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Henry C. Bartlett

G. Paul Holman Jr.

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Strategy as a Guide to Force Planning

Henry C. Bartlett and G. Paul Holman, Jr.

Is there a method to Pentagon madness? That is the question so often asked about defense planning by Congressional and journalistic critics. Between the extremes of “throwing money at the problem” and “indiscriminate cuts,” is there a better approach to force planning?¹

Many authorities believe there is. The Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, in its January 1988 report, *Discriminate Deterrence*, suggests that, “Our *strategy* must be designed for the long term, to *guide* force development, weapons procurement, and arms negotiations.”² We agree. The question unanswered by the report is, how?

The Commission is not alone in its assertion. Almost all high-level statements on national security policy explicitly or implicitly identify strategy as a guide for choosing forces.³ The words are familiar, but our experience as classroom teachers of force planning suggests that they are hollow. It is not always clear to students how strategy can guide us toward rational force choices, even after reading our highest level strategic documents.

This article attempts to show how strategy can serve as a guide in force planning. We argue that strategies can be broken down into sets of key elements or “descriptors” that can be used as criteria for evaluating alternative force choices. We will also point out that force planners deal with progressive layers of strategies. Logically, the descriptors of lower level strategies should support those at a higher level of national security concern.

Professors Bartlett and Holman are members of the Naval War College faculty. They teach force planning in the National Security Decision Making (NSDM) Department.

As an Air Force Officer, Professor Bartlett last served as Vice Commander of the 474th TAC Fighter Wing, Nellis AFB. Earning his doctorate in business administration from Indiana University, he specializes in the fields of force planning, defense economics, organizational behavior, and accounting.

Professor Holman is a career intelligence officer. Holding a doctorate in Russian history from Georgetown University, he teaches force planning, economics, organizational psychology, and a variety of courses dealing with the Soviet Armed Forces.

If this is done, strategy provides an excellent means for indicating appropriate levels and mixes of military forces in support of national interests.

National security analysts constantly assess our nation's place in the world, often using what is termed a "top-down" approach to do this.⁴ They begin with national interests and derive appropriate national security policies, objectives, and strategies to deal with threats and pursue opportunities. Force planners conduct much the same intellectual journey, but with greater stress on the military dimension. In this article, we will use a top-down approach, beginning with a net assessment and descending through levels of strategy to the forces.

The Threat

Theoretically, our national capabilities should be evaluated in light of our actual and potential adversaries. The technical term for this analysis is net assessment,⁵ or what the Soviets call the correlation of forces. The United States and Soviet Union each view the other as the primary threat to their respective national interests.

This emphasis on the Soviets is not meant to deny the existence of other threats to American national security interests. They include drugs, terrorists, regional conflicts, and countries such as Iran, which may be hostile to America, but are in no sense Soviet proxies. We will focus on the Soviet threat for three reasons: it is the only one which could physically devastate America by nuclear means; it has dominated national security decisions over the past forty years; and it allows us to trace the full logic of strategy as a guide in force planning.

National Objectives

In dealing with the Soviet threat, our range of strategic choices has been surprisingly narrow: rollback, containment, or accommodation with Soviet power. These are familiar words to the student of American foreign policy and they have practical significance for force planners. When those policy alternatives are stated as overall national objectives, the choice of one or the other should logically dispose us toward different military force structures. As an example, rollback would favor a heavily offensive orientation, while accommodation would favor a minimal defense.

National Strategy

Given the Soviet threat and a containment objective, the next decision involves strategy—the game plan for linking the instruments of national

power (economic, political, military, and psychological) to the accomplishment of our political goals. Since World War II, our national strategy for handling the Soviet threat has laid great stress on our many allies. This coalition strategy for containing Soviet power is sharply different from other conceivable approaches such as a go-it-alone game plan. (This might be an isolationist, "Fortress America" strategy, or something very different: a willingness to contain the Soviets unilaterally, where necessary, while maintaining the U.S. role as the dominant maritime power—but without necessarily committing ourselves to defend any portion of the Eurasian landmass.)

This choice of a national strategy will continue to channel us toward distinct force alternatives. As an example, our coalition strategy permits member nations to specialize in specific military missions where they have comparative advantages. For the NATO alliance, the U.S. Navy can concentrate on open ocean operations, while western Europe focuses on other required missions such as shallow water ASW and mine warfare. An alternative go-it-alone strategy would probably result in a more ambitious Navy, with strong capabilities in all mission areas, probably at the expense of our forward deployed ground and tactical air forces.

