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The Spectrum of Conflict: What Can It Do for Force Planners?

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PLANNING THE FUTURE SIZE AND COMPOSITION of the United States military force structure is an arduous effort. It consists of appraising the security needs of a nation, establishing military requirements, and selecting military forces within resource constraints. One graphic tool that can assist force planners is the "spectrum of conflict." This essay examines it in both theory and practice, proceeding step by step as the authors do in the classroom, examining its strengths and weaknesses, and showing how it can bolster security assessments. First providing historical examples from Army and Joint Staff perspectives, the authors then explain the use of the spectrum of conflict from peace through nuclear war. An appropriate range of military missions, operations, and scenarios are analyzed for their relative destructiveness and likelihood of occurrence during the time period under consideration. What are the strengths and weaknesses of this concept? How would potential military tasks be prioritized for the coming decade? What degrees of destructiveness and likelihood can be associated with each one?

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Comparing probabilities of occurrence and destructiveness of military operations is a natural part of the planning process, and when approached graphically, the resulting diagram is usually termed a spectrum of conflict. Although it has been used for objective analysis as well as programmatic advocacy, its significance and implications need to be fully explored. Instinctively, military strategists, force planners, and commanders think of a spectrum of operations, missions, and scenarios. Peacetime presence and nuclear war constitute the two extremes. Between them lie many different forms of military activity—some more probable than others. For example, humanitarian assistance is much more likely to take place than two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts. The operations more apt to occur are usually less destructive in scope and duration than conflicts at the other end of the spectrum.

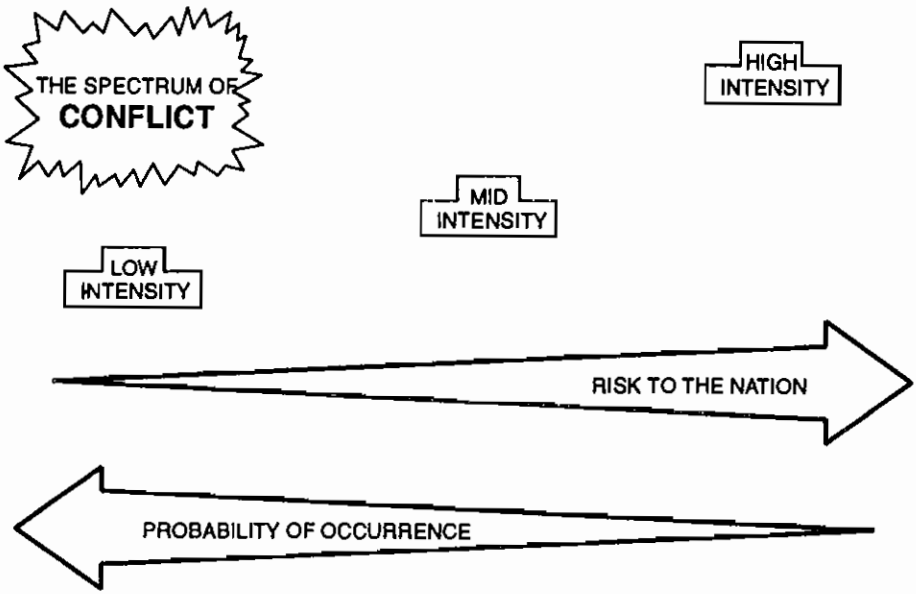
Historical Examples of the Spectrum of Conflict

The U.S. Army has long used the spectrum of conflict to explain its missions and operations. *The United States Army Posture Statement FY 90/91* depicted the spectrum as in figure 1. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of this rendition is the way it aggregates Army operations into three major planning cases: low intensity, mid-intensity, and high intensity. It makes another distinction in weighing the "probability of occurrence" against "risk to the nation"—an inherently debatable factor—rather than referring to the more measurable attribute of destructiveness. The document carefully explains the importance of these concepts: "While the likelihood of U.S. involvement in a high intensity conflict is low, such a war would pose a high risk to the nation. Low intensity conflicts pose a smaller risk, but are much more likely to occur. Our Army must be prepared to fight and win across this entire spectrum of conflict."[1]

