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POLITICAL-MILITARY SCENARIOS

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I

In previous sessions you have been introduced to the importance of the context in considering defense problems and to war gaming. I want to discuss something which relates to both of these things. This is the political-military scenario, the mechanism which provides a context for considering defense decisions, contingency plans, and provides the background against which war games may be conducted.

When the term "scenario" is used in the defense community, it is most often employed to describe the political-military events leading up to a crisis, and

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the crisis itself. Amrom Katz has defined a scenario as "a short, usually fanciful and arguable account of the sequence of events leading to a future war."

"Scenarios about the past," he says, "are called history."

✓ Briefly stated, the scenario tells what happened and describes the environment in which it happened. It may be prepared for a number of purposes. First, it may be looked upon as a general background against which defense policies are considered. Second, it may be designed to provide the opening or setting for a war game. Third, it may be prepared to provide an environment in which to examine the functioning of a weapons system or strategy. Fourth, what is far more dangerous and objectionable, a scenario may be prepared for the express purpose of making a particular weapons system or strategy look good in that environment. Finally, a scenario may be used as a background for contingency planning. ↙

The use of the term "scenario" in connection with these matters is of relatively recent origin. There is no entry for the term "scenario" in the Dictionary of U.S. Military Terms prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1964. I vividly recall the surprise with which I first heard the term used in connection with a military event. It was in the summer of 1944 at the Headquarters of Army Ground Forces. As a lowly major serving as an associate editor of INFANTRY JOURNAL I heard Lieutenant General Ben Lear ask for the "scenario"

of a recent military event. Because up to that time I had heard the term used only to cover radio or movie scripts, I thought the general was being facetious.

A defense research scenario can be one of many different things. It may be as brief as two or three sentences or as long as a book. It may be fanciful, representing nothing in the real world, or it may be modeled with great faithfulness on existing conditions. The requirements for scenarios change with the purposes involved and they change with the times.

As an illustration of the latter point, it may be suggested that in the early days of great American nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, the opening scenario for a general war game conducted in the United States could be disarmingly brief and simple. It often merely said that at a given time, preferably by surprise, the Soviet Union launched an air atomic attack on the United States or vice versa. Nothing was said about the reasons for doing so, or about the special political conditions under which the attack was made. The brevity and simplicity of these scenarios were accepted at the time on the ground that what was important was the U.S. nuclear superiority, not the political details relating to the situation under which the attack was made. SAC and SUSAC were the only factors that really counted. Alliances, the United Nations Organization, the uncommitted nations of the world were disregarded. Attention was focused on one thing only, the military interchange.

After the strategic balance had altered and the Soviet Union had within its power the ability seriously to injure the United States, the requirements of an opening scenario for a war game changed in important aspects. It then became necessary to consider something other than a simple general war in which the great powers exchanged nuclear attacks on their ZI's. The problem of limited war emerged and this required that many definite things be said in the opening scenario about the factors and conditions limiting the conflict. This ruled out the simple two-sentence scenario and led people to construct war-game backgrounds of considerable political and military complexity. A forward step was made in this process with the emergence of the multidimensional scenario which showed the various factions at work within the countries concerned in the crisis.

Scenarios were, of course, used for purposes other than war gaming. Soon after his assumption of office in 1960, Secretary McNamara adopted the procedure of introducing his defense programs to Congress by offering an elaborate description or scenario of the world situation, against which congressmen were asked to consider his proposals. These scenarios often ran to thirty printed pages.

As time went on McNamara admitted greater reliance on scenarios as a means of determining the advantages of alternative force postures in relation to specific contingencies. In 1964 in response to questions by Congressman Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, McNamara said he was not relying on cost-effectiveness calculations alone to determine force

postures but was "relying more and more upon sophisticated analysis of potential political-military conflicts."*

Contingency planning calls for a description of the situation or a scenario in order to be effectively carried out. The use of scenarios for this purpose has increased in recent years. In this area a scenario writer should recognize that his product will be as acceptable as his ability is to see the world as a top military decision-maker sees it. He should have few illusions about his ability to change the decision-makers' view of the world.

II

Having said something about what scenarios are used for, it may be helpful to say something now about what they should be like. Unfortunately there is no universal rule for scenario writers which tells one what to include and what to omit. Neither is there a universal form in which they should be presented. They vary greatly according to the use to be made of them. In some cases a scenario must be devised to help put something into a computer. That dictates its form. In other cases the appropriate form of a scenario may be a historical essay, full of detail, conveying not only the essential features of a given situation but the mood and tone as well. Highly imaginative, ingenious, and artfully contrived scenarios seldom have any real merits.

* Subcommittee on Department of Defense Appropriations, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Department of Defense Appropriations for 1965, February 17, 1964, pp. 304-305.

