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THREAT ASSESSMENT:
THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITIES

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THREAT ASSESSMENT: THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITIES

Threat assessment is crucial in each step of thinking about military strategy. Identifying political and military objectives, deterring or fighting, taking the offensive or the defensive, pursuing annihilation or attrition, using the direct or the indirect approach--each of these basic choices in military strategy depends primarily on the threat. Indeed, without an actual or potential threat, it would be impossible and pointless to construct a military strategy.

A fundamental difficulty in threat assessment is that, paradoxically, it is not just the enemy situation that defines the threat. The "friendly situation" also defines the threat. We naturally tend to focus on the adversary's capabilities and intentions in gauging the threat. But an adversary can be a threat only in relation to our own situation. An accurate and complete threat assessment requires an accurate and complete assessment of both the enemy and friendly situation.

To show the critical but elusive role of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment, I first describe a framework for thinking about threats. I then apply this framework to the origins of the Korean War. The outbreak of the Korean War is relevant because it involved--may even have resulted from--a threat assessment based on mistakes about friendly capabilities and intentions. Finally, I use the Korean War example to say that self-awareness of vulnerabilities plays a dual role in threat assessment: we use vulnerabilities not

only to calculate the threat level and prescribe a response to the threat, but also to describe the threat in the first place.

A Framework for Threat Assessment

We are threatened when an adversary can harm us and intends to do so. An adversary's ability to harm us hinges on his overall strength relative to our overall weakness. Threat assessment thus depends on three factors--the adversary's capabilities, the adversary's intentions, and friendly vulnerabilities relative to the adversary. Threat can be expressed as a simple product of these three factors:

$$T = C_A \times I_A \times V_F$$

Putting the elements of threat this way shows that threat is a dynamic relationship among the adversary's military effectiveness, his purposes in having that level of military effectiveness, and our ability to counter his capabilities and intentions. The overall threat level rises or falls with an increase or decrease in any element of the threat.

Naming the elements of a threat does not, of course, determine that threat level. The framework of capabilities, intentions, and vulnerabilities structures thinking about threats. But it is still necessary to do the thinking, and there are numerous difficulties in doing that. The adversary's capabilities and intentions are not givens for the military strategist. Even if a strategist has an adversary's complete order of battle, his assessment of military effectiveness still requires many inferences about unquantifiable factors such as doctrine, quality of personnel and equipment, and

morale and discipline. Similarly, an adversary's declared intentions may be unclear or incomplete. Even if they are clear, they cannot be taken at face value. It is not only that his declarations may be deceptive. It may also be that his intentions are inchoate. His intentions must be continually inferred from his actions as well as his words. This in turn points to a perennial issue in threat assessment--the relation of capabilities and intentions. Given the difficulties in estimating capabilities and intentions, there is a natural tendency to reduce one to the other. It is inviting simply to deduce intentions from capabilities or capabilities from intentions. If we have been surprised because we misjudged an adversary's intentions or if it is too hard to interpret an adversary's intentions, we will be tempted to say his intentions equal his capabilities. On the other hand, if we think we know an adversary's intentions, we will be tempted simply to measure his capabilities in terms of what we suppose his intentions are.

As critical and difficult as it is to pin down an adversary's capabilities and intentions, it is just as critical and difficult to estimate our vulnerabilities. We are generally so close to, so familiar with, and so affected by our own weaknesses that it is difficult for us to identify them and to evaluate them objectively. For this reason, it is probably even more important to think systematically about our vulnerabilities than it is to structure our thinking about the adversary. Just as we distinguish what an adversary can do and what he intends to do, it is useful to analyze friendly vulnerabilities in terms of capabilities and intentions.