National Military Strategy

From a military perspective, we have consistently sought to deter Soviet attacks against us and our allies. This objective leads to force characteristics that are different from the intent to deliberately attack (as an example, the force structure required to achieve Hitler's vision of a greatly expanded Germany) or, more conservatively, a use of massive military power to compel rivals to do our bidding.

If our goal is to deter, we can choose from different types of deterrent strategies. Two theoretical extremes are threat of punishment and denial of an adversary's objectives. Again, whichever emphasis is chosen will tend to guide force choices in a particular direction. Two examples of deterrence by threat of punishment are the current French nuclear strategy of massive retaliation and similar U.S. thinking during the 1950s and early 1960s. The best example of deterrence by denial is current Soviet strategy, which requires large, active, and passive defensive capabilities to frustrate any potential attack.

In the nuclear arena, threat of punishment has taken the form of an offensive force structure which can devastate the enemy's homeland—even under the worst case of absorbing a surprise first strike. The key attributes of such forces must be survivability—reflected in the strategic triad of land, air, and sea-based forces—and their assured penetration of enemy defenses.

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U.S. strategy has long been mixed. It originally stressed threat of punishment by retaliatory strikes against countervalue targets (such as the industrial and economic infrastructure). But as technology and the Soviet threat advanced, arguments arose over the need for at least some counterforce capabilities for our offensive forces. The advocates of such capabilities contended that we could deter war most effectively by threatening what the Soviets value most (not merely their cities, but also ICBM silos, airfields, logistical centers, and division bases). If such a counterforce capability makes ultimate Soviet war aims unattractive, then logically a surprise attack would not occur in the first place.

However, elements of a strategy based upon denial of objectives never totally left American thinking and have increased notably over the past two administrations. In offensive terms, we seek forces with high accuracy. The objectives are very ambitious: denying the Soviets the reserve forces they would require to continue the conflict; limiting the damage a second Soviet strike could inflict on the American homeland; and preventing Soviet domination of the postwar world. In defensive terms, we have had at least some continental air defenses, civil defense, and research on antiballistic missile capabilities since the 1950s. More recently, the President has directed greater emphasis on strategic ballistic missile defense research. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) has subsequently grown in importance. We are approaching the point when advanced technology may further increase the defensive aspects of the denial component in our strategy.

In the conventional arena, our strategy to deter Soviet aggression has been strikingly consistent since World War II. We have chosen to defend selected parts of Eurasia by forward deployment of land, air, and sea forces on allied territory. This element of a conventional strategy is starkly different from an alternative of basing these forces at home in a central reserve. Here again, U.S. strategy has been mixed. Both of these elements logically support our national strategy of coalitions, but they have very different effects upon the resulting force structures. As an example, if a greater proportion of our reinforcements are allocated to a central reserve, we will require more ships and aircraft to provide strategic mobility for crisis response and reinforcement.

Our most familiar planning documents usually offer additional descriptors or elements of our conventional strategy. These generally include collective security, which in military terms supports the higher level coalition strategy; flexibility to handle the full range of both Soviet and non-Soviet threats; rapid reinforcement in the event of war; and security assistance to friends and surrogates, which multiplies our assets without requiring direct U.S. intervention. Such documents also include other descriptors or concepts whose content and frequency have varied. One is technological superiority (to offset Warsaw Pact numerical superiorities and husband our human

resources). We also include the concept of deliberate escalation, which could occur in terms of intensity (from conventional to nuclear combat), or expanded geographical scope (for example, opening a new front).⁶

Using such descriptors does not help us to identify the specific numbers of tanks, aircraft, ships, and warheads we may require for any given circumstance or region. Nor does it formulate any "von Schlieffen plan" to aid us in future conflicts. But this approach does create a way to communicate ideas among force planners, strategists, and concerned laymen. If we distill and array such descriptors of a strategy as we have done above, they provide a coherent array of criteria for evaluating alternative force choices. Such an array will provide a general sense of direction, channeling force choices through the levels of strategy.

Regional Strategy

Next, having assembled useful arrays of force planning criteria from the national and military levels of strategy, we shall proceed on down to the regional level. Our major regional planning case since World War II has been NATO. Consequently, we will explore the descriptors of NATO's flexible response strategy.

