

1-30-2018

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Recommended Citation

Fitzsimmons, Michael, "Strategic Insights: Challenges in Using Scenario Planning for Defense Strategy" (2018). *Articles & Editorials*. 4.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/4

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Strategic Insights: Challenges in Using Scenario Planning for Defense Strategy

January 30, 2018 | Dr. Michael Fitzsimmons

Lawrence Freedman and Colin Gray are two of the most famous contemporary scholars of military strategy. Within the past few years, each published a book addressing different aspects of the same practical problem of strategy: defense planning.¹ Considered to be strategy's mundane cousin, defense planning revolves around how a nation designs its military according to its views of the future. Freedman's and Gray's verdicts on the subject are very similar and simply put: we are usually wrong when we predict the future of war. This judgment is not new; indeed, it conforms with the observations of countless defense policymakers and analysts on the challenges of strategic planning in national security.²

However, those looking to the works of these preeminent strategists for practical prescriptions on confronting uncertainty in planning are liable to be underwhelmed. Freedman warns against expecting either too much or too little continuity in current security trends, ultimately concluding that many predictions about the future of war "deserve to be taken seriously," but all should "be treated skeptically."³ In a similar vein, Gray concludes his study with a list of findings that defense planners may find accurate, but not particularly novel.⁴

The time is ripe for further reflection on this important and enduring problem as the United States enters another season of issuing formal strategic plans, including a new *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy*, and *Nuclear Posture Review*, among others. The Army recently published a new version of the foundational doctrine Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, and will continue developing its new ambitious planning framework for "Multi-Domain Battle."⁵ How, in the process of all this planning, does the most powerful military in history currently handle the fundamental challenge of making strategic choices for the future in the face of deep uncertainty?

In theory, one of the Department of Defense's (DoD) most important tools for strategy development under uncertainty is scenario planning. Distinct from operational planning, which focuses on applying existing capabilities to today's threats, scenario planning aims to explore a wider range of possible challenges several years or even decades into the future.⁶ Using alternative future scenarios to test prospective capabilities, concepts, and policies—through wargaming, modeling, and other analytic techniques—is a unique and necessary method for grappling with uncertainty.

Since 2002, the DoD has employed a formalized joint process for scenario planning known originally as the Analytic Agenda, subsequently renamed Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA). Its codified purpose is to "support deliberations by DoD senior leadership on strategy and planning, programming, budgeting, and execution (PPBES) matters, including force sizing, shaping and capability development."⁷ However, despite its intended importance to the DoD planning processes, the SSA enterprise is actually far less influential than it could be on senior leaders' decision-making. You will search many hundreds of pages in vain for any reference to the SSA process in the memoirs of Defense Secretaries Rumsfeld, Gates, and Panetta.⁸ The process has

struggled to gain traction in recent major strategic reviews in the Pentagon. In addition, discussion of SSA in professional literature is almost entirely confined to the defense analytic community. Policy and strategy debates, by contrast, frequently include general discussions of scenarios, but almost never address how military leaders and organizations should or do apply scenarios in their decision-making.

The limits of classification have some bearing on SSA's low public profile, but the more important explanation is simply that scenario planning in the DoD has not fulfilled its promise as a fulcrum for strategic planning. As veteran analyst Paul Davis put it in his 2016 report to Congress on the status of joint scenario analysis, "defense secretaries, Joint Staff chairs, and service chiefs are fully aware that they are planning under deep uncertainty. They have not been well served by analysis that suppresses uncertainty."⁹

Why is this so hard? Some of the answers are partly submerged in the arcane details of bureaucratic processes and incentives, but the obstacles have strategic ramifications. Six nettlesome challenges in particular have complicated the execution of effective scenario planning in the Pentagon over the years. They can be summarized as dilemmas between competing priorities or concepts.

1. Likelihood vs. plausibility as appropriate planning factors.

How likely does a scenario need to be to compel planning? Furthermore, how likely is any given scenario in the first place? Despite the use of many scientific-sounding arguments on the subject, and despite superficial deference to the intelligence community as an authority on the subject of likelihood and plausibility, the answers to these questions are entirely subjective and unverifiable. Everyone has an opinion, and very few can be disproved. This means that a nearly endless number of uncertainties can be cause for legitimate debate in making scenario assumptions, from the large (would we really deploy combat forces to that continent?) to the small (would that ally give us that percentage of ramp space at that commercial airport?). This is a very problematic feature of a process dependent on extensive collaboration and consensus-based resolution of major issues.

2. High-resolution analysis of a small number of cases vs. low-resolution analysis of a large number of cases.

Clearly, the uncertainty of the future security environment demands examination of a range of scenarios for force planning. On the other hand, understanding (much less predicting) combat outcomes is a complex endeavor, requiring specification of many factors. Trade-offs are required between depth and breadth, but consensus on the proper balance here is always fragile and unstable. Moreover, it is worth noting that the analytic and bureaucratic cultures of DoD organizations tend to favor depth over breadth.