What is required is an adequate presentation of the context in which the problem is to be studied or the war game conducted. Without this context, there can be few guidelines for decision-makers or players in a political-military war game. Problems become meaningless in a contextless world, and war gamers commit absurdities when they are not governed by reasonable guidelines. I can recall a war game conducted many years ago which had no opening scenario or statement of conditions to guide the players or the control team. It also had no political players. Under these conditions most any kind of move was possible, and a player representing Britain, when his country was threatened by the Soviet Union, suddenly moved the British army to Colorado.

This kind of absurd action -- and one could point to many similar illustrations -- highlights the necessity of providing a complete context in which to study the problem involved, or to test the piece of equipment under fixed conditions, or to carry out a projected war game. The requirements for scenarios are higher than they used to be. Readers and war game players are more sophisticated today than they were in former years. Even the military services now recognize the role of political players or advisers as their action in the big exercise Desert Strike showed in 1964.*

Providing a context and scenario for present day problems or war games dealing with current time periods involves one level of difficulty. It only requires that

* Both sides in operation Desert Strike had political advisers attached to the headquarters teams.

present conditions and circumstances be faithfully set down. Where one deals with a future time period, however, a new level of difficulty is encountered. Such a context must attempt to describe a situation which can only partially be foreseen. The most useful guidance that can be given the scenario writer who attempts to set forth a context for the future is to suggest that he should make the best explanation possible of the changes envisaged in the future scenario. That is, nothing should be included in the political-military scenario dealing with the future which differs from the present without giving some explanation as to what happened in the interim, or what caused the change.

In a good scenario there should be no great unexplained leaps, no uninvented weapons, no reversal of the laws of gravity, and no inner contradictions. Scenarios dealing with the future will find their greatest acceptance when they make these explanations and when they possess internal consistency in all their parts. One should avoid trying to explain all unexpected or critical actions of nations by attributing them to miscalculations. Some miscalculations are certain to occur in any crisis but the whole crisis should not be explained in these terms.

III

Let us turn now for a moment to consider some of the requirements of an adequate opening scenario for a limited war game. Since an all-out nuclear general war starting with a surprise attack on one country's ZI has diminished

credibility at present, this really means the scenarios for all wars, including what is commonly called a "controlled general war."

Any scenario worthy of the name should begin with a description of world conditions. This description should include an estimate of the nuclear strategic balance as envisaged by the principal powers. Any additions to the nuclear club in future-oriented scenarios should be based upon scientific and economic facts where these are obtainable rather than upon whimsey or romantic expectations. Since the state of deterrence of general nuclear war between the great powers will be influenced in the future by the state of relations between the Soviet Union and Communist China, a clear statement of the status of their relations should be included.

Such a description of world conditions should also set forth the existing alliance obligations and the relationships between blocs. This would, in the case of a European-based crisis, demand an elaboration of the state of affairs in NATO or its successor. It would also require that the Warsaw Pact be assessed in equally realistic terms. Any changes affecting the likelihood of nations disregarding their alliance obligations should be considered in the light of their self-interest and be consistent insofar as possible with their previous policies and attitudes.

No description of the world situation would be complete without some estimate of the prestige and power of the United Nations Organization and the role it might play in a crisis of the kind envisaged. This will rule out the practice sometimes resorted to of referring crises

which can be resolved in no other way to the United Nations -- as if that weak organization could do what the national state system was unable to do.

After an adequate statement of world conditions has been made, attention should be paid to important local or regional conditions. For example, no crisis in the Near East can be described or studied without recognizing the persistent antagonisms which exist between Israel and the United Arab Republic or between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus. No crisis on the sub-continent of Asia should be described without a recognition of the continuing Indian-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.

Details about local conditions are important in preparing scenarios for limited war crises because things which happen in one area may be dependent upon what happens in another. The U.S. intervention in Lebanon in 1958 is a case in point. We landed troops in Lebanon because of a coup d'état which took place in Iraq under circumstances misunderstood in Washington. Local conditions are also important for estimating what overflight privileges will be extended to the involved powers and what base rights will be permitted in allied or friendly territory. The Lebanon crisis made it clear to the United States that overflight rights would not be automatically extended to us in NATO territory but would have to be acquired from each individual country on the merits of the case.

A scenario for a limited war game should provide the players and the control team with enough guidance, based upon previous national policy and self-interest, to show what reasonable national objectives would be in the

crisis under consideration and how strongly the countries are motivated. This should show what limitations a nation would be willing to accept, what price it would be willing to pay for given gains, and in general on what terms it might be willing to terminate a conflict over these objectives. Unless one is willing to let all these problems be resolved by a control team without any guidance being provided for them, this guidance must be incorporated in the opening war game scenario. This means that the basis for the limitations imposed on the use of violence must be laid in the scenario itself.

