



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY



INFORMATION SERIES

SURVEYING THE LITERATURE: RECENT BOOKS ON NATIONAL SECURITY

HON. DAVID J. TRACHTENBERG, *Editor*
DR. MICHAELA DODGE, *Assistant Editor*
AMY JOSEPH, *Managing Editor*

Issue No. 473

December 15, 2020

This is a quarterly series of reviews focusing on recently published books dealing with topical and noteworthy national security issues. Authors and publishers interested in submitting their books on national security for review may contact the Editor at informationseries@nipp.org.

Thomas F. Lynch III, editor, *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2020), 367 pp.

Reviewed By: Thomas G. Mahnken
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, D.C.
Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C.

Recent years have seen growing recognition that we are once again in a period characterized by great-power competition – and with it the prospect of great power conflict. The urgent need to compete with China and Russia comes after a three-decade



respite from serious thinking about what it means to face an economically powerful and technologically sophisticated adversary in peace and in war. The experience of the Cold War lies outside the memory of all but the most senior national security professionals. The vast majority of officers in the U.S. armed forces and civil servants in the U.S. government entered service after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. For them, the notion of great-power competition is at best a theoretical and historical matter; it is certainly not one of personal experience.

Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition focuses squarely on the urgent need to compete with China and Russia. The volume draws upon the considerable talents of the faculty of the National Defense University, to include Frank G. Hoffman, Phillip C. Saunders, T.X. Hammes, Richard Andres, and Paul Bernstein. Orchestrating such an expansive project with so many authors is a complex undertaking, but Thomas F. Lynch III does an excellent job as both editor and contributor.

Part I of the volume focuses on conceptualizing the new era of great power competition. The authors in this section emphasize the difficulty of measuring power accurately in peacetime, a challenge that is magnified by technological and geopolitical change. They also note the miscalculation and surprise that are inherent in such a situation. The essays in this section also provide an overall diagnosis of the state of the competition between the United States, China and Russia, emphasizing China as the United States' greatest rival. Part II of the volume examines the topic of warfighting, innovation, and technology in a new era of great power competition. Its essays emphasize technologies associated with the so-called fourth industrial revolution and the ability to produce small, smart, and cheap military systems. The authors of this section discuss the asymmetric competition among the United States, China, and Russia to exploit these new capabilities, as well as more traditional instruments such as nuclear weapons and political warfare. Part III explores great power competition in a regional context, and the volume concludes with a section devoted to preparing to compete.

This final topic deserves considerable attention. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies developed a comprehensive set of structures to compete with the Soviet Union across the full spectrum of instruments of power.¹ A similar effort is needed today. More narrowly, the Defense Department's embrace of competition with

¹ Thomas G. Mahnken, *Forging the Tools of 21st Century Great Power Competition* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020).



China and Russia over the long term remains a work in progress. For example, although the Pentagon has rhetorically embraced the term “great power competition”, it has not yet adapted its thinking and its processes, let alone its budgeting and procurement priorities, to reflect the needs of the strategic environment.

Strategic Assessment 2020 offers intellectual ammunition to equip both practitioners and scholars for the current era. Like any good work, it provides answers but also sets the stage for the considerable work that remains to be done to develop and implement strategies for competing with China and Russia over the long term.

Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 169 pp.

Reviewed By: Michaela Dodge
National Institute for Public Policy, Fairfax, VA

In *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Era*, Lieber and Press examine what they call “the nuclear puzzle,” or why the world with an atomic weapon has been just as geopolitically competitive as the one without it. This puzzle has been most evident with regard to the gap between international relations theorists who maintain that the sheer irrationality of nuclear weapons makes even a small number of them an effective deterrent and should lead to a more peaceful world (the myth) and decades of national security practice that led to thousands of nuclear weapons of various types, capabilities, and ranges being deployed during the Cold War and geopolitical relations just as competitive as ever, albeit without the presence of a great power war.