3. Long, structured timelines for data development and analysis vs. the need to be responsive to senior leader guidance.

The more complex scenarios and associated data become, the longer it takes for the system to produce and approve those products. This is a challenge regardless of which end of the spectrum (identified in the previous point) the system tends toward (i.e., many simple

scenarios or few complex scenarios). A small number of highly detailed scenario products generates significant workload and requires long and structured timelines for development—but so do a large number of less-detailed scenario products. This presents a challenge in making the scenario products responsive to senior leader input. Such input inevitably disrupts timelines for data development and analysis, compromising the timeliness of SSA products.

4. Transparent and collaborative process vs. innovative exploration of new concepts and capabilities.

It is no secret that bureaucratic processes are enemies of innovation. The natural dynamics and politics of developing collaborative products across multiple organizations with differing incentives tend to produce compromises that elude difficult choices rather than confront them, and suppress experimental ideas rather than nurture them. SSA products often bear the mark of such compromises and tend to hew closely to conventional, established thinking about strategic and operational approaches to scenarios. Yet there is not a simple solution to this problem. SSA products are bound by the need to foster a transparent collaborative process, both because the issues addressed require the expertise of a diverse range of organizations, and because the viability of their ostensible role in shaping programs and budgets depends on a certain degree of institutional credibility that is conferred by the transparent, collaborative process.

5. Appropriateness of operational plans vs. scenarios as the basis for force planning and “requirements” generation.

In theory, force planning, development, and investment should support near-term needs from deliberate planning and those derived from potential future contingencies in an integrated fashion. In fact, because operational planning and force planning processes are so segregated in the DoD, operational plans and future scenarios end up competing with, rather than complementing, each other when it comes to strategic resource allocation.¹⁰ Clearly, having force planning either solely focused on current plans or unrelated to current plans would be inappropriate. Nevertheless, the DoD has always struggled to strike a deliberate balance in this regard.

6. Prerogatives of civilian planning guidance vs. military operational art.

Finally, the SSA process experiences a constant struggle, as do many Pentagon processes, in defining a boundary between those prerogatives and judgments that civilian guidance predominates and those that military operational expertise predominates.

The point of enumerating these debates or dilemmas is not to criticize any particular position an organization might take on the substance of the issues. Rather, it is to paint as clear a picture as possible of the fundamental structural impediments to designing an effective scenario-planning process to support force development. Any such process will need to grapple with these dilemmas, and will have to make trade-offs, whether deliberate or accidental, among worthy but competing goals.

When the current round of official strategizing has culminated, senior officials, congressional overseers, and defense professionals would do well to take stock of how well the process was or was not served by scenario analysis, and grasp the opportunity to revitalize this essential tool for strategic planning.

ENDNOTES

1. Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014; Lawrence Freedman, *The Future of War: A History*, New York: Public Affairs, 2017.

2. For an example from defense policymakers, see any *National Defense Strategy*, *National Military Strategy*, or National Intelligence Council *Global Trends* document from the past decade. Emblematic of this view is Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey's first sentence in his preface to the 2015 *National Military Strategy*: "Today's global security environment is the most unpredictable I have seen in 40 years of service." U.S. Department of Defense, *National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, Washington, DC: The Government Printing Office, June 2015, p. i. For just a few recent examples from defense analysts, see: Ionut C. Popescu, "Strategic Uncertainty, the Third Offset, and US Grand Strategy," *Parameters*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Winter 2016-17; Michael J. Mazarr, *Rethinking Risk in National Security: Lessons of the Financial Crisis for Risk Management*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Paul K. Davis, *Lessons from RAND's Work on Planning Under Uncertainty for National Security*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012; Richard Danzig, *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions about Prediction and National Security*, Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, October 26, 2011.

3. Freedman, pp. 286-287.

4. Gray, pp. 202-204. Examples include: "try only to make small mistakes," "the most important quality in defence planning is prudence," "history is . . . the most useful source of education for defence planners," and "beware the curse of presentism."

5. Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, Washington, DC: The Government Printing Office, October 2017; U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *Multi-Domain Battle: Evolution of Combined Arms for the 21st Century 2025-2040*, Version 1.0, Washington, DC: The Government Printing Office, October 2017, DRAFT.

6. For a foundational description of scenario planning, see Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World*, New York: Currency Doubleday, 1991. For a more recent discussion of scenarios applied to foreign policy, see Michael F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

7. Department of Defense Directive Number 8260.05, "Support for Strategic Analysis (SSA)," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, July 7, 2011, p. 1.

8. Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, New York: Sentinel, 2011; Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 142-143, 457. Gates does briefly discuss the general need for planning for a wide range of conflicts. See also Leon Panetta with Jim Newton, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014.

9. Paul K. Davis, *Capabilities for Joint Analysis in the Department of Defense: Rethinking Support for Strategic Analysis*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016, p. 31.

10. For a brief overview of this phenomenon, see Robert A. Gleckler, "Why War Plans, Really?" *Joint Force Quarterly*, Iss. 79, 4th Qtr 2015, pp. 73-75.

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