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Alan Ned Sabrosky

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Of Smoke and Mirrors: Grand Strategy by Commission

ALAN NED SABROSKY

A Review Essay on: **Discriminate Deterrence**. Report of the Commission on Integrated Long-Range Strategy. 70 pages. US Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., January 1988.

Few enterprises are as demanding as that of attempting to craft an appropriate strategy for a power such as the United States in an ever more complicated world. Earlier endeavors include the classic *NSC-68* written in 1950 and the so-called "Nixon Doctrine" prepared two decades later. The most recent attempt is *Discriminate Deterrence*, compiled under the auspices of a prestigious commission co-chaired by Fred C. Iklé and Albert Wohlstetter and supported by a professional staff. The objective of *Discriminate Deterrence* is to devise an integrated strategy "designed for the long term, to guide force development, weapons procurement, and arms negotiations." How well it has done in its pursuit of that objective, and why, is the subject of this review.

An Overview of the Effort

The basic document consists of a summary and eight substantive chapters, with a dozen working papers and topical reports to be published separately. The chapter titles themselves provide an indication of the scope of this effort. Sequentially, they are: "The Changing Security Environment," "Third World Conflicts and US Interests," "Wars on the Soviet Periphery," "The Extreme Threats," "Influencing Soviet Arms Policy," "Managing Technology," "Managing the Defense Budget," and "Connecting the Elements of the Strategy." Each undertakes to identify relevant issues, assess the prevailing state of affairs, and then prescribe how the subject of that chapter should

be handled by the United States in the years to come. The result "is meant to guide our defense planning for many years into the future—at least twenty."

While the document needs to be read in its entirety to be understood properly, the essential architecture can be outlined briefly to provide an appreciation of the thrust of the effort. The strategy of "discriminate deterrence" proposed by the commission is intended to revise rather than to replace what it describes as the durable and largely successful "grand strategy of extraordinary global sweep" that has guided American defense planners for approximately four decades. This is necessitated by the commission's view that there are both continuities and changes in the security environment confronting the United States. Thus, it is asserted that "for the foreseeable future, the United States will have to compete militarily with the Soviet Union," a continuing challenge that is complicated considerably by factors such as the emergence of Japan and China as powers of consequence, the diffusion of advanced military technology into the Third World, and the emergence of a diverse set of actual or potential conflict situations in the Western Hemisphere and elsewhere at the lower end of the conflict spectrum.

Dealing with this more complicated security environment, it is suggested, requires a strategy of "discriminate deterrence." Continuities include the global containment of the Soviet Union; retention of a survivable strategic nuclear retaliatory capability; collective defense; forward-deployed US forces backed by an adequate reinforcing capability from the continental United States; and an emphasis on quality rather than on quantity in both technology and personnel. Among the principal changes recommended by the commission are a diversification in both the contingencies the United States should be prepared to meet and the range of possible military responses to those contingencies; greater sophistication in our dealings with the Third World in general; the development of appropriate defensive as well as offensive nuclear and conventional systems; and the consistent and sustained exploitation of emerging technologies, including those that would facilitate the control of space in wartime. Of particular interest is a six-point strategy for US involvement in Third World conflicts, including the assertion that "US forces will not in general be combatants" and a call for the United States to cultivate what the commission labels "cooperative forces" (i.e. proxies) capable of doing for the United States what the Cubans and others do for the Soviet Union.

Dr. Alan Ned Sabrosky (Ph.D., University of Michigan) is a military affairs writer and consultant. He was formerly Director of Studies, Strategic Studies Institute, and also holder of the General of the Army Douglas MacArthur Chair of Research at the US Army War College. A Marine during the Vietnam War, he has taught at West Point and is a 1986 graduate of the Army War College. He has published ten books and monographs and over 80 articles and reviews on defense and foreign policy.

“Discriminate Deterrence” Reconsidered

There can be little quarrel with the importance of taking a hard look at the strategic requirements of the United States in the light of the changes taking place in the world. There can be even less doubt about the value of having in one's conceptual repertoire an integrated long-term strategy. And there is no doubt whatsoever that *Discriminate Deterrence* is the culmination of the combined efforts of a number of excellent individuals dedicated to the proposition that the United States can and will approach the future armored against adversity with such a strategy.

