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Strategy & Force Planning: The Case of the Persian Gulf

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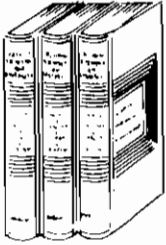
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BOOK REVIEWS

“But for those who have been at the pointy end of the spear and who have also participated in developing and choosing between ‘valid’ alternatives competing for scarce resources, the difference between ‘How much is enough?’ and ‘How much is too much?’ is far from trivial.”

Colonel Eric E. Hastings, U.S. Marine Corps

Epstein, Joshua M. *Strategy & Force Planning: The Case of the Persian Gulf*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987. 168pp. \$28.95

In his brief 1981 study titled “Planning Conventional Forces, 1950-1980,” William W. Kaufmann says: “Force planning is a military art more practiced than studied in the United States.” Among other things, I think Mr. Kaufmann meant that the military art of force planning could be improved by some prior preparation—or study—before one sallies off to practice the art form. Joshua Epstein has obviously been studying.

Mr. Epstein’s purpose is “to illuminate general issues of strategy and force planning through the rigorous examination of an important and analytically rich special case: the Persian Gulf.” The author develops his thesis around a proposed Persian Gulf campaign plan. Most of the book is given over to the determination and rationalization of the forces required to carry out the chosen strategy. He has developed an adaptive model—a dynamic net assessment process—to help reveal the force requirement and to test the sensitivity of the force to changing influences.

This effort is timely for two reasons. First, the potentially synergistic national debt, trade deficit, and budget deficit problems forecast little, if any,

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defense budget real growth for the near term. Meanwhile force effectiveness, efficiency and sufficiency will continue to receive close public and political scrutiny. Second, current arms control talks appear to have Washington and Moscow on the verge of a mid- and possibly short-range nuclear arms reduction agreement. Yet some Europeans would argue that raising a nuclear war threshold by zeroing mid-range missiles correspondingly lowers the conventional war threshold. In short, the conventional balance between NATO and the Warsaw Pact takes on greater meaning as conventional forces necessarily shoulder a greater strategic burden.

If one considers the art form of operational campaign planning, Mr. Epstein appears to invert the traditional planning sequence as he develops the feasibility (strength) of the force required only after he has developed the acceptability (cost-benefit or risk) of the selected course of action. Yet, considering the art form of force planning, what Mr. Epstein is really trying to do is evaluate the sufficiency of a given force over time. In other words, given constrained resources, regional objectives, chosen policies, a threat, a strategy, and a requirement for a credible set of forces to achieve the objectives through the chosen strategy, *how much is enough?* He offers his case study as a specific example from which enduring problems can be illuminated, some specific conclusions drawn, and—a *posteriori*—general force requirements induced as his model is applied to other scenarios.

After first deterring a direct Soviet nuclear attack against the United States, the author's next defense priority for the United States is to deter an attack against NATO and to assure the security of Western Europe. It is principally within the context of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict that Southwest Asia (SWA) and control of the Persian Gulf becomes sufficiently important to warrant planning for full-scale operations in simultaneous theaters—potentially requiring additive force structure. For Mr. Epstein, the two contingencies (NATO-Europe and SWA-Persian Gulf) are inextricably linked. At that point, strategic credibility, the forces which are required by the chosen strategy, and the marginal use of constrained resources become the immediate issues. He wants to ensure that both the strategy and the resources can be effectively and efficiently used.

"How much spending [by NATO members] depends on the measures required to compensate; the requisite compensatory efforts hinge on the scale and nature of the diversion to the Gulf; the entire issue thus turns on *this book's basic question: how much U.S. force is required in the most demanding plausible case? What strategy, and what force structure, will provide the most credible deterrent to large-scale Soviet aggression [in the Persian Gulf]?*"

The chosen force planning scenario evolves from the threat of a Soviet invasion of Iran in order to possess or dominate the oil fields of Khuzestan. The case study then proceeds to identify and discuss strengths and weaknesses of three strategies that have competed for applicability to that

region: (1) "vertical escalation," relying on a conventional force tripwire and tactical nuclear weapons; (2) "horizontal escalation," threatening attack in other regions; and (3) a "conventional-only defense" of the region.

His analysis of vertical escalation is a brief intellectual romp through alternative answers and implications of the fundamental nuclear strategy question: Can nuclear war be limited (controlled)? The analysis of horizontal escalation is a similarly stimulating discussion of the variable elements of the question: How does one deter certain Soviet actions (if deterrence equals capability, plus will, plus incalculability—all modified by *the enemy's* perception)? And if deterrence fails, how does one end the war with war aims remaining limited, i.e., avoiding a predictable or inevitable slide into a war that becomes global in scope or total in aim? For Epstein's Persian scenario, both the vertical and horizontal escalation strategies fail the credibility logic test. While the friendly campaign courses of action may be feasible and suitable, they are not acceptable (principally a matter of risk). They would constitute "asymmetric responses" to a threat which does not jeopardize *U.S. national survival*. In Epstein's judgment, he expects the Soviets would also perceive such flaws. In short, the strategies do not deter because they are not credible.

After a rigorous analysis, Epstein finds that strategy for conventional defense is both credible and symmetrical. The issues he develops around the "symmetry" of strategies and forces include crisis stability, precipitate behavior, escalation control, escalation dominance and accomplishment of limited war aims. His exposition of this strategy is an interesting and intellectually challenging comparison of four distinctive campaign analyses. (Read the footnotes and check the appendices in order to assess his choice of static measures and assumptions.)