A key element of flexible response is forward defense against the Warsaw Pact threat at NATO borders. Its goal is to preclude any perception that territory would be surrendered either temporarily or permanently. One possible alternative could be a concept of rearward defense, which would trade space for time by maneuvering on NATO territory while preparing to counterattack. Another might be some variant of forward offense involving an immediate counteroffensive into Warsaw Pact territory. Choices at this regional level of strategy affect very broad force characteristics such as the basing structure, reliance upon reserves, deep-strike systems, and the degree of armored forces.

Forward defense at the inter-German border is currently explained in terms of a "layer cake" of NATO national corps arrayed side by side from north to south. At warning, these corps deploy forward to the border and take up planned defensive positions which, at best, have been lightly prepared. This element of the flexible response strategy, therefore, stresses speed of deployment by mechanized forces with strong antitank capabilities.

This concept of forward defense involves certain risks. Current force levels are relatively low. Consequently it is questionable whether we have adequate reserves in the NATO rear to stop a major Warsaw Pact breakthrough. This situation has intensified the old debate over the effectiveness of forward defense. Various alternatives have been proposed.

One is the concept of a cordon defense behind the West German border. Such a strategy descriptor would logically stress barrier systems and

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hardened fortifications. Such concepts evoke memories of the ineffective Maginot Line and stimulate West German concerns about perpetuating the division of their nation. As a result, NATO has consistently rejected such an approach.

A second possibility, which has been receiving greater attention over the past several years, is deep attack. Its two major forms are follow-on-forces-attack (FOFA) and the U.S. joint doctrine of airland battle. Both variants put unprecedented stress on identifying, targeting, and striking Warsaw Pact land forces behind the front lines as they move forward from their mobilization points. FOFA is limited to deep attack by air and missile systems to reflect NATO's declared position that it is a defensive alliance and has no intention of operating on or seizing Warsaw Pact territory. Airland battle doctrine also stresses deep attacks against Warsaw Pact follow-on forces. However, it conveys an additional sense of maneuver and counteroffensive operations by land forces—perhaps across the inter-German border. Such a concept is not acceptable because of NATO's declaratory, defensive objectives and strategy.

The force structure implications for striking deep—in both FOFA and airland battle—are much the same. Each variant requires extraordinary attention to advanced technology for command, control, communications, and intelligence; real-time identification and targeting at considerable range; all-weather delivery systems; and precision-guided munitions. They differ only in the greater requirement for ground maneuver forces under airland battle doctrine.

A third possibility, which has been extensively discussed in Western academic circles, is the concept of a defensive defense dominated by forces which could not conceivably threaten Warsaw Pact vital interests. It has taken many forms, but most would stress dense, light, and highly potent antitank forces—as opposed to main battle tanks, which the Warsaw Pact might misinterpret as threatening offensive intentions.

These alternatives (cordon, deep attack, and defensive defense) would only change the forward defense element in NATO's flexible response strategy. However, there are several other key descriptors. One is direct defense at the level and point of attack. This element of the strategy requires attention by force planners to the full geography of NATO (such as the extreme Norwegian and Turkish flanks), as well as the full spectrum of warfare. An opposite concept, such as indirect defense, would put less of a premium on the military capability to respond in place and kind to Warsaw Pact aggression.

Another key descriptor of the NATO flexible response strategy is rapid reinforcement as opposed to a more deliberate, slower reinforcement. This goal of rapid reinforcement has channeled NATO forces in some very important directions. Within the space of ten days, the United States is

committed to deploy, “a total of ten Army divisions (of which four, plus two armored cavalry regiments, are stationed in Europe in peacetime), 60 reinforcing tactical fighter squadrons, and one Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), plus support detachments for all of these forces.”⁷ To do this, planners have elected to pre-position sets of division equipment in Europe (as opposed to sending them by sealift, which a slower reinforcement concept would allow). Thus we accelerate the reinforcement of Europe by limiting our logistical burden to airlift of the soldiers.

Threat of escalation is perhaps the final key element of the strategy of flexible response. NATO seeks to deter political coercion, territorial encroachment, and war by threatening the use of nuclear weapons if conventional forces fail. This is a sharply different and vastly cheaper concept than conventional deterrence. In terms of force planning, this descriptor points to the need for a range of theater nuclear weapons. It will also pose painful questions for NATO force planners as arms control agreements take effect. As examples, how will the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty affect NATO’s ability to deter conventional aggression through the threat of escalation? How would a 50-percent reduction in strategic nuclear warheads affect NATO’s strategy and force structure?