In 1993 General Gordon R. Sullivan, Chief of Staff of the Army, presented a more complicated version of the spectrum of conflict that reflected certain major debates over the Army's future. "By 1991 the Army's capstone doctrinal manual, Field Manual 100-1, introduced the term 'peacetime engagement'. . . . [It] reintroduced the concept of 'hostilities short of war' to describe an increasingly important segment of the continuum of potential Army missions and employment. Many wanted to describe these missions as 'non-traditional,' but others recognized that the Army's historic role of serving the nation included a rich heritage of operations other than war."[2]

Sullivan's spectrum used two diverging axes to portray the likelihood and level of hostilities, with a smooth curve connecting the extreme cases of peacetime engagement and global nuclear war (figure 2). This depiction conveyed several predictions about the Army's future. In the aftermath of the Cold War, global nuclear war was deemed far less probable but still not out of the

FIGURE 1
SPECTRUM OF CONFLICT



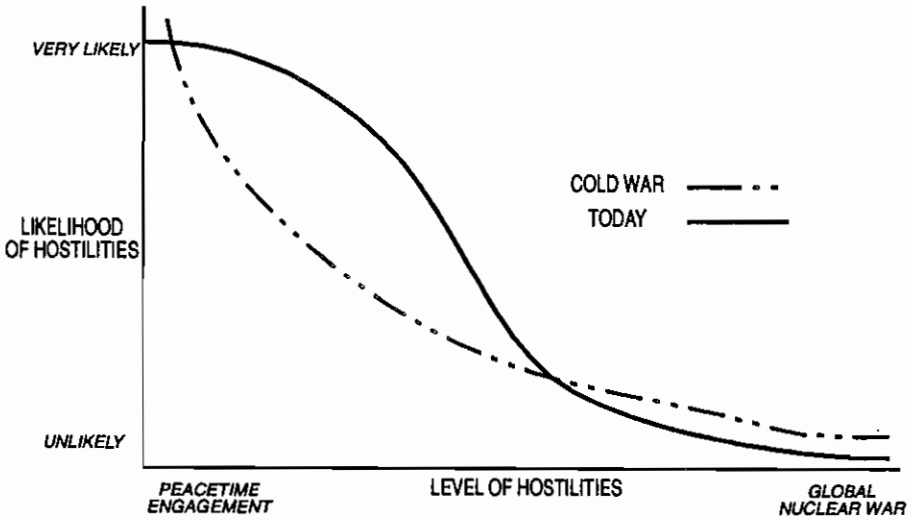
question. The term "peacetime engagement" was a notable change, but most important was the graphic judgment that more operations might take place at the lowest level of hostilities than during the Cold War.

A more complex version of the concept appeared in the 1991 *Joint Military Net Assessment (JMNA)* (figure 3). General Colin Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, explored implications for the entire force, rather than a single service, at a turning point in America's military history: "This assessment represents a first report of the transition from planning and programming principally for global war with the Soviet Union to planning and programming for the regional situations we expect to face in the 1990s."[3]

In this case, the spectrum of conflict is used to assess specific conflict scenarios, several of which are generic: peacetime engagement; counterinsurgency and counternarcotics (CI/CN); and lesser regional contingencies (LRC), global, and nuclear. Others are more specific in terms of location: Major Regional Contingency-West (MRC-W for Korea), Major Regional Contingency-East (MRC-E for Southwest Asia), and war escalating from a European crisis.[4]

This depiction was built around the axes of "probability of occurrence" and "level of violence." Readers must assume that the point of origin is low (or