On this model, threat assessment requires relating friendly capabilities and friendly intentions to the adversary's capabilities

and intentions. The adversary becomes more or less threatening as friendly capabilities and intentions for countering the adversary increase or decrease. That is, our vulnerabilities and therefore the overall threat are inversely proportional to our capabilities and intentions. Breaking vulnerabilities down into capabilities and intentions makes the threat equation more specific:

$$T = (C_A \times I_C) \times \left(\frac{1}{C_F} \times \frac{1}{I_F}\right)$$

or

$$T = \frac{C_A \times I_A}{C_F \times I_F}$$

A matrix is perhaps more useful for picturing the relationship among adversary capabilities and intentions and friendly capabilities and intentions:

+	adversary capabilities	-
	minimum threat	
friendly intentions		adversary intentions
	maximum threat	
-	friendly capabilities	+

Putting friendly capabilities and intentions into an equation or matrix is not, of course, meant to suggest that threat assessment is simple arithmetic. It is meant instead to point out that a miscalculation about friendly capabilities and intentions can

distort a threat assessment in the same way that a miscalculation of adversary capabilities and intentions can. It shows too that threat assessment is most difficult when capabilities and intentions, adversary or friendly, do not match up. Threat levels are especially uncertain when capabilities, enemy or friendly, exceed intentions.

Putting friendly capabilities and intentions into the threat framework is also meant to indicate that we can face the same obstacles in assessing our capabilities and intentions that we face in assessing the adversary's. Our own order of battle is not the whole story about our capabilities, and our declared intentions are not the last word on our actual intentions. We can also conflate friendly capabilities and intentions, reducing our intentions to our supposed capabilities or our capabilities to our supposed intentions. Ironically, friendly capabilities and intentions may be as uncertain, ambiguous, and shifting as the adversary's. The mistaken threat assessment with which the United States entered the Korean War shows just that.

Threat Assessment and the Korean War

The United States was taken by surprise when North Korea invaded the South. We were surprised because the threat assessment held at the outbreak of the war underestimated the adversary's capabilities and misread his intentions, and we were wrong about the adversary because we did not understand our own vulnerabilities.

As to adversary capabilities, the assessment was that North Korea was not ready for war. In June 1950, about two weeks before North Korea invaded the South, the United States ambassador in Seoul

reported that the North Korean forces had "undeniable material superiority." U.S. officials had been inclined for some time, however, to deny the North's superiority. The prevailing view in Washington was North Korea was not yet capable of going to war. The military balance on the Korean peninsula appeared so favorable to the South that North Korea would need considerably more time to prepare for war. The ambassador's report on North Korean capabilities was seen in Washington merely as an argument to support the ambassador's request for tanks and heavy equipment for South Korea.

The miscalculation of North Korean capabilities was tied to a misreading of North Korea intentions. It was easy to downplay the North's capabilities because the United States had already determined that North Korea did not plan to attack.

By the time of the ambassador's report on North Korean capabilities, there were already numerous indications that North Korea planned to initiate war. The U.S. Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) had logged about 400 "border incidents" from July to December 1949, but in April 1950 KMAG reported that the raids had decreased from 60 or 70 a month to 7 or 8 a month. Incidents along the 38th Parallel remained low in May. Rhee, the president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), said at a news conference on 5 May 1950 that May and June would be "a crucial period" and that South Korea lacked "adequate defense." His defense minister said five days later that the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) was moving in force toward the border and that an invasion was imminent. North Korea evacuated civilians from the border zone in May and also removed railroad tracks leading north from Kaesong. Following the South Korean elections at the end of May, North Korea began a propaganda campaign

calling for the peaceful unification of North and South Korea. By the middle of June a U.S. intelligence officer at Chunchon warned that camouflaged tanks and artillery had been moved in the border area, and another U.S. adviser warned that invasion was likely at any time.

The United States missed these indications of the adversary's intentions because they did not fit the dominant view that war was not imminent. In March 1950, General MacArthur's G-2 reported that North Korea would continue guerilla and psychological war, but would not initiate civil war in the spring or summer of 1950. Secretary of State Acheson and MacArthur shared the belief that although there was a possibility of a North Korean attack on South Korea, it would not happen in the summer of 1950. Against that background, it was not hard to explain away the signs of North Korea's intentions. Since the North had not exhausted the possibilities of achieving its objectives through guerilla war and political pressure, it seemed unlikely that it would resort to overt military action. In addition, most of the indicators of war had routine precedents. Secretary of Defense Johnson later characterized the North's innumerable minor border violations as "Sunday morning incursions." Analysts downgraded the new indicators and did not become suspicious when there was a sharp drop in the frequency of border incidents. Similarly, Rhee's warning of a "critical period" had routine precedents: Rhee and intelligence reports had warned of possible military action so often that their new warnings were seen as "crying wolf."

