



2009.II.04

Andrew F. Krepinevich, *7 Deadly Scenarios: A Military Futurist Explores War in the 21st Century*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2009. Pp xvii, 334. ISBN 978-0-553-80539-0.

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Andrew Krepinevich, a proponent of “futurism,” begins by explaining and validating his methodology. First, he reminds us of military disasters—for example, Pearl Harbor and the Blitzkrieg inflicted by the Germans in 1940—which could have been avoided, had futurists’ advice been heeded. Then, he offers us “The Street-fighter State”—a futurist vision he first published after exploring a possible U.S.-Iranian conflict.¹ He also draws attention to the inertia of bureaucratic, often cliquey, change-resistant military establishments; but he does not explore the outcome when futurist views gain overwhelming support. The now discredited “domino theory,” which predicted the inexorable spread of communism, authenticated wars in Korea and Vietnam, but bequeathed a strange legacy: defeated North Korea remains a problem; triumphant Vietnam does not.

The ghost of Vietnam—which haunts Americans today, just as the War between the States did a century earlier—appears fleetingly in this book. There are only two Vietnam references in the index: pages 17 (blame falling on politicians) and 18 (delay in training adaptation). This illustrates the widening division between the older, reactionary generation of military futurists (including Krepinevich himself), and today’s history-conscious thinkers, who more readily espouse crisis avoidance strategies. Despite their differing philosophies, both groups must address the same problem, which Krepinevich has clearly defined:

Today the United States confronts a very different set of enemies—radical Islamists and hostile nuclear rogue states like North Korea (and prospectively Iran)—than it did during the Cold War. And China’s rise to great power status, which some view as a positive sign, raises eyebrows in the Pentagon, where Beijing’s ongoing military build up is a source of growing concern. How do these new rivals, who culturally are quite distinct from the Cold War-era Soviets, see themselves advancing their agenda? What means will they use to achieve their goals? And when will they make their move? (13)

The core of the book—as the title suggests—is the seven deadly scenarios that may challenge the U.S. government in the next decade, but it is misleading to say that it “explores war in the 21st century.” Broadly speaking, the seven scenarios coalesce in the years 2012 to 2016, and none features the “surprise inherent in war” to which Krepinevich often refers; each examines a familiar worry. That said, the author has woven an impressive body of fact and opinion in each scenario and produced sharp moments of crisis.

The author is a West Point graduate and a Harvard Ph.D. with twenty-one years of military service. A prominent academic, journalist, and government adviser, he has recently focused his thoughts on threat assessment. Consequently, his meticulously detailed scenarios include credible personalities, careful national mood assessments, and broader social and economic influences. Each scenario presents a logical sequence of events—but are they realistic? And what will we gain from them?

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Scenario 1: The Collapse of Pakistan.

Krepinevich outlines a step-by-step process of political and socioeconomic breakdown in Pakistan that loosens the country’s control of its nuclear weapons, which might then fall into the hands of terrorists who seek to destroy the United States or one of its allies. He sensibly concludes that, were this to occur, a U.N.-led force should intervene to secure the nuclear weapons.

1. *The Bottom-Up Review: An Assessment* (Washington: Defense Budget Project, 1994) 44.

Scenario 2: War Comes to America.

Krepinevich offers a miscellany of science, opinions, possibilities, fears, and panics which lead us to the blinding flashes of nuclear bombs; and then further threats from several directions: all part of a seemingly Muslim-inspired “Wall of Fire.” The scenario is confusing rather than convincing. It is a daunting mix of quotations, bits of science, buzzword block titles, and ubiquitous (foreign power-assisted?) Islamic terrorists. The painstaking detail only adds to the confusion—but then, war *is* confusing.

Scenario 3: Pandemic.

In this scenario, Krepinevich offers a view of humanity seldom seen outside a Hollywood disaster movie: viruses everywhere; mass panic; overwhelmed medical services; and, finally, tens of thousands of deaths, as desperately determined hordes of the world’s poor batter against America’s hurriedly slammed doors. While I cannot comment competently on the medical science, I do question the behavioral aspect of this scenario.