FIGURE 2
LEVEL AND LIKELIHOOD OF HOSTILITIES



perhaps zero) for the two axes, while the extremes are higher. The scenarios are labelled and plotted in reference to the two axes. Significantly, then, war is more likely to occur in Southwest Asia than in Korea, while war in Europe is doubtful. To convey another useful theme, the *JMNA* also portrays "consequences of failure" on a second vertical axis. Unfortunately, however, it does not provide the rationale for the consequences for failure (see figure 4). There are some scenarios, like nuclear war, that are intuitively obvious, but readers must decide for themselves why the consequences of failure would be so high for the peacetime scenario and so low for the CI/CN case.[5]

The *JMNA* did arrive at some important conclusions. Above all, "the spectrum of conflict, peace through nuclear war, has not changed; it continues to provide a method to overlay various scenarios."[6] The most destructive forms of conflict may have declined, but the consequences of failure would still be grave. Thus the spectrum of conflict served as a concise way to convey complex judgments about the post–Cold War world.

Using the Spectrum of Conflict

As teachers of force planning, the authors begin by specifying the time period under consideration. An inevitable debate involves how far into the future we

FIGURE 3
PROBABILITY OF OCCURRENCE

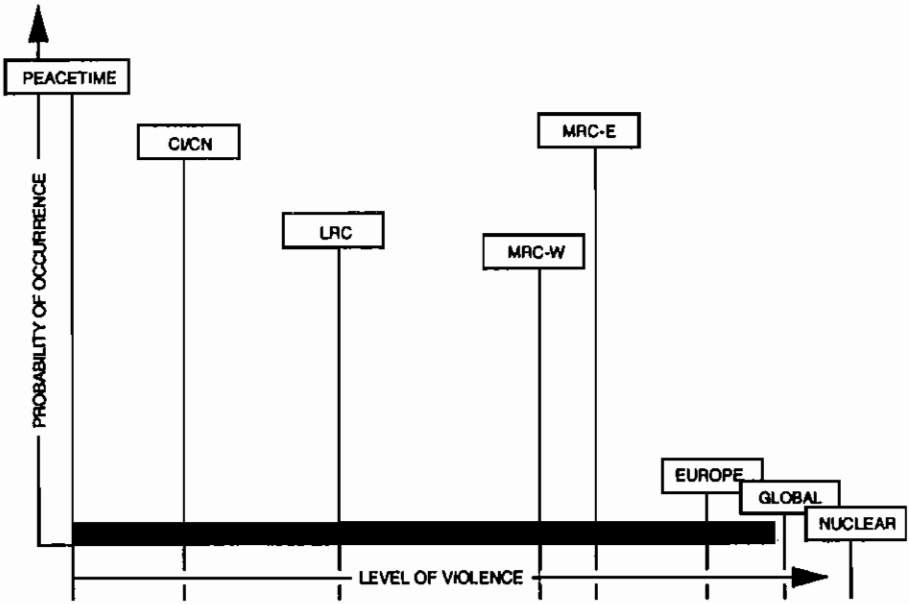
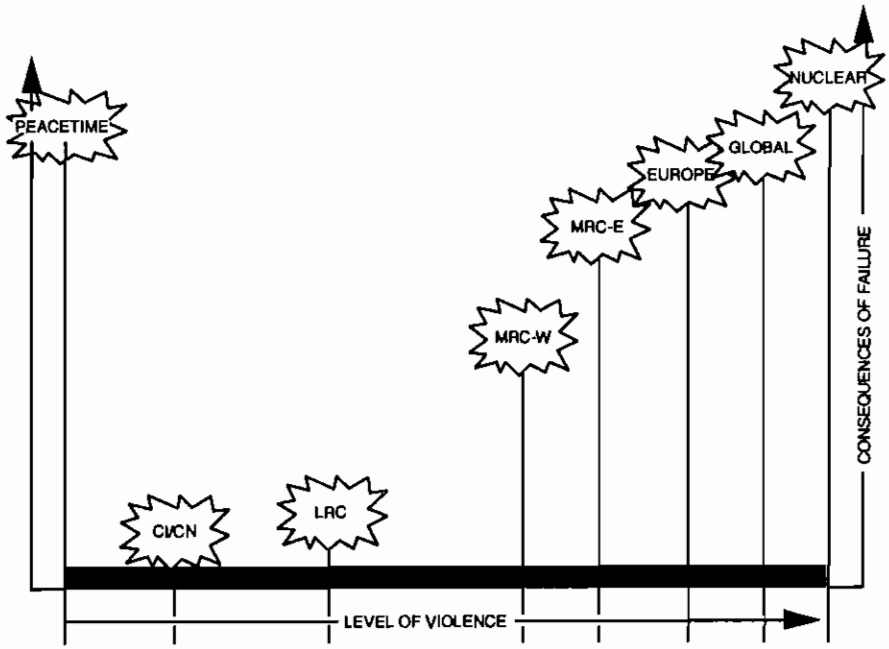