The United States misapprehended the North Korean threat because it misperceived North Korea's capabilities and intentions.

But mistakes about friendly capabilities and intentions also caused the erroneous threat assessment.

As to friendly capabilities, KMAG held the view that the ROK army was superior to the NKPA. Internal KMAG reports showed serious ROK deficiencies. But KMAG consistently and enthusiastically reported to the Pentagon and to visiting VIPs and journalists that the ROK army was easily capable of meeting any threat posed by the NKPA. When author John Gunther visited MacArthur's headquarters, he was told that "the South Korean forces ('The best Army in Asia') could wipe out the North Koreans with no difficulty." The KMAG commander told U.S. reporters covering the South Korean elections at the end of May that the ROK army could easily repel the NKPA. KMAG's campaign to show the superiority of friendly capabilities culminated in a report in the 5 June 1950 issue of Time that the South Korean army was the best of its size in Asia and that "no one now believes that the Russian-trained North Korean Army could pull off a quick, successful invasion of the South without heavy reinforcements." It is not clear why KMAG was so positive about friendly capabilities. KMAG's assertions about ROK strengths may have reflected sincere beliefs about ROK capabilities. They may also have been intended to portray KMAG's success in training the ROK army, to deter North Korean aggression, to justify the U.S. withdrawal from South Korea, or to promote further economic and military assistance for South Korea. Whatever the motivation, KMAG's picture of friendly capabilities was convincing, as George Kennan makes clear in his Memoirs. Kennan relates that in June 1950 the State Department learned of an intelligence hunch that something was like-

ly to happen along Soviet periphery. Korea was, however, ruled out as the place where anything would happen. Kennan had been told

that an inauguration of military operations from the Communist side in that country was practically out of the question: the South Korean forces were so well armed and trained that they were clearly superior to those of the Communist north; our greatest task, we were told, was to restrain the South Koreans from resorting to arms to settle their differences with the north.

This wishful thinking about friendly capabilities was consistent with blurred thinking about friendly intentions. In late 1947 the Joint Chiefs of Staff determined that Korea had no strategic importance to United States security and that the United States had little interest in maintaining troops and bases there. In December 1948 the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Korea. In June 1949 the United States withdrew most of its forces, but left 500 advisors assigned to KMAG. KMAG reported not to MacArthur in Japan, but directly to the Department of the Army. The State Department had overall responsibility for Korea. In the last six months before the war began, there were numerous signals of the country's ambiguous position between a hesitant commitment to South Korea and the belief that Korea was of no strategic importance. On 5 January 1950, the United States announced a "hands-off Formosa" policy, and it seemed likely that a similar policy would be adopted toward Korea. On 12 January, Acheson said in a widely reported speech that the "defense perimeter" of the United States stretched from the Aleutians to the Philippines. This appeared to exclude Korea from U.S. defense plans in the Far East. On 19 January the House of Representatives defeated an Administration request for supplemental aid for South Korea. NSC-68, which was under review in April 1950, foresaw a large increase in U.S. conventional military forces to contain

Communism and mentioned Korea as one of many potential **danger** spots. But NSC-68 did not describe a firm commitment to South Korean security. In an interview reported in the 5 May 1950 issue of U.S. News & World Report, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said that he was "afraid" the United States would "abandon" South Korea "whether we want it or not" because South Korea was not important to U.S. strategy. For Rhee, this read like an invitation to the communists to invade. Against these signs of decreasing U.S. interest in South Korea, Ambassador John Foster Dulles began a two-week trip to Japan and Korea on 14 June. Dulles told the ROK National Assembly "you are not alone."