Several lessons emerge from the NATO example. First is the importance of strategic clarity. Strategy cannot be a useful guide in force planning unless it can be distilled into a readily understood array of descriptors, which then become the criteria for evaluating alternative force choices. Second is the need for strategic simplicity. It is very easy for a multilateral alliance of democratic countries to talk too much and too vaguely about their strategy for achieving desired objectives. This can even be the case for strategists in general. Third is the countervailing requirement for elements of strategic ambiguity. A strategy of deterrence may require an aspect of incalculability. For example, the threat of escalation should be hedged by some deliberately vague qualifications. What we seek is sufficient clarity and simplicity to guide our own force planners, without giving potential enemies enough insight to counter our strategy and achieve their political objectives.

Schools of Strategy

Having considered national (grand), national military, and regional strategies, we next consider the choices offered by radically different perspectives arising from at least three distinct emphases in strategic thought. They are the maritime, continental, and aerospace schools. Most War College students are familiar with the concepts of Mahan, Corbett, Mackinder, and Douhet. Each of these classic theorists established an environmental theme around which strategies can be crafted and forces channeled.

Our principal rival, the Soviet Union, has a traditional preference for the continental view and constantly reasserts that victory in war requires the seizure of enemy territory after destruction of his forces. Historically, Moscow has attached less importance to both maritime and aerospace perspectives than we have. Americans have long been attracted by Douhet's stress on air power as a means of transcending the potential stagnation and cost of ground combat. The result has been a long debate over the effectiveness of using conventional air power against the enemy's heartland to achieve victory. An analogous debate has raged even longer concerning the utility of maritime tools to gain strategic leverage against a continental power.

There is the constant risk that undue emphasis on one of these environmental schools of strategy could distort force choices and thus confound our ability to deal with known and emerging threats. Some critics have made precisely that accusation against the maritime strategy set forth by the U.S. Navy in the mid-1980s.⁸ For the purposes of this article, we will neither defend nor attack that strategy, but simply use it to continue our exploration of how strategy descriptors can guide force planning at a distinctly different level of strategy.

Maritime Component of the National Military Strategy

The Maritime Strategy aims to support U.S. national strategy under all scenarios ranging from peacetime presence through strategic nuclear war. Its goal is to bolster deterrence through both the threat of punishment and the actual denial of Soviet objectives by the application of U.S. naval power. Should deterrence fail, U.S. naval forces would attempt to influence the outcome of the war by controlling escalation, seizing the initiative, and taking the fight to the enemy.

These are ambitious objectives, and the blueprint by which we would achieve them may or may not contain sufficient strategic descriptors to chart the general course of U.S. naval force planning.

Official, unclassified documents present the Maritime Strategy in terms of a scenario of global, conventional war with the Soviet Union. It begins with an unfolding crisis situation, which might or might not escalate to combat. The first descriptor found therein is that our forces would deploy early. This seemingly simple element has major force planning implications such as high readiness, forward basing abroad, strategic home-base locations, and the potential need for stealth in the initial stages of the crisis.

Another element of the strategy is to deploy our naval forces well forward against the Soviet Navy. The purpose is to sink the Soviet Fleet or deny it access to the open oceans in the early stages of a war. These goals could ensure the rapid reinforcement by sea upon which our allies depend so

heavily. We cannot resolve in this paper how far forward we would go; this is the rightful terrain of future campaign planners. But we can say with certainty that early, forward deployment has sharply different force planning implications than a later, more rearward orientation.

The Maritime Strategy also anticipates that U.S. naval forces would respond to Soviet aggression (probably on land) by taking the offensive. They would seize the initiative at sea, both destroying deployed Soviet forces and fighting their way toward Soviet home waters. No other descriptor of the Maritime Strategy produces a force structure so starkly different from other conceivable approaches to neutralizing the Soviet naval threat. Defensive concepts, such as barrier defenses or convoy escort, would predispose us toward different mission areas with different, far less robust capabilities.

A further element of the strategy is the sense of simultaneous operations at sea in all theaters to destroy Soviet naval forces. This could include not only ships, but also naval aircraft, bases, and sanctuaries. If such operations were conducted sequentially instead, the level of forces required might be different.

A naval force capable of early, forward, offensive, and simultaneous operations against highly valued Soviet assets will be different in both level and mix than other, hypothetical navies built to support alternative strategies. Structuring such a force involves risk. As an example, focusing on the "worst case" of protracted, global, conventional war with the Soviet Union requires assumptions about a navy that will be used in more likely cases of crisis response and contingencies in the Third World. Above all, force planners assume—sometimes too rashly—that a force structure designed for the high-threat Soviet environment can also control less demanding scenarios.