Scenario 4: Armageddon: The Assault on Israel.

Delicate crafting was required here to produce a scenario that would be acceptable to Americans and plausible to others. Instead, the author presents half-truths that undermine his credibility. Consider his description of the Israel-Lebanon conflict in 2006:

During the span of little more than a month Hezbollah fired some 4000 rockets of various types into Israel. Of them, over 900 rockets hit near or on buildings, civilian infrastructure, and industrial plants. The ferocity of the attack, which averaged some 130 rockets per day, far exceeded anything suffered by Israel up to that time.... Some 2000 homes were destroyed, more than fifty Israelis died, with several thousand being injured.... Over 25% of the 114 IDF personnel killed were tank crew-men; out of the 400 tanks involved in the fighting in Southern Lebanon 48 were hit and 40 damaged (129–30).

No mention here of the almost total destruction of southern Lebanon by Israeli aircraft and artillery; of the more than 1000 men, women, and children killed; or of the legacy of dangerous munitions that Israel’s bombing left behind. Krepinevich disregards, too, the anger this lethal destruction provoked in the region—particularly in Turkey, which has the second largest army in NATO.²

Furthermore, Krepinevich sees America’s *bête noire*, Iran, behind every sinister action. He fails to appreciate how the disproportionate casualties and destruction enraged the whole of Islam. At present, America and its allies are training citizen armies and police forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The loyalty of these forces is not guaranteed; a serious incident in Israel could provoke widespread revolt in both countries, akin to the Indian Mutiny of 1857, even without Iranian influence.

Scenario 5: China’s “Assassin’s Mace.”

Krepinevich reviews Chinese history, stressing negative outcomes in order to fashion a malevolent image—even, perhaps, an “evil” one. For example, he writes: “To encourage U.S. consumption—and the purchase of Chinese goods—Beijing was, for the longest time, willing to allow the United States to run up huge annual trade deficits, at one point exceeding \$300 billion” (175). He implies that Beijing has been negligent, but common sense puts the blame on Washington. The author then predicts the embarrassing consequences of this trade imbalance as interest rates rise; concomitant tensions both within China and externally; and, finally, the resultant battle of wills between China (on one side) and the United States and Japan (on the other) over the status of Taiwan.

2. Since this book was published, Turkey has continued to speak out forcefully: at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland (Jan 2009), the Turkish Prime Minister publicly criticized Israel’s devastating incursion into Gaza in response to sustained Hamas rocket attacks. In October 2009, after Israel refused to allow Turkey’s Foreign Minister into Gaza, a major U.S.-sponsored air defense exercise (“Anatolian Eagle”) had to be cancelled because Turkey would not allow Israeli aircraft to participate—see James Hider, “Eagle Is Grounded after Turks’ Gaza Snub,” [London] *Times* (12 Oct 2009) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0925.htm>.

Scenario 6: Just Not-on-Time: The War on the Global Economy.

Krepinevich devotes some thirty pages to the adverse impact on America, if terrorists were to “[turn] off the taps” of oil, international trade, energy, communications, etc. all at once. The gloomy and rather paranoid vision of the future offered here strains both credulity and the notional resources of world terrorism.

Scenario 7: Who Lost Iraq?

Here Krepinevich foresees the final withdrawal of the U.S.-led coalition from Iraq between 2012 and 2014. Chaos ensues as Iraq fragments into warring factions and Americans seek to assign blame for a war which cost so much money and so many lives, but achieved so little. The resultant *Angst* (reminiscent of the aftermath of the Vietnam War) weakens America’s resolve. To prevent war cascading out of Iraq, Russia and China offer to assume responsibility for stabilizing the Middle East. In 2015, the U.N. and a now-powerless U.S. government accept this proposal.

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Krepinevich writes clearly and succinctly, placing individual topics within finite sub-headed text blocks, grouped into an introduction (“A Glimpse of the Future”), the seven scenario chapters, and a conclusion (“Lighting the Path Ahead”). The book is not a smooth read: the reader has to absorb successive, often unrelated information blocks, with minimal guidance from the author. It would have helped had he prefaced each chapter with a “road map” rather a quotation. (The geographical maps at the front of the book are useful.)