As with any such endeavor, there is, as the saying goes, both good news and bad news. The *good* news is that there are a number of well-taken points in this document, particularly of a descriptive and (to a lesser extent) an analytical nature. The authors of *Discriminate Deterrence* acknowledge both the fact and the possible consequences of the changes taking place in the world arena. Indeed, one is struck by the extent to which the “drivers” of NSC-68—the concentration of power in the hands of the United States and the Soviet Union, the presumed existence of a “new fanatic faith” in the latter, and Moscow's dismissal of any obstacle to its ambitions other than the United States—no longer command center stage. There is a fair assessment of developments in the global and regional military balances. The prospects for nuclear proliferation are understood to be very real. The growing sophistication of the “arsenals of the lesser powers” increases the risks and the costs of superpower intervention anywhere. And improvements in US conventional capabilities in Europe and in strategic lift capacity are countered in some respects by a “diminishing ability to gain agreement for timely access, including bases and overflight rights.”

Discriminate Deterrence also quite properly argues that there is a need for US defense planners to escape from a preoccupation with two “extreme contingencies”—a “massive conventional attack against NATO by the Warsaw Pact” and “an unrestrained Soviet nuclear attack on US strategic forces and other military targets in the West.” Without rejecting the need to “plan for the extreme contingencies,” the commission concludes that “an emphasis on massive Soviet attacks leads to tunnel vision among defense planners.” This makes it difficult to respond adequately to challenges to US interests and allies in the Third World, where “nearly all the armed conflicts of the past forty years have occurred,” and which are the potential source of either more destructive wars or significant changes in the overall “correlation of forces.” There is therefore an urgent need for the United States “to be better prepared to deal with conflicts in the Third World” in the years to come, especially in the realm of what is now called “low intensity conflict.”

Finally, there are a number of useful observations on subjects ranging from the requirements for deterrence to the limitations on technology that commend themselves to the reader. One is that “a strategy that depends

on . . . [a] 'nuclear exchange' has serious limitations," with effective deterrence resting on a potential attacker's belief in our willingness as well as our capability plausibly to respond if challenged. Another is the recognition that defensive systems are appropriate "at any level of conflict," and that "defenses against ballistic and cruise missiles" are essential elements of any reasonable defense posture. A third is that arms control agreements may be very useful in some circumstances, but they can also be "a recipe for disaster" if they are pursued "mainly for the international good will they are expected to generate, and only secondarily for their effects on arms." A fourth is that "security assistance programs are of great importance . . . [and encumbered by] endless [congressional] restrictions placed on the dwindling amounts of available funds," inhibiting "the President's flexibility to deal with conflicts that threaten US interests." And finally, while "developments in military technology . . . could require major revisions in military doctrines and force structures, . . . high tech is not an American monopoly"; our "technology today is less superior than it used to be," the Soviet Union has made substantial gains that "might be extended," and global "weapons production will be much more widely diffused in the years to come."

All of these factors need to be taken into account by strategic planners. It is therefore most unfortunate that the potential reflected in parts of *Discriminate Deterrence* is undermined by some *bad news* that must perforce be reported also.

Perhaps the most fundamental problem is that the architects of *Discriminate Deterrence* simply have not produced the type of integrated strategy that would both "compel trade-offs" and define the type of choices that ought to be made in the changing security environment they portray reasonably well. There is something here for everyone—NATO for the Army and Third World contingencies for LIC enthusiasts, offensive and defensive strategic nuclear force modernization as well as arms control, calls for steady increases in defense spending along with a cautionary note about constrained resources—and nothing that will offend violently any important constituency. Both the "analysis" and the "prescriptions" are laden with placebos and banalities. It is certainly true, for example, that "we must provide the resources needed to maintain the training, morale, and excellence in leadership of the men and women in the armed forces," and that "we will need an acquisition process that fosters cohesion, speed, and incentive for innovation." Without some indication of precisely how these laudable goals are to be achieved, what one has is less a "strategy" than an expression of wishful thinking whose realization is hostage to what "should," "could," or "might" be done.