FIGURE 4
CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE



must look. The factors that drive this time horizon are both international and domestic. How soon, for example, could any country become a military peer competitor of the United States? At home, what are the lead times for procuring major weapon systems to replace aging force structure?

Operations and Missions. The second step is to list specific military tasks that dominate planning. A recent example appears in *Doctrine for Joint Operations,* Joint Publication 3-0, which presents a summary section entitled "Range of Military Operations." In the section "Operations Other Than War," two categories are identified: those that involve the use or threat of force, and those which do not. The former includes deterrence and compellence through raids and strikes. "Other such operations include peace enforcement, counterterrorism, enforcement of sanctions, support to insurgency and counterinsurgency, maritime interception, and evacuation of noncombatants." The latter consists of "humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, nation assistance, security assistance, foreign internal defense, counterdrug operations, arms control, support to U.S. domestic civil authorities, evacuation of noncombatants, and peacekeeping." Under "War," a graphic summary also entitled "Range of Military Operations" lists simply Attack, Defend, and Blockades.[7]

Destructiveness. The next step is to plot relevant operations and missions along a horizontal axis, from the least to the most destructive. This defines the spectrum of conflict.[8] As the previous examples demonstrate, several other variables as well have been used to perform this task. Among them are "risk to the nation," "intensity of conflict," "level of hostilities," and "level of violence." All suffer from vagueness and subjectivity. A case in point is that most Americans probably believe that ethnic warfare in the Balkans poses little or no "risk to the nation"; yet many historians would disagree, reminding us that World War I began in Sarajevo and warning that American interests could well be jeopardized by another European conflict—especially one involving Greece, Russia, and Turkey. By the same token, mine warfare may present a low "level of violence" to strategic planners, but not to the captain of an aircraft carrier.

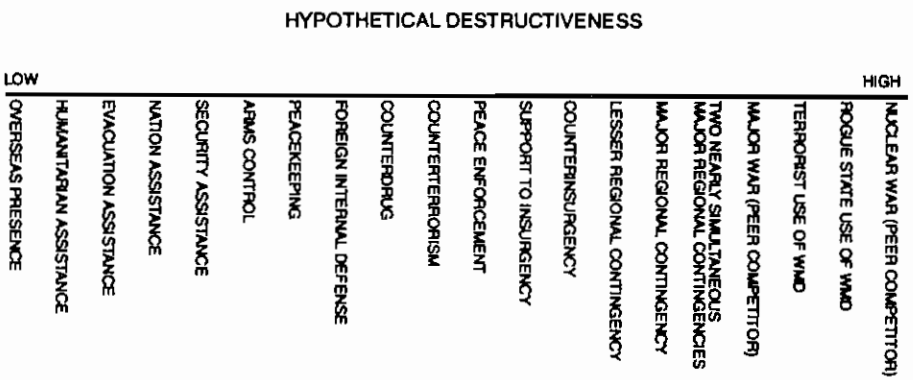
The term "destructiveness" lends itself to measurement and tends to reduce misunderstanding. Force planners should estimate the destructiveness of any mission, operation, or scenario (for the time period under consideration) in the context of their country's national interests. They must take full account of the many assumptions and uncertainties that may skew their hypotheses. Specifically, we suggest that they evaluate hypothetical destructiveness in terms of its scope and duration. At the least, scope would involve such factors as lethality of weapons involved, number of forces engaged, and geographic expanse of the war. Duration is the estimated length of time a given conflict will last. Certain

