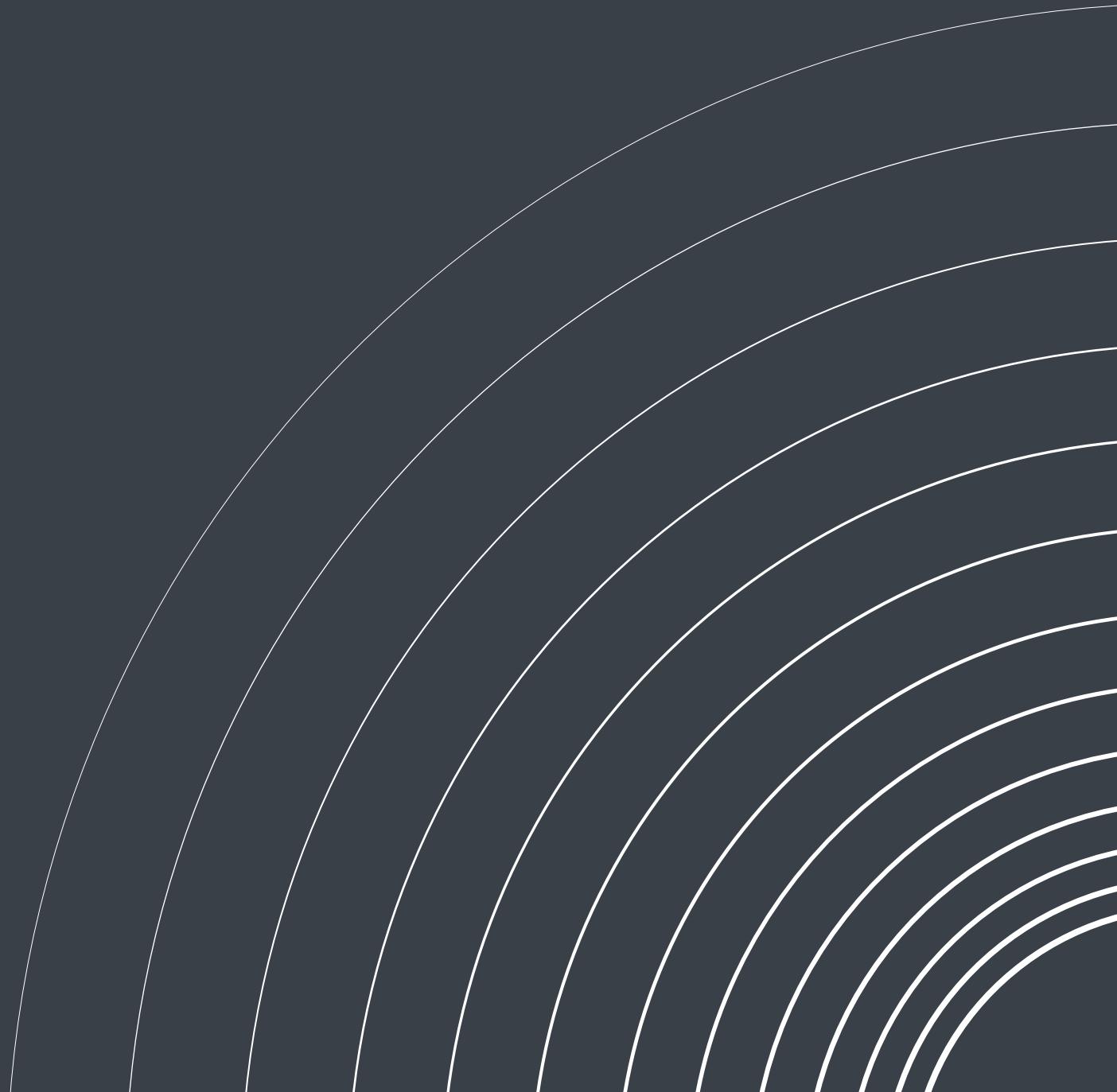


# PATTERNS AND PURPOSE

Francis J. Gavin



# In his introductory essay for Vol. 2, Iss. 3, Frank Gavin, the chair of our editorial board, writes about feeling like a scholar without a home, the challenges of publishing an interdisciplinary journal, and how to adapt best practices from science and engineering to questions of war and peace.

**I** have often felt like a scholar without a home. Trained as a historian, I teach historical thinking and publish historical work. While I have spent time in schools of public policy and international affairs, interdisciplinary research centers, and even a political science department and a law school, I have never been employed by a history department. To further the confusion — I care passionately about foreign policy, engage regularly with national security professionals in my teaching, scholarship, and public engagement, yet have never served in government. Nor have I had an obvious methodological or ideological affinity.

In the past, I have looked at this “identity crisis” as a problem. Who was I? At conferences, when people introduced themselves, I was unable to match their pithy, recognizable titles. “Ideologically-uncommitted, methodologically-promiscuous, historically-minded scholar who thinks about strategy and statecraft with an eye toward improving policy” was no match for “political scientist,” “comparativist,” “restrainer,” “neo-realist,” “post-modernist,” “constructivist,” “Europeanist,” “think-tanker,” “methodologist,” “liberal internationalist,” “progressive,” “never-Trumper,” or “national security professional.”

