

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 36
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2006*

Article 4

5-1-2006

Commentary & Reply

Parameters Editors

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Recommended Citation

Editors, Parameters. "Commentary & Reply." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 36, 2 (2006).
<https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol36/iss2/4>

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Commentary & Reply

Adding to “Net Assessment”

To the Editor:

In his article, “Net Assessment: A Practical Guide” (*Parameters*, Spring 2006), Paul Bracken has performed a useful service in laying out some of the skills associated with the practice of net assessment. As one who has worked, directly and indirectly, for Andy Marshall over the past two decades, I found the article refreshingly straightforward; it should prove helpful to those seeking to acquire net assessment skills. At the same time, I thought it might be useful to add a couple of thoughts to round out Mr. Bracken’s article.

Over the years, net assessments have generally fallen into one of two categories: regional (e.g., the military balance in Europe, the military balance in Northeast Asia) or functional (the strategic nuclear balance, the military investment balance between the United States and the Soviet Union). Different net assessments required different analytic approaches and tools. Even within each category, the approaches and tools were different, as they were a function of the strategic characteristics of the area being assessed.

In terms of “Strategic Interactions,” one must be careful not to couch the net assessments in terms of “anticipated reactions of opponents.” Often, opponents take actions that are not reactions to our defense policies, but are driven by other factors—third parties, geography, the desires of senior decisionmakers, organizational cultures, national or organizational objectives, etc.

In fact, one of the major “Strategic Asymmetries” that often exists between the two sides lies in their objectives. A good analysis of US strategic and operational objectives can help us identify what measures are most useful for any particular net assessment. And a good analysis of our competitor’s objectives might help us understand how he assesses the situation, an assessment which may be very different from ours—potentially providing us with opportunities to improve our relative position.

Mr. Bracken’s characterization of the way the United States breaks its national security problems down between the military and the civilian intelligence communities would benefit by adding the national labs and the Department of Homeland Security. Of course, none of those organizations are monolithic, unitary actors. Within the military, for example, one might find big differences between the operational, intelligence, and research and development communities. Over the years, two of net assessment’s major contributions have been to highlight the operational domain, as well as to attempt integrated analysis across the domains.

As for “Getting Things Right with a Little Thought,” Mr. Marshall has often pointed out that one of the major contributions that net assessments can make

is to help senior decisionmakers think about the problem or issue area in a particular way. Getting the questions right is more important at that stage than trying to get the right answers. Focus on diagnosis, Mr. Marshall says, not prescription. If you get that right, then lots of people can work on getting the right answers.

That is one reason Mr. Marshall has continually maintained that one should separate the net assessment function from the strategic planning activity. A second reason is that if the same office is charged with both missions, it is only human nature to “cook the books” on the net assessment—that is, to skew the assessment toward what you “know” is the right answer, resulting in a less-than-objective net assessment.

Finally, Mr. Bracken is absolutely right when he points out that net assessments cannot be effectively conducted at the National Security Council level. That is why, in 1973, President Nixon moved the net assessment function from the NSC (where it was under Henry Kissinger) to the Office of the Secretary of Defense (reporting to James Schlesinger). It has remained there for more than three decades.

Jeffrey S. McKittrick
Leesburg, Virginia

The Author Replies:

Jeffrey McKittrick makes good points which I agree with. Net assessment is an important discipline and should be in the toolkit of anyone involved in competitive strategy.

Paul Bracken

Commentary & Reply Submissions

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