In his final chapter, Krepinevich offers over thirty pages of advice, both broad ranging and specific, on a diversity of subjects including asset evaluation, strategy update, paths to the future, operational concepts, and training, to name a few. A broad ranging example: “Strategy also involves ‘identifying or creating asymmetric advantages in competition in competitive situations that can then be exploited to help one achieve one’s ultimate objective, despite the active, opposing efforts of one’s adversaries or competitors to achieve theirs’” (290); a specific example: “To begin, the President and the senior defense department civilian and military leaders must be convinced of the need for strategic planning” (294).

These two quotations show the limitations of Krepinevich’s all-embracing, scatter-gun advice. While his advice is often sensible and scenario-based, Krepinevich does not emphasize his basic assumptions. Basic assumptions are vitally important. If they are wrong, strategy is inept. For example, America assumed it was fighting communism in Vietnam, but the issue was far more complex, as Truong Tran, a former South Vietnamese draftee, explained:

When the United States decided to land foot soldiers in Vietnam, with all good will, it put the South Vietnamese at a disadvantage. The North was able to mobilize southerners as well as northerners to fight what they called the American invasion. All our history has taught children that you have to be courageous enough to fight foreign aggressors. We could not tell our brothers and sisters that we were fighting for ourselves as long as American soldiers were in our country fighting for us. We said that we were fighting to save the country from Communism, but that was too abstract and people could say that at least Communism was Vietnamese.³

What drives the anti-U.S. bomb makers in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is it religion, culture, or simply a desire to eject an invader? Why were the Twin Towers attacked on 9/11? Was it because everyone hated America itself (as many Americans opine) or America’s unpopular policies in the Middle East (the view of many outsiders)? Krepinevich leaps confidently from scenarios to advice without first reviewing his scenarios and clarifying his key assumptions.

The U.S. Government is already addressing some of the challenges evoked by Krepinevich. For example, the Obama administration has sought to retire the term “war on terror” and others in the West speak of a clash of ideologies: “The global disorder is what it has always been: one of conflict over interest and values.

3. Christian G. Appy, *Vietnam: The Definitive Oral History, Told from All Sides* (London: Ebury Pr, 2006) 504.

It may be peaceful or violent, but it will always involve struggle.”⁴ To reduce tensions, Krepinevich might have sought ways to stifle that clash. A host of (mostly intractable) factors contributes to terrorist motivation, but we can address specific Islamic grievances. We might hasten orderly withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and strive harder to resolve the inherently unstable⁵ and obviously unjust⁶ situation within Israel’s borders. With regard to the latter, the 2008 Nobel Peace Laureate and former President of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, recently reiterated the European view: “We have to help them (the Israelis and the Palestinians) before they destroy each other; the present situation in Israel destabilises the whole region.”⁷

Krepinevich has produced a valuable book which deserves the attention of a wide audience. Most importantly, he has exposed worrying “thought strands,” which, if widely espoused by the military establishment, could lead America and its allies into an ever-expanding vortex of conflict, centered on either (or both) of two small countries: Israel (population less than 10 million) and Taiwan (population less than 25 million). We can only hope that, before this happens, the ghost of Vietnam rises up and saves us.

—updated 25 Nov 2009

4. D.M. Jones & M.L.R. Smith, “Counter-Insurgency Politics: Going Global,” *The World Today* (Oct 2009) 27–28.

5. Peter Beaumont, “Israel Outraged As EU Poll Names It a Threat to Peace,” *The Observer* (2 Nov 2003) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0926.htm>. Europeans actually identified Israel as “the greatest threat to world peace, bigger than North Korea and Iran.”

6. Israeli today has been compared to South Africa during its apartheid era. See, e.g., Chris McGreal, “Worlds Apart,” *The Guardian* (6 Feb 2006) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0927.htm>.

7. Comments made during a session on “Turkey’s Next Steps” at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, London (19 Oct 2009).