Compounding, and perhaps contributing to, the lack of strategic choice is an ambivalence about the Soviet Union that permeates the document. Both the changes in the security environment identified in *Discriminate Deterrence* and the avowed need for "more mobile and versatile forces . . . that can

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deter aggression by their ability to respond rapidly and discriminately to a wide range of attacks” argue for a pronounced shift in emphasis in defense planning (at least for conventional forces) away from the Soviet Union. Yet only by continuing to focus on a Soviet threat is it possible to justify much of the current US force structure and many of the major procurement decisions made by all of the services in recent decades. The inconsistency this produces inhibits escape from that “tunnel vision among defense planners” so detrimental to strategic planning. The result is that the Soviet Union is portrayed throughout this document as a state whose urge to attack almost everywhere is deterred only with difficulty. There is all too little recognition of the reality that all threats in the world do not originate in Moscow; that a genuinely multipolar world would confront Soviet strategic planners with more problems than their American counterparts would face; and that the USSR, for reasons of history and ideology, may have internally legitimate concerns about the United States and its allies (especially West Germany) very different from the view held in the West.

A third difficulty concerns the commission’s ambivalent view of the role of deterrence in general, and of nuclear deterrence in particular. It must be acknowledged that we really do not know what truly deters in the realm of nuclear affairs, as the evidential base involving even conventional wars between two nuclear powers is—fortunately—nonexistent. In *Discriminate Deterrence*, it is conceded that “in the nuclear age, no conventional war involving combat between US and Soviet forces would be unaffected by nuclear weapons”; that “over the past forty years, the Soviet regime has shown no signs of gravitating toward all-or-nothing gambles”; and that “Soviet military planners have shown an awareness that if the Politburo uses military force, it has a strong incentive to do so selectively and keep the force under political control.” Having made these points, the commission then proceeds to discuss possible Soviet military actions and (for example) “NATO’s ability to respond with controlled and effective nuclear strikes” as if its own arguments had never been made. There is no assessment of what Soviet *political* goals would be served by war with the United States in Europe or elsewhere that would be worth the risk of any level of nuclear war. There is no explanation of the circumstances that would induce the Soviet Union first to go to war with the United States over a Europe both consider to be a vital interest,

and then to accept defeat and the sacrifice of that vital interest rather than escalate the fighting as necessary. And there is no resolution of the contradiction between the recognition that “it does not take much nuclear force to destroy a civil society,” and the rather odd notion that somehow a capability “to respond discriminately” can keep a nuclear war “within bounds . . . ensuring that it does not rapidly deteriorate into an apocalypse.”

Fourth, there is far too little on the *means* required to execute this putative strategy. Indeed, it says a great deal about the commission report to note that there are separate chapters on both technology and the defense budget, but only passing references to the vital issues of personnel and force structure. Budgets and technology are important, to be sure, but are rather sterile in the absence of any solid appreciation of the human dimension of a military establishment and the force structure trade-offs required to execute any strategy. Similarly, there is not a hint that we have a very expensive defense establishment with enormous duplication of effort among the services that has its roots in interservice rivalry and bureaucratic inertia, lacking even a fig leaf of strategic justification. Any strategy worthy of the name would come to terms with these issues—although it must be conceded that any *document* on strategy prepared by this (or any similar) commission that attempted to do so would never appear in print.

Fifth, *Discriminate Deterrence* is woefully deficient when it comes to addressing economic issues, broadly defined. There is no comprehensive assessment of the total cost of the many new initiatives proposed in this report, or of what specifically would be the funding priorities in the likely event that enough monies for everything are not forthcoming. There is some talk about “Soviet economic difficulties,” but not about those of the United States, except to note that defense budget constraints are likely to be imposed “by concern over the national debt and pressures for social spending.” There is scarcely a hint about the consequences of being the world’s largest debtor nation, with an annual debt service larger than that of the annual defense expenditures of the rest of NATO combined. And it is difficult to appreciate fully “the dynamism of the private sector” upon which so much depends, in the face of governmental malpractice that has made a travesty of the budget process.