To solve the puzzle, the authors introduce the concept of a nuclear “stalemate.” The foundation of the nuclear stalemate consists of three nuclear weapon attributes: small size, destructive power per unit, and ease of delivery. These attributes create a condition of “mutual kill” and the “impossibility of victory,” as if there was a universally accepted definition of the term “victory.” In reality, this is contingent upon the perception of each of the parties to a conflict. Similarly, nuclear weapons are said to “have greatly enhanced deterrence” and have had a “unique deterring power,” although the book does not elaborate on who is deterring whom from doing what.



Answering the latter question would likely make the puzzle less puzzling (and perhaps less interesting from an academic perspective since the theory would be less generalizable²). But the stalemate is difficult to achieve and maintain, which leads to continued competitive behavior.

The authors' repeated references to the United States trying to break out of the stalemate in pursuit of counterforce capabilities are unsupported by the historical record. In fact, the United States was careful to limit its strategic offensive programs in ways that would preserve what Lieber and Press call the stalemate and deliberately chose not to undermine or actively defend against Soviet first strike capabilities. For example, the United States cancelled the program to develop Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles that could attack Soviet silos at the end of 1960s.³ Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger made clear that U.S. hard target kill capabilities "depend on how far the Soviets go in developing a counterforce capability of their own"⁴ and were not designed to threaten "the Soviet deterrent."⁵ The United States cancelled its missile defense programs to preserve the condition of mutually assured destruction with the Soviet Union and to this day has not deployed any strategic missile defense capabilities intended to defend against sophisticated near-peer ballistic missile threats from either Russia or China.

In a way, the puzzle is really not that puzzling.⁶ Nuclear weapons have not changed human nature, nor have they changed the international system. Fear, honor, and

² On the importance of understanding an opponent for deterrence see for example Keith B Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

³ John Foster in, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on Arms Control, International Law and Organization, *ABM, MIRV, SALT, and the Nuclear Arms Race*, Hearing, 91st Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), p. 509

⁴ Testimony of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Defense, February 12, 1975, p. 17, available at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Department_of_Defense_Appropriations/1JYtAAAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=should+have+some+ability+to+destroy+hard+targets,+even+though+we+would+prefer+to+see+both+sides+avoid+major+counterforce+capabilities&pg=PA17&printsec=frontcover.

⁵ See James Schlesinger's testimony, March 4, 1974, op. cit., pp. 2, 21, 71; Schlesinger, Remarks, Overseas Writers Association Luncheon at the International Club, Washington, D.C. (January 10, 1974), p. 14; and Schlesinger, News Conference at the Pentagon (January 24, 1974), p. 2.

⁶ Colin S. Gray, "Across the Nuclear Divide-Strategic Studies, Past and Present," *International Security* 2, no. 1 (1977): 24-46, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538657>.



interest reign supreme.⁷ The United States cannot presume what political meanings adversaries will attribute to victory, nor how much they will be willing to sacrifice to pursue it—thus it is incorrect to assume away the possibility of a nuclear war, particularly for policymakers and defense planners charged with defending the United States. Survivability and credibility will continue to be important components of the U.S. nuclear force posture.

“The central puzzle of the nuclear age is the persistence of intense international security competition,” write the authors. But continued international security competition under the nuclear shadow is not the puzzle the book makes it out to be. Countries will generally prefer to achieve their objectives by traditional, non-nuclear means (hence, the emphasis on continuous improvement of conventional military forces) and preferably in tandem with others (hence, the continued importance of allies). Even less surprising is that leaders do not value all objectives equally (for example, protecting the United States from adversaries is a must, expanding cooperation with international partners at the expense of potential adversaries is nice to do) and so they will choose commensurate tools of statecraft to achieve them. In sum, what the analysis appears to forget, is that not all nails require a nuclear hammer.

David J. Trachtenberg, *The Lawgivers' Struggle: How Congress Wields Power in National Security Decision Making* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), 316 pp.

Reviewed By: Christopher Williams

Former Special Assistant to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense and Independent Consultant, Fairfax Station, VA

In *The Lawgivers' Struggle: How Congress Wields Power in National Security Decision Making*, Mr. David J. Trachtenberg draws from personal experience as well as solid historical research to shed light on the question of which branch of government—the Legislative or Executive—has primacy in national security affairs. His answer: Power and authority over national security decision making ebbs and flows between the Congress and the President depending on a range of factors, which is just what the

⁷ Colin Gray, “Clausewitz Rules, OK? The Future Is the Past: With GPS,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 161–82.



