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Review Essay

The New Defense Policy Agenda

GEORGE H. QUESTER

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and more broadly in the wake of the end of the Cold War, the United States has been going through a major rethinking of its defense policy agenda. Preventing a nuclear attack on the United States might earlier have been thought to be much easier once communist rule in Moscow had been ended; but securing the American homeland against mass destruction has now seemingly become much more complicated, amid the prospect that nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction may fall into the hands of people far less easy to deter than were the communist leaders in the Kremlin.

If deterrence is to be more difficult, a physical defense of the American homeland may again have a higher priority, amid a debate on whether such defenses can ever be effective enough and a great uncertainty about what kinds of delivery vehicles would be used by someone trying to destroy an American city. And, if such defenses can *not* be effective enough, it may then seem necessary that the United States strike preemptively whenever an adversary's attack is about to be launched.

As was the case all through the Cold War, such considerations of protecting the United States against mass destruction must also be balanced against the importance of protecting America's allies against such destruction, and against the more traditional risks of conventional warfare, the risks that peoples would be conquered against their will, that territorial aggressions might succeed, while the threat of mass destruction remained unexecuted in the background.

The world indeed has had to wrestle with the risk of mass destruction ever since nuclear weapons were introduced at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the problems of ordinary warfare still persisted over the ensuing four and a half decades of the Cold War. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union spurred many analysts to conclude that such normal conventional warfare might finally be put on the historical shelf, with the US military having to turn to a host of new and nontraditional missions; but this conclusion might once again turn out to be premature, just as when South Korea was invaded in June of 1950.

And finally, exactly as in the years of the Cold War, the policy process on US national defense will be subject to a continuing skepticism and scrutiny as to whether all the money being spent on defense is really necessary, as to whether there is not some process of "bureaucratic politics" at work whereby the Pentagon is seeking to find an enemy to justify increases in its budget, whereby the putative manufacturers of anti-missile defense systems are exaggerating the effectiveness of their product in the pursuit of enormous profits.

The five books reviewed here are spread nicely across this array of issues, illustrating how experienced analysts of US defense policy can attach priority to very different portions of the national defense problem, and can emerge with conflicting answers.

We might begin with the seeming novelty and salience of the vulnerability of the American homeland to physical attack as of 11 September 2001. As noted, the newness of this vulnerability can easily be overstated. A historically-aware American might remember that Washington was occupied by the British in 1814, with the Capitol and the White House being put to the torch, and with Baltimore being besieged, and one might similarly remember the German-instigated explosion at the “Black Tom” dock just across the Hudson River from New York City in 1915 (the largest explosion to rock Manhattan until the 9/11 attack). The newly independent US Air Force was certainly reminding Americans as early as 1949 that they were now physically vulnerable to a Soviet air attack, urging people to think of a polar-projection map rather than a Mercator projection, as Nebraska might now be just as vulnerable to attack as Maryland or New York.

The real novelty is thus not that America is so open against weapons of mass destruction, but that such weapons may come into the hands of political movements or individuals who cannot be easily retaliated against, who cannot be deterred. We are required now to consider the wide array of deadly technologies that have settled into place around the globe, and also the many points of fragility and vulnerability around our homeland that might let such deadly technologies be brought to bear.

Joseph Cirincione’s *Deadly Arsenal: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* is a very valuable and readable survey of the first half of this problem, of the physical array of deadly weapons that can be directed against the American people in the immediate future. It offers the reader a comprehensive introduction to the threats we face, and also to the various efforts and regimes that have been directed against such deadly proliferation. Published early in 2002, the book fairly obviously was composed earlier in the previous year; it has a quick reference to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack, noting how the deadly utilization of airliners has to broaden our definitions of “weapons of mass destruction,” but the text is focused mainly on what governments can do with such weapons.

On the other half of this same basic problem, *Protecting the American Homeland: A Preliminary Analysis*, by Michael E. O’Hanlon and a panel of authors brought together by the Brookings Institution, presents a thoughtful survey of the weak points in the American homeland, the points at which terrorists or ordinary states, perhaps using the very deadly weapons cataloged by Cirincione, perhaps using nothing more dedicated to weapon purposes than the jet passenger aircraft of the 9/11 attacks, can inflict serious damage on the United States.

A first reading of the Brookings collection almost produces the wish that it had not been published, lest it be too suggestive to erstwhile terrorists or other enemies, too valuable as a catalog of North American weak points. Yet it would surely be smug for an American to assume that our enemies had not already been engaged in such research on their own, that terrorists would not have thought of any particular avenue of attack if Americans had not begun an analysis of how to prevent that attack.

The Brookings study advocates substantial expenditures on remedying many of the weaknesses it spots, and hence will not reinforce the skeptics who scoff at defense spending requests and anticipate major budget cuts here. It eschews getting into an analysis of the pros and cons of a national missile defense (NMD) system, instead discussing in

detail the many other ways a deadly warhead could be delivered to North America besides by a ballistic missile.

The argument for or against missile defense, to be discussed further below, is thus related in a complicated way to 9/11. The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington indeed showed how many other ways an adversary could attack the United States. What is the point of reinforcing the front door if the back door has no lock at all? But the 9/11 attacks also prove that there are groups in this world who would indeed do great harm to the United States if they could, who would fire a ballistic missile at an American city as soon as they laid their hands on it. If one is going to reinforce the back door, does this suggest that the front door should not be made as strong as possible?