operational environments tend to lengthen wars, often belying the initial predictions of unwary strategists—jungles, mountains, and cities, for example, create sanctuaries for guerrillas while constraining conventional forces. Similarly, such large expanses as the Russian steppes permit the trading of space for time. In general, the duration of the conflict depends upon the intensity of historical animosity between the opponents, national will to bear the costs of war, physical geography, and rules of engagement—especially restrictive rules of engagement and attempts to control escalation, which have lengthened the conflicts from Vietnam through Bosnia.

Potential destructiveness deserves more attention than it has received, especially during an era of ethnic chaos and collapsing states. Civil wars possess a deceptively different kind of destructiveness (combining both scope and duration) than do state-to-state conflicts, which may be why American forces have fared better against such governmental opponents as Grenada, Panama, and Iraq than against the guerrillas of Vietnam, the clans of Lebanon, and the warlords of Somalia.

Figure 5 is an illustrative spectrum of conflict for missions, operations, and scenarios. It includes not only the tasks specified in JCS Pub 3-0 but also, more importantly, weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological).[9] The unprecedented proliferation over the past three years of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium has increased the possibility of a nuclear incident, either by terrorists or by rogue states. Similarly, the rapid diffusion of chemical and biological capabilities has increased the chance of attack by other weapons of mass destruction. Such scenarios could be quite destructive, especially if they posit attacks on civilian population centers.

FIGURE 5
SPECTRUM OF MILITARY OPERATIONS,
MISSIONS & SCENARIOS
(1995 - 2005)



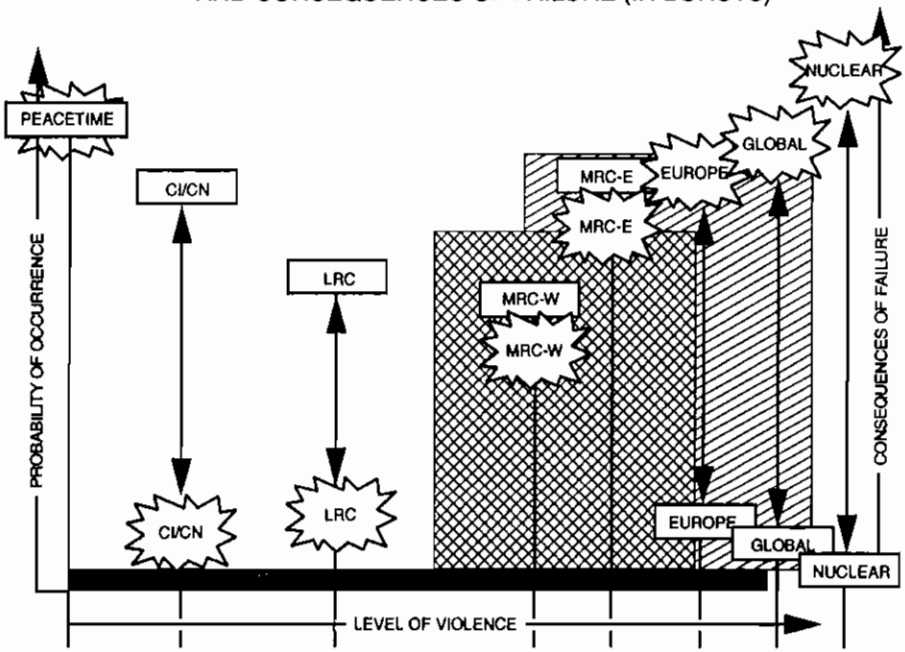
Likelihood. The next step is to plot the estimated likelihood of occurrence for all these operations, missions, and scenarios against a vertical axis. Individual analysts and separate services or departments may disagree vociferously about the likelihood of different contingencies, just as they would over their relative destructiveness.[10] However, the usefulness of the spectrum of conflict lies in accentuating and debating both variables.