Because U.S. intentions toward Korea were inconsistent and incomplete, it is no surprise that when North Korea invaded on 25 June, the United States had no plans for responding. U.S. defense planning started with the assumptions that the most likely war was an all-out war with the Soviet Union and that only guerilla warfare and subversion were likely in Asia. In a total war centered outside Asia, South Korea had no "strategic" importance. It seemed unnecessary therefore to form intentions about how the United States would respond to an invasion from the North.

Applying the threat framework to the outbreak of the Korean War confirms the importance of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment. Indeed, the mistaken threat assessment held by the United States at the outbreak of the Korean War resulted more from defective thinking about friendly capabilities and intentions than from errors in calculating adversary capabilities and intentions. North Korean capabilities and intentions were underestimated because friendly capabilities were overestimated. The supposed imbalance of

military forces made it doubtful that North Korea would ~~resort~~ to war. Friendly capabilities were overestimated because ~~friendly~~ intentions had not been thought through. A South Korea ~~capab~~le of defending itself from North Korea was consistent with a ~~decli~~ning U.S. commitment to South Korea. It was easier to suppose ~~that~~ the ROK army could repel an NKPA attack and that therefore the North did not intend to attack than it was to form and express U.S. intentions should the North attack. Unclear thinking about friendly intentions led to wishful thinking about friendly capabilities. That in turn led to mistakes about the enemy's capabilities, and mistakes about enemy capabilities suppressed thinking about signs the enemy intended to go to war.

Threat Assessment and Self-Analysis

With the Korean War example in mind, it is possible now to go a step further in understanding the role of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment. Vulnerabilities are not just a part of the threat equation. They are also the point of view from which we see the other elements of the threat equation.

Adversaries threaten us, and so we must of course look primarily at the adversary to determine the level of threat we face. But as the outbreak of the Korean War shows, we must also look at ourselves. At every stage--including analysis of the threat, the military strategist must first apply the ancient maxim to "know thyself." There is a real danger we will not think hard enough about our vulnerabilities. It is easy to suppose that we already understand our vulnerabilities, that they are simply givens the strategist can work from. In practice, however, we have to work

through our vulnerabilities because evaluating friendly capabilities and comprehending friendly intentions can be just as puzzling and complex as coming to terms with the enemy situation.

As the Korean War shows, friendly vulnerabilities have a dual role in threat assessment. The first role is straightforward. Enemy capabilities and intentions must be balanced against friendly capabilities and intentions. Friendly capabilities must be weighed against the adversary's military forces to determine the level of damage the adversary can inflict. Friendly intentions--friendly political and military objectives and plans for achieving them--must be evaluated against the adversary's intentions to obstruct us.

The second role of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment is more elusive. Our intentions and our capabilities provide the perspective from which we see the adversary's capabilities and intentions. Misjudging ROK army capabilities, we misjudged NKPA capabilities. Because our intentions regarding South Korea were amorphous and ambivalent, because we planned for general war outside Asia rather than a limited war in Korea, we misjudged North Korea's intentions and missed indications of North Korea's decision to go to war. It is usual to say that deterrence failed in Korea because the United States failed to communicate to other side the costs and risks of going to war. Given the role of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment, we can be more specific about how deterrence failed in Korea. We failed to communicate the costs of war to the other side because we had miscalculated the threat posed by North Korea, and we miscalculated the threat largely because we misunderstood our capabilities and intentions. The underpinning of our understanding of the enemy is our understanding of ourselves. This

explains why it is essential we have a "red cell" through which we look at ourselves as the enemy does. If we do not carefully appraise our capabilities and think through our intentions, we will misjudge the threat and may even fail to identify the threat in the first place.

The dual role of friendly capabilities and intentions in threat assessment reflects the dual role of military strategy. We usually think of military strategy as prescribing a way to achieve military objectives. Confronted with military threats, we construct a military strategy to neutralize or destroy those threats. But military strategy is not only prescriptive. It is also descriptive. The role of friendly vulnerabilities in threat assessment shows that military strategy first describes threats and then prescribes a response to them. A clear understanding of our capabilities and intentions is the first step in defining threats and therefore in constructing a military strategy. The threat is not the point from which a military strategy starts. It is the first product of the military strategy.

