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Capabilities-Based Planning: A Brief Example of the Approach; Strategic Insights: v.3, issue 10 (October 2004)

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Can the Defense Department (DoD) develop a top-down, capabilities-based planning process (CPB) that is effective? Answering that question requires showing an example of CPB at work.

The example I have in mind is ballistic missile defense (BMD). If BMD is a sensible example, then it should be possible to start with strategic challenges, shift to a strategy to deal with those challenges, and then move down the ladder of logic from the JOpsC (Joint Operations Concept), to the JOCs (Joint Operating Concepts), and then to the capability options that the Secretary of Defense must consider.

What are the primary strategic challenges? First, to the U.S. government’s ability to physically protect the United States and its major interests, including the survival of its allies and the continuation of international commerce and communication. Second, to the ability of the president of the United States to deal with an unprecedented range of military, paramilitary, terrorist, and political challenges without using a level of force that would alienate allies, neutral governments, and “world opinion” generally.

For example, the government of the United States could have responded to the attacks of 11 September 2001 with nuclear weapons, but against whom, to what ends, and with what effects? Because no one could answer those questions satisfactorily, the President was left with just one obvious option—to attack the Taliban in Afghanistan and thereby remove Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations.

What is the basic strategic approach to these challenges adopted by this administration? First, to field a military force strong enough to deter a direct conventional or nuclear attack on the United States and its allies. Second, to take the initiative against any likely enemy before that likely enemy can attack the U.S., its allies, or the instruments of international commerce and communications. Third, to field capabilities that will give to the president the ability to deal with a range of challenges on the appropriate levels. It does no good to leave the president with only two options—do nothing or launch a nuclear strike.

The JOpsC requires U.S. forces to defeat their enemies quickly and decisively. The Homeland Security JOC lays out a layered defense of the United States—one that gives the president time to deal with an emerging danger before those who pose that danger can strike at the U.S., its allies, or its interests. The Strategic Deterrence JOC requires joint commanders to plan around and against the vital interests of potential enemies. It requires planners to see a possible confrontation from the opponent’s point of view. It notes that deterrence requires understanding and shaping a potential opponent’s decision calculus. In general, the “desired operational effect” to be achieved is the deterrence or defeat of the kind of attack that would make the United States appear either helpless or incredibly vicious.

What are the “capability options”? Some, obviously, aren’t even military, including using executive departments such as State, Justice, and Treasury to cut off funds for terrorists. Of the military capability options, there are (1) BMD, both active and passive, (2) real-time surveillance of likely enemy installations and pre-emptive attacks on those installations with conventional forces or SOF, and (3) military conquest and occupation of nations likely to harbor and/or support enemies of the U.S. with the capability to launch major attacks on the U.S., its interests, or its allies.

The Administration’s view of the four primary challenges of today’s national security environment are summarized in the following chart:
IRREGULAR CHALLENGES: Erode the power of the United States through unconventional methods of warfare such as terrorism, civil war, or criminal activity.

CATASTROPHIC CHALLENGES: Attempt to paralyze the United States through the use of weapons of mass destruction, either against the USA directly or against a coalition partner or ally.

TRADITIONAL CHALLENGES: Thwart the influence of the USA by confronting US forces with stronger conventional or nuclear forces.

DISRUPTIVE CHALLENGES: Supplant US power through the introduction of one or more new technologies or techniques, such as cybernetic attacks.

The likelihood of each of these challenges is different. For example, the chance that US forces will be confronted with a major “traditional challenge” is low, while the chance that US forces will face multiple simultaneous “irregular challenges” is quite high.

Can we evaluate the three capability options in light of this array of challenges? Yes, by matching each option against the “quad chart” dangers—traditional, irregular, catastrophic, and disruptive. BMD does well against certain catastrophic dangers, and perhaps against disruptive ones, too. By contrast, BMD doesn’t add much to existing capabilities in the area of irregular warfare, but it might add much in the area of traditional conflict—at least enough to deter the threat of a limited nuclear strike.

The second capability option—real-time surveillance and pre-emptive attacks with conventional forces or SOF—won’t be effective if adequate intelligence is lacking. In this case, accurate targeting is the key to success in defeating or deterring a catastrophic threat. However, if accurate surveillance and targeting can be achieved, then this capability has important implications for dealing with traditional, irregular, and disruptive dangers.

The third capability option can be effective if it’s clear to potential enemies that the U.S. can in fact dominate areas of foreign territory or quickly remove hostile regimes and replace them with effective friendly regimes. The down side to this option is that it’s essentially something done after an attack on the U.S., its allies or its interests has already taken place. For example, it was clear after the attacks of September 11, 2001, that the U.S. had the capability to defeat the forces of Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein from power. But the existence of that capability did not deter the attacks of September 11, 2001, because the terrorists who conducted them weren’t dependent on Hussein’s regime. At the same time, however, the continued existence of that capability might deter future attacks by other terrorist organizations that do need the support of regimes in places like Syria.

We can also compare the capabilities in terms of cost. All three are expensive, but achieving the surveillance required for the second option may be too expensive and therefore may not be a feasible option at this time. The third option, because it tends to come after an attack like that of September 11, 2001, must have, as a cost, the burden of enduring an attack—and that cost may be unacceptable politically if not also economically.

There are other metrics that can be applied to the three capability options, including political acceptance by American citizens, effects on allies, effects on neutrals, and the impact of any option on the overall force structure of the United States.

In short, it’s quite possible to take this particular issue to the Secretary or the Senior Leadership Review Group (or SLRG) now. Analysts can work their way down the chain of logic from challenges to strategy and then from strategy to concepts and from concepts to capabilities. There are some who say that this method should be used for all existing and potential military capabilities, but I think that is not necessary. What matters is being able to apply this form of analysis to major issues—issues that must be raised to the level of the Secretary of Defense.
The ballistic missile defense issue is easy because it really isn’t an issue at all. The President and the Congress have decided to pursue and support all three of the capability options. One reason they have done so is because the second and third options have great utility in all four of the national security challenge areas. But this case at least illustrates the method of capabilities-based planning, and how it both resembles and differs from threat-based planning.