Draw the Curve. Some analysts find it useful to connect the plotted points with a curve or line as shown above in figure 2. However, there are pitfalls here. Drawing one smooth curve may oversimplify complex issues and conceal controversial judgments. As an example, "terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction" can range across the entire spectrum in terms of destructiveness and likelihood of occurrence. It could entail chemical attack against an isolated military unit, nuclear targeting of a civilian airport, or even contaminating New York City with a fearsome disease, such as anthrax. Consequently a scatter diagram plotting the points without a curve may be preferable, especially for analyzing a large number of operations, missions, and scenarios. If a curve is drawn, its shape is significant. At the least, it can have historical importance, showing differences in judgment from decade to decade. The smooth, asymptotic curve often plotted during the Cold War (figure 2) has changed considerably: not only will the military be conducting more operations at the lowest level of destructiveness, but the chance of operations other than war in the coming decade is 100 percent. Moreover, there may be some important "spikes" upward or downward. Two MRCs, for example, seem much less likely than one, while the isolated use of weapons of mass destruction appears far more likely than global nuclear war.

Focus on Major Planning Cases. The last step is to divide the spectrum into a few large categories. These broader sets of operations, missions, and scenarios are the major defense planning cases. Here again, experts may disagree on how to label them. There are those who think in terms of the intensity of conflict (low, medium, and high), while some stress technology (especially nuclear versus conventional conflict), and yet others use political circumstances as discriminators (such as war versus operations short of war).

As an example, the 1991 *JMNA* explains some important changes in how the Department of Defense thinks about the major planning cases. This document portrays these changes graphically (figure 6) and explains them with care: "Previously, conventional force requirements were generated by focusing attention toward the right end of the spectrum, where the threat was large and the consequence of failure was great (depicted by the lightly shaded area on the graph). Consequently, our conventional force structure was large, heavy, and

FIGURE 6
PROBABILITY OF OCCURRENCE (IN BLOCKS)
AND CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE (IN BURSTS)



robust. However, more recently our focus has shifted to the left (depicted by the darker shaded area). . . . Today, the probability of occurrence for conventional conflicts at the right end of the spectrum is low, and warning time has so greatly increased, that these conflicts are no longer the central point of focus or the principal driver of requirements of forces. We find now, however, that the focus of attention and risk is the range of conflict scenarios where the probability of occurrence is greater and the consequences of failure are still high."[11]

Recent events suggest the wisdom of dividing the spectrum into three major planning cases, "Operations Other Than War," "War," and "Weapons of Mass Destruction." Such a division can help strategists and force planners first to identify the common features among future missions, operations, and scenarios and then to set priorities for the allocation of scarce resources.[12] We do not mean that one case would take all available resources, or even most of them, nor do we mean that it would necessarily take the next available dollar, but rather that it should be considered first, using the criteria of destructiveness and likelihood as outlined above.

However, it will be no easy task to set such priorities. Some will argue that War (such as MRC-E and MRC-W) deserves the highest priority when preparing

for the coming decade, while others would assign the greatest importance to Operations Other Than War. A few might even favor Weapons of Mass Destruction, particularly when rogue states are involved. In a period of constrained resources the ability to set priorities will continue to be crucial, and the spectrum of conflict can be a valuable aid.

This essay began by showing first U.S. Army and then Joint Staff versions of the "spectrum of conflict." Different variables were noted and different purposes were compared. The authors then suggested several steps for constructing a "spectrum of conflict." It has many important attributes that we believe can assist both strategists and force planners by: encouraging a comprehensive review of the operations, missions, and scenarios that a country's armed forces may encounter in the time period under analysis; examining them for completeness, relevance, and plausibility; stimulating debate over likelihood and destructiveness; facilitating aggregation into major planning cases; and setting priorities for the allocation of scarce resources.