Finally, because limited wars may be described as wars that are fought by the big powers in some other countries' territory, the special interests or concerns of the host country, or the country in which the war is being fought, should be set down in some detail in the scenario.

IV

No discussion of scenarios can proceed very far without encountering the two problems of credibility and relevance.

To take up credibility first, one feels instinctively that any scenario for a military ground, for research and analysis, or for the opening a war game should be made as credible as possible. Few people feel comfortable in a world made up entirely of phantasy. Game players rebel against scenarios which seem to them to present incredible events or conditions. They demand a high

degree of consistency within the scenario itself and as close as possible a resemblance to the real world. They tend to reject as incredible any departure from the present status quo. They fight the scenario even though they know that for game purposes a hypothetical war is necessary. Complete credibility is seldom if ever obtainable in a future-oriented scenario and I think it is a waste of time to strive for it.

Critics of the credibility of scenarios must recognize that preparing a well-structured scenario and predicting single future events are two different things. In the case of predicting single future events, one mistake invalidates the whole effort, but in a well-developed scenario the weakness of a single element is compensated for by the credibility of the remainder. Where the choice has to be made between events or elements that may seem incredible, the choice has to be made on the grounds of relevance -- how necessary is this particular event or element to the research or defense objectives in mind?

In some cases the research objectives, or the defense objectives should take precedence over the credibility in the matter of accepting a scenario. This state is reached when those involved recognize that a research project or a war game is being carried out to throw light on some otherwise obscure problem, not to achieve complete identity with the real world. Frank recognition should be made when departures from credibility and reality are made for research purposes. When this is done, and when people recognize that no claims for complete credibility are being made, they more willingly participate in such an endeavor.

While we are talking about credibility and relevance it is only fair to repeat that people demand a great deal more of it from future-oriented scenarios than they do from history. They willingly accept from the hand of history what they would strenuously protest against if offered by a scenario writer. Nearly all the important crises in which the United States has been engaged since 1958 would have been described as "incredible" if put forward in advance of the crisis. Who would have believed in advance that the United States would intervene in Lebanon because of a crisis in Iraq? Who would have believed in advance that the Soviet Union would try to change the strategic balance in its favor in 1962 by installing IRBMs in Cuba? Who would have believed that after issuing what was virtually an ultimatum for their removal, the United States would act with utmost caution about searching Soviet transports approaching the island? Who would have believed in advance that a Chinese invasion of northern India in 1962 would be followed by an almost immediate withdrawal? Who would have believed a few years ago that the United States would send 300,000-400,000 men to fight in Vietnam without either specific Congressional or United Nations approval?

Speaking of the credibility of war game scenarios, General Matthew Ridgway has recorded in his memoirs the skepticism which greeted one he wrote in 1940 for the opening of a war game. In it he said that Japan would go to war with the United States by staging a surprise air attack to immobilize the Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. He records that his fellow officers told him

that it was a "possibility so improbable that it did not constitute a proper basis for a maneuver."* One year later the game players were all involved in playing out in real life the scenario that Ridgway's fellow officers ruled out as "incredible."

This leads one to suggest that we should not be over-hasty in condemning future-oriented scenarios as incredible just because they differ from present-day conditions or assumptions.

Potential scenario writers should be warned that their products are likely to be received with skepticism and protests by prospective users. If it is an opening game scenario that is envisaged, one can be sure it will be criticized by players as being unfair as well as incredible. In general there is likely to be less controversy over low-probability events whose consequences would be severe, than over low-probability events whose consequences will not be critical. These are what arouse the fighting instincts of players or readers and make them want to devise scenarios of their own. The common procedure is for game players in research institutions to spend the first few days fighting the scenario before turning to fight the enemy. They then play against the scenario as well as against the control team and the game director. People accustomed to the realities of government service are reported to be much more reasonable players. They know from experience that there is no perfect organization and no perfect scenario.

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* Matthew B. Ridgway, Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway, Harper, New York, 1956, pp. 46-47.

To summarize some of the points I have attempted to make:

1. Scenarios when used for defense-research purposes may be a number of different things: backgrounds, contexts, settings for war games, and narratives of war games.

2. To be effective and widely accepted, scenarios should be modeled as closely as possible on the existing world, or if departures are made from this world, the change should be explained as completely as possible.

3. In some cases relevancy, rather than credibility should predominate, since otherwise research into future problems can scarcely be undertaken.

4. To avoid diverting war game players from their research purposes of the game, and to limit their faith in the scenarios, these should be prepared with the greatest care possible and with attention to internal consistency.

5. No scenario writer should expect complete acceptance of his work, but should try to win over his critics by his careful detail, by internal consistency, and by the research relevance of his work.

6. When properly constructed and used in a responsible fashion, scenarios can be helpful aids to defense research.