Framers of the Constitution intended – one branch to serve as a brake on the other, while still enabling the timely and effective pursuit of U.S. national security interests.

Trachtenberg’s first-hand experience as a professional staff member on a Congressional defense committee in the U.S. House of Representatives and in several positions in the Office of the Secretary of Defense yields a steady stream of interesting and instructive anecdotes that are used to highlight the role of Congress in the tug-of-war for primacy in national security affairs. I was impressed by the solid research and ample footnotes that provide the reader with important historical context. In this regard, “Chapter Two: The Constitutional and Historical Basis of Congressional and Executive Roles” should be required reading for all students of government as it provides an insightful summary of the thinking of America’s founders, as expressed in the *Federalist Papers* and the U.S. Constitution itself, on this critical topic.

Trachtenberg asserts that the book “seeks to explain in relatively simple terms how Congress operates and how it seeks to assert its authority on matters of national security policy, identifying points of friction between those who make the laws and those who execute them. It is primarily intended to help students understand the executive-legislative dynamic.” In this regard, the book fulfills its mandate effectively. It is an easy read and makes oftentimes complex interactions between the branches understandable, which is no small challenge for a topic this weighty and at times arcane.

While numerous historical examples are provided to illustrate the ebb-and-flow of Legislative-Executive interactions on national security matters, much of the focus of the book is on particular experiences the author had in Government, including and especially while serving as a professional staff member on the House Armed Services Committee. (I, too, had the pleasure of serving in such a capacity and found it to be one of the most rewarding experiences in my nearly forty-year career.) The case studies cited are relevant and enlightening and will lead the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the Constitution’s “invitation to struggle” over power in national security decision making.

Trachtenberg’s book also provides insight into the powerful role that Congressional defense committee professional staff members can and do play in the review of Department of Defense budgets, programs, and policies and making recommendations to members of Congress as they assemble the annual National Defense Authorization



Act. He strongly encourages students and readers with an interest in public service to consider working on Capitol Hill, as it provides a wonderfully instructive birds-eye view of the national-level policy making process and insights into the power and influence of Congress and its relationship with the Executive branch.

Trachtenberg avoids taking a formal position in the long-standing and ongoing debate between those who believe Congress has overstepped its proper authority in conducting oversight of executive branch policies and programs and those who think Congress has ceded too much of its authority to the President, and instead leaves it to the reader to reach his or her own conclusions. This is an appropriate strategy for the book but also leaves the reader to wonder where he stands on thorny questions such as, Is the current balance between the two branches about right? How should that balance be changed and why? Has the Congress abdicated its role in reviewing and approving formal agreements between the United States and various foreign governments? Should the Congress impose additional constraints on the President's ability to order the use of military force? Is the Congress micromanaging the various activities of the Department of Defense? and more.

As someone who has also served in both the executive and legislative branches of government, I wholeheartedly endorse this book and strongly encourage teachers and professors of government studies to use the book as a means of helping educate their students on this vital topic. Trachtenberg has leveraged his talents as a seasoned practitioner of national security affairs to provide a highly readable and instructive book that merits the attention of students across the nation.

The views in this *Information Series* are those of the author and should not be construed as official U.S. Government policy, the official policy of the National Institute for Public Policy or any of its sponsors. For additional information about this publication or other publications by the National Institute Press, contact: Editor, National Institute Press, 9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750 | Fairfax, VA 22031 | (703) 293-9181 | www.nipp.org. For access to previous issues of the National Institute Press Information Series, please visit <https://www.nipp.org/information-series-2/>.

The National Institute for Public Policy's *Information Series* is a periodic publication focusing on contemporary strategic issues affecting U.S. foreign and defense policy. It is a forum for promoting critical thinking on the evolving international security environment and how the dynamic geostrategic landscape affects U.S. national security. Contributors are recognized experts in the field of national security.