This concept, however, does have some drawbacks. The term "spectrum of conflict" is itself a bit narrow and misleading. Perhaps "spectrum of military missions, operations, and scenarios" would be more descriptive, albeit cumbersome. We continue to employ the term "spectrum of conflict" because of its wide acceptance. Unavoidably, the spectrum of conflict accentuates the utility of military power, as opposed to economic and political instruments for achieving national goals. It also reduces complex realities and relationships to stark, unqualified judgments, at the constant risk of oversimplification.

Perhaps most dangerously, the spectrum of conflict relies upon expert opinion about the future, in spite of the fact that such judgments have all too often been wrong. Recent political upheavals, for instance the collapse of the Soviet Union, have altered Cold War formulations of the spectrum of conflict. By the same logic, technological progress (e.g., the mass production of nonlethal weapons) may reorient today's thinking about the probability and destructiveness of future operations, missions, and scenarios.

Such defects notwithstanding, national planners will surely continue to think in terms of a spectrum of conflict that extends from peace through nuclear war. They will also find it an excellent way to explain their decisions to the American people. Under the conditions the authors use in this essay, a major national goal will surely be to reduce both the likelihood and the destructiveness of future conflict. Achieving it will continue to require military capabilities across the spectrum of conflict.

Notes

1. The Honorable John O. Marsh, Jr., and General Carl E. Vuono, USA, *The United States Army Posture Statement FY 90/91* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1990), p. 22.

2. Gordon R. Sullivan, *America's Army: Into the Twenty-first Century*, National Security Paper no. 14 (Cambridge, Mass.: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in association with The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 1993), p. 6.

3. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *1991 Joint Military Net Assessment* [hereafter *JMNA*] (Washington: Department of Defense, March, 1991), pp. 1–5.

4. For the definition of MRC-E as standing for Southwest Asia (SWA) and MRC-W for Korea, see *JMNA*, pp. 9-2, 9-8.

5. For example, if one assumes that the most important military mission in peacetime is to deter nuclear war, then the consequences of failure would be high indeed. The low consequences of failure for CI/CN seem harder to justify. Vietnam was a case of counterinsurgency, but the outcome in Southeast Asia had devastating consequences for the country. Many authorities would also contend that the consequences of failure in the counternarcotics scenario are extremely serious.

6. *JMNA*, pp. 1–7.

7. *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 [hereafter JCS Pub 3-0] (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1993), pp. I-2 through I-5.

8. According to the *Oxford American Dictionary* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), p. 656, a spectrum is "an entire range of related qualities or ideas."

9. JCS Pub 3-0 does not mention weapons of mass destruction in its section entitled "Range of Military Operations," pp. I-3 through I-5. However, a useful discussion of "Operations When Weapons of Mass Destruction Are Employed" does appear on pp. IV-26 through IV-28.

10. We prefer the term "likelihood" to "probability" or "risk" (which connote a higher degree of statistical rigor than we believe to be achievable in national security matters).

11. *JMNA*, pp. 1–8.

12. During the Cold War, for example, the likelihood of nuclear war was judged by most experts to be low. However, the destructiveness of such a scenario demanded that strategists and force planners treat it as their highest priority. They needed confidence in the ability of the U.S. to deter the worst-case scenario—a surprise Soviet counterforce attack. Lacking that confidence, the nuclear planning case demanded additional resources to bolster deterrence. This case has declined sharply in priority over the past few years, and others have risen.

Ψ

An advantage is an advantage, however offered or obtained; whether by an enemy's mistake, or by the accidents of the ground that play so large a part in land war; and on either element a skillful defense looks warily for its opportunities to the enemy's mistakes, as well as to other conditions.

Alfred Thayer Mahan
Naval Strategy, 1918