The Brookings book was entirely written after the 9/11 attack, and hence is very much in step with the pace of the news. In congratulating the Bush Administration for not trying to establish a new Cabinet-level department to deal with homeland defense, it comes across as a bit out-of-step with the most recent events, as the Administration, in part in face of opposition criticism in the Congress for doing too little to respond to the new threats, has come around to the idea of a new department. But the analysis presented by the chapter on "Organizing for Success," drafted by Ivo Daalder and Mac Destler, very neatly anticipates some of the difficulties that have emerged in the debate on a new department, as to what is to be included and what is not.

Included in the Brookings book are several wise discussions of the civilian-government interface, of how some of the hardening of targets against future terrorist attack will have to emerge when crucial decisions are made by commercial shippers on new technological standards, etc. Also opened for discussion is what may be one of the most profound issues of all for Americans as they have to deal with future dimensions of national defense, the issue of private rights and civil liberties, as it may become much more necessary now for the government to keep track of who is in the country legitimately and who is not; it may even become necessary for all of us to carry identity cards.

While the Brookings book addresses itself to all the rest of the North American defense problem aside from missile defense, Bradley Graham's *Hit to Kill* offers a fascinating and comprehensive overview of the technological challenges, and the procedural handling, of the missile defense issue in particular, a set of choices that would have been subject to lively debate even if the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon had never occurred. The book indeed spans a fair amount of history, our entire experience with ballistic missiles since the World War II German V-2, and recounts the various rounds of optimism or pessimism since then about whether such missiles could be intercepted and stopped en route to their targets.

Based on interviews with a great number of the key players, the book delves deeply into the process of the decisions that were made, tracing out the political and economic considerations that have produced support or opposition for such projects. Graham's book is very readable for its discussion of the technical issues, the bureaucratic in-fighting, and the strategic choices that have been at play here. The history of the various tests run on missile defenses is recounted, alongside the debates about the validity of such tests.

The book obviously had been completed and was just about to go to press on 9/11. An Afterword, taking the terrorist attack into account, is attached. It notes some of the basic connections mentioned just above, by which missile defense might have to be relegated in importance because other avenues for attack have been demonstrated, or by which the reverse might be true, as deep enmities in general had been thus demonstrated, perhaps

suggesting that *all* the avenues of attack now needed to be blocked, even if this required substantially greater allocations of tax dollars.

Graham's account deals somewhat in passing with the arguments against missile defenses that had seemed persuasive to many of us during the Cold War, arguments by which it was perhaps even desirable for Americans to be vulnerable to a Soviet second-strike missile attack, because this would keep the Soviet leaders from becoming too nervous, during a crisis, about the possibility of an American first-strike attack.

Some analysts might conclude that such concerns for Moscow's possible nervousness are no longer important, now that the Cold War is over and Russia is a democracy. But *A New Nuclear Century*, by Stephen Cimbala and James Scouras, takes a much more cautious stand on this question, arguing that the strategic stability of the post-Cold War nuclear confrontation cannot be taken for granted, and that it would be foolish to analyze choices on strategic missile defenses only in terms of the new countries coming into the possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Do the new considerations of homeland defense thus totally replace the Cold War considerations of maintaining strategic stability between the two nuclear superpowers, and of maintaining some extended nuclear deterrence to reinforce the safety of NATO and South Korea? As Cimbala and Scouras ably argue, these earlier demands on defense policy may still be very important, even if the new century has added a host of other demands to be satisfied. The authors do not limit themselves to the American-Russian confrontation, as they include a chapter on the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and what this can mean for nuclear stability.

Finally, the impact of weapons of mass destruction, nuclear or otherwise, was never total even during the Cold War, and will not be total now, for battles still may be fought around the world in which the threat of massive civilian losses will only hang in the distant background, in which the dominant considerations would be the same as before Hiroshima—who destroys whose military forces, and who gets to occupy territory. Such were the considerations in Desert Storm, of course, when Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces had to be pushed back out of Kuwait, and such would be the dominant considerations if military force has to push all the way to Baghdad in this new century.

The Technological Arsenal, edited by William Martel, presents a wide-ranging survey of the new military technologies that may or may not give the United States an important edge in all of such warfare. Some of the technologies discussed will be relevant to strategic missile defense, of course, and to superpower interactions with nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, and a few might be quite relevant to the repulsing of terrorism (or they might even facilitate terrorism—this book was in press already before 9/11). But the thrust of the bulk of this book is indeed directed to battlefield capabilities—the US capabilities that made the intervention against the Taliban so surprisingly effective, the US capabilities that Chinese and Russian commentators often claim to fear.

The book is extremely good in laying out these new technologies in terms intelligible to the layman, and it opens up a number of the debates about the feasibility of various approaches, noting and admitting the possible drawbacks and counters. It is up-to-date as of the summer of 2001; but, given how fast the technologies are evolving, it could quickly enough be behind the curve, even without the events of 11 September 2001. A skeptic about defense spending, or a traditionalist in military analysis, might accuse the authors of being guilty of the American fascination with high technology, but the presentation of the choices comes across as generally level-headed, with little that reads like hyperbole.

The authors in the Martel collection might have been encouraged to speculate further about whether the technological trends will work to maintain an American advantage in the future vis-à-vis the military forces of other powers, or whether the advantage here is in the end more likely to be handed back and forth, and on whether these trends are likely to favor the offensive, the side taking the initiative to launch combat, or instead to favor the defense, rewarding the side waiting in place to be attacked.

Replete with detail and arguments that are ably presented for the reader, the five books are worth the attention of anyone concerned with America's defense as it has had to be redefined. As noted, these works do not really duplicate or substitute for each other, as each of them covers a different portion of the problems, and offers a slightly different sense of what the total defense problem will now be.

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