The objective for each of the opposing forces is to control Khuzestan. The process begins with a net assessment which is, of course, initially supported by static measures and (arguably optimistic) assumptions. After studying the Soviets' capability, Epstein divides their acceptable campaigns into two distinct options: a fluid, forceful and direct drive for the objective (with all that that means in terms of obstacles, logistics supportability and time) or; a buildup in northern Iran (after the first obstacle/barrier breakthrough) followed by a drive south for the objective. Depending on who gets to the objective first, (principally a function of warning time and political will to intervene) the two Soviet attack options are modified by who has the initial "advantage" of defending the objective area. Epstein proposes a counter-vailing conventional campaign strategy which delays Soviet movement and attrites their usable forces (with varying effectiveness) regardless of which option Moscow chooses.

Moving into the realm of simulation, war gaming, and modeling, Epstein develops an "adaptive" model that projects (sequentially measures) both opponents' relative unit lethality remaining over time. He develops the

model as a response to the severe limitations he perceives in standard Lanchesterian theory-based modeling. His aim is to produce a model that he hopes is situationally responsive and sufficiently “dynamic” to produce legitimate, credible results in measuring net remaining combat power over time. In short, his “adaptive” model produces much more than mere quantitative analysis. But of course it also produces much less than revelations about some future, predestined events.

Many force planning issues remain: the strengths and weaknesses of scenario-based force planning; the difficulties in accommodating or quantifying incommensurables (e.g., judgment, maneuver, time, will, morale, etc.); the implications of simultaneous or sequential theaters; central reserves versus forward deployment and/or land-basing; a go-it-alone or a coalition strategy; regional or flexible mission force tailoring; pre-positioning or strategic air and sealift; and perceptions of limits on the legitimate use of U.S. forces. Epstein grasps opposing force capabilities, vulnerabilities, and constraints and simultaneously examines them through a demonstrably “fair” and clear prism. It would be a mistake to forget that his model is just that—a prism that distorts while it focuses. Of course, threat intentions, as ever, are tough to predict and deal with and therefore may require some hedging. But Soviet threat capabilities are not overdrawn, while simultaneously U.S. capabilities are not undervalued and regional circumstances are not overlooked—for all that that may mean to crisis and arms-race stability as well as selection of acceptable strategies to accomplish general U.S. national security objectives.

Overall, Mr. Epstein proposes a solid—if arguable—link between ends and means while taking care to identify any perceived force-strategy mismatches. While giving insight to “enduring questions,” the results of his campaign comparison are situationally dependent. He reminds the reader of the effect of what he views as inexorably precipitate events in 1914 along with the “peace-in-our-time” mentality and lost opportunities of 1938–1940. In sum, he wants to revise the future crisis calculus by adding stability through procurement of sufficient, credible, and deterrent force structure.

Having said that, Mr. Epstein has *not* provided the last word on horizontal or vertical escalation strategies. Nor has he proven the applicability of his strategy and his forces across the vast array of legitimate U.S. defense objectives. Equally, it is well to remember that things change even as they are being observed. Current events reflect an unsettling profusion of interests, objectives, and threats in the Gulf region. “Worst-case” threat honors may go to the Soviets but “most-vexing” or “-likely” may go to an entirely different threat. Additionally, some of Mr. Epstein’s conclusions are weakened by assertions regarding the past motivation of U.S. planners for Southwest Asia. Yet I believe he has made a valuable contribution by demonstrating (at least to his professional satisfaction) containment of a sizeable threat through credible, conventional means at bearable, preparatory cost and acceptable risk.

But for those who have been at the pointy end of the spear and who have also participated in developing and choosing between “valid” alternatives competing for scarce resources, the difference between “How much is enough?” and “How much is too much?” is far from trivial. Cost-effectiveness is pertinent; yet cost-effectiveness can be illusory or transient. On balance, Mr. Epstein has provided a well-supported case study, a tool which will be useful in preparing future planners for their force planning responsibilities. At the very least, he has demonstrated the political flexibility that can be offered by military preparedness, while suggesting some of the potentially negative consequences when overestimating or undervaluing forces.

Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1987. 160pp. \$7.50

“However absorbed a commander may be in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into account.” With these words, Winston Churchill tells us why the sixth annual edition of *Soviet Military Power* is worth our while to read and think about. It is a comprehensive treatment of Soviet military hardware, capabilities, strategies, policies, and trends.

Beginning with a chapter on Soviet strategic military policies, the authors move to strategic and nuclear forces, theater forces including naval forces, forces for readiness and sustainability, Soviet weapons research and production, and regional policies. They conclude with some brief notes on U.S. response to all this. It is well-written—better indeed than many of the classified publications—and contains more information than most of us will absorb in a single reading. Bearing in mind the readership of the *Naval War College Review*, this review will

concentrate on the Soviet strategic and naval forces.

In his preface, Caspar Weinberger makes two interesting observations. First, the West has relied on technological superiority to offset the sheer mass of the Soviet forces. This advantage is under vigorous challenge. Second, it behooves us to give some thought to why a nation with severe internal economic problems would devote 15 to 17 percent of its GNP to establishing and maintaining such a large military buildup. The authors suggest that the answer lies in a Soviet desire to achieve a military posture “that provides for absolute security as it continues to seek world domination.”

In their opening analysis on the Soviet view of strategic war, the authors observe that while the Soviets recognize the catastrophic consequences of a global nuclear war, they also appear to believe that they can ultimately prevail in such a contest. Their force structure seems to reflect both a nuclear war-winning posture and, increasingly, a posture for