Last, but certainly not least, the analytical reservations about technology in parts of the report fall by the wayside in its prescriptions: when searching for solutions, technology is the court of first and last resort. The architects of this document consistently fall back on technological solutions to strategic problems, whether the issue is the Soviet-American military balance, conflict in the Third World, alternatives to basing and access problems, or arms control. Let there be no mistake: technology *is* important, but it is neither a substitute nor a surrogate for strategic thought. It has been said that “history . . . knows many cases where an unskilled military leader led his technically equipped troops to defeat by the shortest path.” The same can be said

for unskilled strategists and their countries—a point that seems to have eluded those who have prepared this report.

Pathology

There are three principal reasons, in my opinion, for the existence of so many fundamental problems in *Discriminate Deterrence*. The most obvious reason is the reliance on the medium of a commission, rather than the efforts of one or two key individuals. A commission in the US government serves as a form of bureaucratic valium, searching for a least common denominator of consensus, and avoiding or couching in obscure language truly contentious issues. So it is with this document, whose whole is far less than either its potential or the sum of its various parts. Most, if not all, of the members could have done far better on their own, as many have demonstrated in the past. As it stands, however, *Discriminate Deterrence* has the clinical tone of the committee report it is, with all of the punch and decisiveness of JCS position papers. Relative to both *NSC-68* and the “Nixon Doctrine,” it reflects a decline in the quality of strategic discourse in the United States, a growth in governmental unwillingness to confront strategic and budgetary realities, and a paradoxical preference to do more with less—admirable in the abstract, perhaps, but hardly a contribution to strategic thought.

A second, and more respectable, reason is that the magnitude of the strategic problem confronting the United States is truly awesome. The fact that the traditional strategy has endured may be a sign of its strength. But it may also be a sign of institutional rigidity, or a harbinger of something very unpleasant waiting in the wings. The world has changed in ways that we do not fully appreciate. We know that technological change and the advent of nuclear weapons mean that geography no longer insulates us from danger. We know that we no longer possess the economic and military superiority of the early years of the Cold War that gave us a considerable margin for error. We know that our governmental system responds clumsily to the requirements for the exercise of power in world politics. And we simply do not know what to do about it all. As a consequence, we avoid the truly hard questions: How can we retain a preoccupation with a Soviet threat and still find the resources to

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do more elsewhere in an era of constrained or declining defense budgets? What could possibly motivate any Soviet leadership not bent on suicide to initiate a war against the United States or its key allies? How can we use what we have “on the shelf” to safeguard our interests in order to avoid incessant appeals to a technological salvation that may be unattainable? Absent answers to these and similar thorny questions, hard strategic analysis will be in exceedingly short supply.

The third and probably most intractable reason concerns our institutional inability to respond effectively to challenges. There is more than a measure of truth to the somewhat cynical observation that “when faced with a twenty-year threat, government responds with a fifteen-year program in the Five-Year Defense Plan, managed by three-year personnel, funded with single-year appropriations which are typically three to six months late.” Put bluntly, the design and execution of any strategy requires both long-range planning and long-term resourcing, without which even the most sophisticated strategy will fail. Neither that planning nor that resourcing is possible in a system beset by an annual (or even a biennial) budget process as complicated as that of the United States, compounded by a biennial election onslaught when strategic sense falls victim with regularity to a lemming-like quest for political office. Much depends on the Congress, as the drafters of this report make all too clear. Yet it is equally clear that congressional intervention in the defense policy process is inevitable, frequently incompatible with the support of US national interests, and unlikely to change to an appreciable degree.

Looking Ahead

In some respects, the architects of this report have done better than might have been expected, given the enormous constraints under which they necessarily labored. That they were unable to craft a document that plausibly defined a strategy relevant to the world in which the United States must function, while retaining the anti-Soviet emphasis necessary to preserve force structure and budget, is really not surprising. Indeed, *Discriminate Deterrence* has many of the strengths and weaknesses of the United States as a player in world politics. It has a solid moral foundation, a genuine commitment to peace and prosperity, a sense of mission, and some understanding of international security affairs. But it lacks a proper appreciation of power, a sense of limitations as well as of opportunities, and an understanding of the interplay of diplomacy and force in strategy, and it is encumbered by an utterly unattainable desire to have the best of all worlds. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the Iklé-Wohlstetter Commission relied largely on rhetorical “smoke and mirrors” to create an American Potemkin Village and call it a strategy. The Bush Administration will have its own opportunity to do better; perhaps it will have some success in that endeavor. □