Recent events in the Persian Gulf illustrate both the weakness and the strength of this assumption. In the short term, U.S. naval forces were embarrassingly vulnerable to the low technology of mine warfare during the early days of the crisis. Such a situation was not accidental. It reflected a conscious choice among maritime strategy descriptors, in which forward, offensive capabilities were maximized for the U.S. Navy—leaving significant mine warfare capabilities with our allies.

However, as subsequent events in the Persian Gulf have unfolded, two points are worth noting. First, in non-Soviet contingencies, it is probable that there will be sufficient time and space to overcome initial shortcomings resulting from the high-threat Soviet emphasis. U.S. naval forces did adapt to the environment, and allies were forthcoming in helping with mine operations. Second, naval forces designed for such strategy descriptors as forward and offensive—relative to a high threat Soviet environment—will dominate Third World maritime battlefields when appropriate forces are brought to bear.

Implications

Observers will differ in their evaluation of U.S. strategy, force structure, and crisis responses, especially when we look to the future. The strategy descriptors which we have examined do not include every military planning case, but the same methodology can be applied to them.

SDI is an example. It may revolutionize many aspects of force planning. Above all it reflects a much stronger movement toward the strategic defensive as opposed to the offensive orientation of our current strategy. Moreover, it would put a greater premium upon nonnuclear as opposed to nuclear capabilities. To the extent that we are relying upon extremely advanced, expensive, and untested technical capabilities, we can anticipate many debates over ground-based versus space-based systems and near-term versus long-term operational capabilities. These debates will involve the most revolutionary changes in military strategy in recent years, and we can clarify them greatly by carefully defining the strategy descriptors which must guide our many and complex force choices.

Perhaps an even more difficult challenge is now posed by arms control initiatives. There is a very serious risk that drastic changes in theater and intercontinental nuclear systems will have unforeseen impacts upon current strategy. For example, the INF treaty has major implications for many aspects of NATO force planning. As theater-range nuclear systems decline drastically in number, will NATO need to compensate by moving toward conventional deterrence? Will NATO prefer to modernize its shorter range nuclear systems, or focus upon deep strike aircraft? What will be the impact on Soviet strategy and on the overall likelihood of war?

Finally, how can we pay for these changes? There is a high probability that declining real defense budgets (since FY 1985) will continue. During such periods of retrenchment, the worst possible outcome for the U.S. Armed Forces would be indiscriminate cuts inflicted more by service "rice bowls" and Congressional "pork barrels" than by rational criteria. Cooler heads will argue against such irrational cuts, offering a wide range of wiser choices. They might argue that we should redefine our national interests, redistribute the burdens among our allies, change national objectives, or alter the national military strategy. In every case, the authors of this article contend that careful attention to existing or emerging strategy descriptors will result in a more effective mix and level of forces.

Notes

1. The term "forces," as it is used throughout this article, means total military or warfighting capability. It reflects the full level and mix of weapon systems, people, and ideas.

2. The Commission on Integrated Long-Term Strategy, *Discriminate Deterrence* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988), p. 1.

3. Official statements vary in how strongly they present this assertion. Contrast Caspar W. Weinberger, *Annual Report to the Congress. Fiscal Year 1984* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1983), p. 18, with the vaguer formulation in Chart 1.A.1, Frank C. Carlucci, *Annual Report to the Congress. Fiscal Year 1989* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988), p. 17.

4. This concept of a "top-down" approach to force planning is explored in Richmond A. Lloyd and the Force Planning Faculty, Naval War College, eds., *Foundations of Force Planning: Concepts and Issues* (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1986), pp. 62 and 217.

5. See John M. Collins, *U.S.-Soviet Military Balance. Concepts and Capabilities 1960-1980* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), pp. 3-14, for perhaps the best elaboration of the essentials of net assessment.

6. Compare and contrast the interestingly different formulations in the Secretary of Defense's *Annual Report for FY 1988* (pp. 47-50) and *FY 1989* (pp. 63-65) with The Joint Staff, *United States Military Posture for FY 1989* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1988), pp. 2-4.

7. *Annual Report FY 1989*, p. 219.

8. For representative examples of such critics, see John J. Mearsheimer, "The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security*, Fall 1986, and the exchange of views between John M. Collins and Rear Admiral William Pendley in U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, March, June, and August 1986.

