



Executive Summary

Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press



DEFENSE PLANNING FOR NATIONAL SECURITY: NAVIGATION AIDS FOR THE MYSTERY TOUR

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Defense planning for future national security has to be a matter of guesswork. The practical choices on how to proceed are only two: an educated futurology, or an approach based upon the humanities, identified here inclusively as history, politics, and strategy. Many people have genuine difficulty grasping fully the implications of the fact that the future can be a direct source of no data at all. Everyone knows that the future has not happened, that it never can and therefore never will. Nonetheless, we need to try to work around this forbidding natural law and do our best to provide prudently for national security in the unknown future. There are better and worse ways in which this can be attempted. Fundamentally, however, it is essential to retain an open mind about the future. The pragmatic challenge is to identify ways in which one can make all prudently permissible allowance for future uncertainty, while making suitable definite preparation with military capabilities that could meet a wide range of possibilities.

The approach labeled here as “educated futurology” is considered with reference to three methodological aids to future defense planning: scenario design, development and testing; trend spotting; and scientific defense analysis. These activities are now mature in the United States (and elsewhere) and do have merit. However, they also have limitations and can inspire a measure of confidence about understanding of the future that is almost entirely unwarranted. A generic fact that needs to be understood about these methodologies is that although they encourage us to lean forward mentally into the future, in fact, indeed necessarily, they project what is understood from today into the future. *Ipsa facto*, this is not a criticism, given that we can only

consider the future in the light of our comprehension now: the future itself cannot now be accessed for our defense planning convenience.

The most serious weakness shared by scenarios, trend-spotting, and defense analysis are that: (1) they overprivilege the projection of understanding from the present into the future, and (2) underprivilege recognition of the real problem (ignorance) and, as a consequence, discourage any effort to address it intelligently. The most sensible way to think about the challenge of defense planning for the future is to identify honestly what is now known, as well as what is not knowable by any methodology. The latter should worry us, because unpleasant complete surprises could spoil a decade or longer of America’s future. But, the former, less exclusive category of current uncertainties is accessible to us, though not in detail. Scenarios, trend-spotting, and defense analysis, are all typically characteristically “presentist” efforts to conduct futurology in a disciplined way. Not infrequently, these activities are described as social-scientific, if not scientific. This is regrettable and should be avoided. Science is about the search for certainty in knowledge; a certainty that can only be achieved by means of empirical testing for verification. Nothing about the future, from the future, of high interest to American defense planning for future national security is empirically testable. Highly imaginative scenario design and innovative and elegant mathematics are all probably useful as planning tools, but they can breed a false confidence, in important respects, that the fog that shrouds the future has been penetrated.

Fortunately, there is an approach to future defense planning accessible to us which can yield critically helpful assistance. This is categorized here

inclusively under the label of the “humanities”! Much defense expertise is held by people whose disciplinary background in either the hard or soft sciences effectively has been permitted to hinder, if not actually block, their access to our past experience. While it is true that history does not repeat itself, it is far more true to claim only that history does not repeat itself in detail. In fact, strategic history, our own and that of others, is a goldmine of illustration and evidence of human political behavior and functionally strategic reasoning inspiring operational and tactical action. When we look to the future, with direct reference almost entirely to our present, we cannot afford to neglect or ignore the continuities that make a true unity of history in the “great stream of time.” Close to the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), former Greek general Thucydides advised that behavior in statecraft was propelled most powerfully by the motives of: fear, honor, and interest. This famous triptych can tell us nothing about what particular challenges America will face in the rest of the 21st century, but it should be allowed to tell us most of what we need to know about the kinds of challenges that there are certain to be.

When operationalized for our utility, strategic history in many vitally important respects is found to be highly relevant when considered carefully. This monograph explores and examines the potential value for future planning of such transhistorical topics as military motivation; training; experience and expertise; the relations among brain, skill, and muscle; competence in command; land power; war and warfare; and politics and strategy. The focus here primarily is upon the U.S. Army, hence the privileging of land power in the analyses.

The monograph concludes by offering five items as recommendations for consideration in approaching the challenge of preparing the U.S. Army prudently, and in consequence adequately, for the future.

1. Strategic history: This resource should be employed as the principal basis upon which understanding of America’s defense planning needs for the future are founded empirically. The detail must be different, but the challenges to national security will be discovered to have a timeless generic quality. A nonexistent future and an untrustworthy ever moving present, compel us to look to strategic history for understanding of experience long and often painfully acquired.

2. Strategy: In order to provide the discipline for useful order in historical enquiry, make careful use of the general theory of strategy as a key to proper functional grasp of the subject. Strategy, as we understand the concept and label it, is quite modern

(1770s), but, in functional terms, the austere basic architecture of ends, ways, means, and assumptions, opens doors for meaning while avoiding anachronism.

3. Science: Fundamentally, defense planning for future U.S. national security is incompatible with science. Since science must seek certainty that can be verified through testing and, given that there can never be data about the future from the future, defense planning cannot be conducted scientifically. This is not criticism; it simply states a permanent necessary truth of nature. Common misuse of the concept of science as noun and adjective can harm national security, because such labels pertaining to the future either directly or by implication stake claims for the authority of certainty of knowledge that they cannot merit.

4. Time: It is necessary to understand that our human strategic history effectively has no beginning or end. In other words, past, present, and future most essentially constitute a unity. Once this is appreciated, we can understand better why it makes sense to approach the future in the spirit of recognition of the certainties both of changing character and of continuity in nature of our experience. It would be absurd to deny the relevance literally of millennia of human political and strategic experience, just because there have been so many changes. It is certainly true to note as a possible caveat that many historical changes are not obvious, for example because they consist of assumptions common only to particular times, places, and cultures. This is a warning, not a showstopper for our purpose here. After all, it does not really matter to us why Athenian or Roman strategic behavior was what it was. Thucydides and the general theory of strategy are both hugely inclusive as to possible detail of local content.

5. Politics: It is necessary for the Army to accept fully the logical and practical implications of the enduring fact that national defense is about politics and is decided in a political process. There is no objective strategic judge who can determine what the United States should and should not do by way of military preparation for the future. That preparation will be done as the result of on-going politics. Military expertise founded upon experience confers needed authority upon professional military advice, but national political decision for or against action is in the hands, or more accurately, in and from the brains and emotions, of American voters. Studies of defense planning for the future, no matter how impressive methodologically, should always be treated with caution for two basic reasons. First, and as noted already, there can be no certain knowledge about the future. Second,

because defense preparation always is and must be determined politically, there can be no certainty concerning the prudence in the relevant decisions. Politics is all, but strictly only, about influence; it is empty of any necessary strategic wisdom. It has to follow that when regarded as it must be, which is to say in political terms, the capabilities of America's land power can never be assumed to be on all-but an autopilot guided by a certainty of strategic prudence. Instead, politics both reigns and rules—and requires constant attention in the interest of the public safety and security.

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