An experience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) changed my view. In 2015, I was asked by the chair of the Department of Nuclear Engineering and Science to co-chair a job search in nuclear security. While always up for a challenge, this assignment was terrifying. As someone who is unable to operate, let alone fix, even the simplest appliances, working with the world’s smartest nuclear scientists and engineers to identify and recruit the best faculty was daunting. I remember walking to lunch in Cambridge with a distinguished physicist who was on my committee. When his iPhone rang, he looked at the name, grumbled “not him again,” and hung up. The name on the screen had been Buzz Aldrin, the second man ever to walk on the Moon. “He wants to be on the nuclear-fueled mission to Mars we are building, but I keep telling him — Buzz, you are too old!” I realized this would be a difficult crowd to impress.

Over time, however, I came to appreciate these nuclear scientists and engineers who welcomed me into their midst. They didn’t care about labels or even disciplines and demonstrated a strong curiosity and interest in how a historian analyzed the world. Their ranks included physicists, material scientists, computational experts, chemical engineers, and others whose expertise mixed and matched from a variety of fields. When judging candidates for the faculty position, their first question was not about disciplinary training or method. They focused on who asked the best questions and who could actually innovatively solve difficult, important problems.

To be clear, these professors were not dilettantes. They understood that nuclear engineers need a shared set of knowledge and skills that is difficult to obtain. The MIT Nuclear Engineering and Science Department held rigorous comprehensive exams for their PhD candidates and understood the benefits of specialization and methodological excellence. Nuclear science and engineering has as many, if not more, narrow, obscure, technical journals as any social science field. My nuclear scientists recognized the importance of theory and the powerful, necessary interplay between the deductive and inductive. In the end, however, no one cared about advancing the “discipline” for its own purposes. To them, “disciplines” and academic fields were a means to an end — vehicles to better ask and answer important questions, and to advance understanding and resolving problems in the world. No MIT nuclear scientist was ever impressed by someone demonstrating theoretical or methodological prowess if it didn’t actually identify or solve a problem that mattered. And all of them felt quite comfortable moving between and fostering engagement between the academy, government and regulatory agencies, and the private sector.

As I explored it further, it was clear that these scientists and engineers operated in a different world than I did, with different incentive structures and organizational histories. Writ large, they had no problem adapting, transforming, or even adding



new fields and disciplines as the problems they tried to solve changed. The social sciences look much like they did in the late 19th century, when cutting edge universities like Johns Hopkins, Columbia, and the University of Chicago adopted the German model and first created PhD programs in economics, history, political science, and sociology. The story in science and engineering has been much different, as dozens of new fields, disciplines, schools, and programs have emerged, ranging from brain and cognitive sciences to stem cell and regenerative biology to environmental science and engineering to data, systems, and society. While it is probably a vast oversimplification, people from science and engineering are often as likely to self-identify based on the problem they are trying to solve as the discipline in which they were trained.

I have thought about that experience a lot since becoming the chair of the editorial board for TNSR. Is there a way to adapt best practices from science and engineering to the important questions of war and peace? Can TNSR become like the extraordinary journals *Science* or *Nature*, publishing the best work, in an accessible way, from a range of disciplines? Or are they fundamentally different undertakings? I am not sure what the right answer to this question is, though it is one we think about. As we encourage scholars to submit their best research on national security, foreign policy, and international affairs — especially those beginning their careers — we are often asked what and who we are. A political science or diplomatic history journal? A platform for policy essays like *Foreign Affairs*? *War on the Rocks* with footnotes? We have our own answer to this question, of course.<sup>1</sup> The challenge has been to align our mission with what incentivizes the broad-based, diverse audience for whom we publish and from whom we draw for articles. Perhaps one of our greatest challenges thus far has been to lure smart young thinkers out of their narrow disciplinary or career bands and get them to speak to different communities and to identify and answer bigger, problem-driven questions; to have the political scientist engage with the policymaker, the think-tanker communicate with the historian, and the technologist with the humanist, all without sacrificing the rigor and excellence that mark the best disciplinary journals.

Many have rallied to this mission, and we could not be more pleased with the work we have published thus far. In many ways, the authors in this volume are especially reflective of this approach. Iskander Rehman is a Sciences Po-trained political scientist

whose impressive analysis of Cardinal Richelieu engages and connects early modern diplomatic and intellectual history to contemporary analysis. Thomas P. Cavanna is a Sciences Po-trained historian whose essay engages international relations theory and questions from the world of political science. Both have spent time in academic and non-academic positions in different fields. Which one is the historian and which is the political scientist — and more importantly, does it matter? Bruce M. Sugden is a policy and research analyst who has combined historical work, technology assessment, and strategic analysis while working for the armed forces, the private sector, and federally-funded research centers. Jim Steinberg, a Yale-trained lawyer who has served at the highest levels of U.S. national security, engages methods from both history and theory to assess what factors and forces shaped the peace process in Northern Ireland. Jim has a favorite quote from Karl Marx's *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach* that reflects his approach to teaching and research that is equally applicable to what we are trying to accomplish at TNSR: "Philosophers have hitherto interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

My sense is that many of these important epistemological questions are in play, and how we organize knowledge around important questions in national security, international security, and foreign policy may change — perhaps dramatically — in the years and decades to come. TNSR will be an engaged participant in these discussions and debates, and will continue to serve as a platform for the best accessible, cutting-edge, publicly minded, multidisciplinary research. ■

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Gavin, "TNSR: Who We Are, What We Do, and Why You Should Care," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 1 (November 2017), <https://doi.org/10.15781/T2513VC68>.