The beginning of wisdom in defense planning is an appreciation of the great degree to which the scenarios employed in the planning process can shape the outcome. Since the development of the Base Force in the early 1990s, two scenarios depicting major theater wars (MTWs)—a North Korean attack on the Republic of Korea, and an Iraqi attack on Kuwait and Saudi Arabia—have been virtually the sole focus of force planning in the Department of Defense.\(^1\) To an extent that was probably neither anticipated nor intended by the DoD leadership at the time, these two scenarios (and, more precisely, certain carefully defined cases within them) have constricted the focus of force planning efforts to a fairly narrow portion of the spectrum of plausible challenges U.S. forces might face. Thus, U.S. defense planning may be giving short shrift to some important factors that should be considered in evaluating future needs.

The problem is not that these two canonical scenarios are not useful. On the contrary, their primary features (but not their details) represent the most plausible near-term threats of large-scale attack that

\(^1\)DoD did employ a range of other scenarios during its 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review. Other scenarios included situations in which an adversary with larger and more capable forces than those portrayed in the MTWs attacked U.S. and allied forces. DoD also used a series of smaller-scale operations as well as MTWs to assess overall force needs in its “Dynamic Commitment” series of exercises. However, the “near peer” assessments were fairly limited in scope and seemed to have little influence in the resource allocation process. The Dynamic Commitment effort did not attempt to go beyond informed judgment with regard to the types and number of forces needed in each of its scenarios. See William S. Cohen, Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review, U.S. Department of Defense, May 1997, p. 24. See also Les Aspin, Report of the Bottom-Up Review, U.S. Department of Defense, October 1993, pp. 13–15.
The Persian Gulf scenario—in which a regional adversary with a mix of 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s weaponry attacks its badly outnumbered neighbors—is representative of a range of challenges that could confront U.S. forces in the future. And both scenarios are credible: There is little room for doubt that these are wars that the United States would fight if they broke out. Nevertheless, in and of themselves, these two scenarios, as used by DoD, are not adequate yardsticks against which to measure current and future U.S. military capabilities. The reasons are manifold.

First, the military challenges posed in each of the two scenarios, as officially described, are too easily dealt with to serve as a basis for prudent planning (see Figure 2.1). As was revealed in a study of the heavy bomber force in 1995, the canonical scenario for the Persian Gulf region assumes that U.S. forces will have nearly two weeks’ re-
inforcement time prior to the commencement of hostilities. During this period, the United States would be able to send more than a dozen fighter squadrons, two to three brigades of Army and Marine forces, and two to three carrier battle groups to the theater. Other U.S. forces would continue to arrive during the course of the campaign. Not surprisingly, assessments of the outcome of such a conflict show U.S. and allied forces winning handily. But what rational adversary would wait to attack under such unfavorable circumstances? If potential adversaries learned anything from the Gulf War, it was that they must strike before the United States deploys large-scale forces to their region and that they must do all they can to impede the progress of that deployment once it begins.

Moreover, history shows that the wars that U.S. forces fight are not the ones for which they prepare and deploy promptly. Several wars did not happen—the Taiwan Strait, Korea (post-1953), and, perhaps, Central Europe throughout the Cold War—at least in part because of prompt or sustained U.S. deployments. Korea (1950) and Iraq’s attack on Kuwait, on the other hand, suggest that a failure to anticipate or to react promptly to threats of aggression may invite attack. Prudence therefore dictates that the scenarios used to test U.S. defense preparedness include the possibility of surprise. Improved monitoring capabilities and a vigilant attitude can reduce the probability of U.S. forces having to defend from an unreinforced posture, but they cannot ensure that warning indicators will always be acted upon. Prompt action often depends not only on the speed of decisionmaking in Washington but also on the cooperation of U.S. allies and friends. Building a consensus for action can take time. In short, a defense posture that relies for its viability on a lengthy period of reinforcement would be a poor deterrent and would subject U.S. forces and interests to substantial and unnecessary risks.

A second way in which the canonical cases are insufficiently challenging is in their assumptions regarding the enemy’s use of existing or emerging attack capabilities. The scenarios appear to be fairly sanguine about the possibility that U.S. forces might come under at-

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tack by large numbers of ballistic and cruise missiles, some of which could deliver chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons.

It is widely recognized that our most plausible adversaries today—including North Korea, Iran, and Iraq—have stocks of lethal chemical agents. It should also be assumed that despite our best efforts to the contrary, over the next ten years or so, fission weapons will be in the hands of a larger number of countries than today. In its Quadrennial Defense Review of 1996-1997, DoD recognized the need to enhance U.S. forces' ability to withstand chemical and biological attacks. And while spending on protective gear is increasing, force structure and operational concepts seem not to have been affected. Similarly, in most DoD analyses, naval forces appear to have had unimpeded access to favorable operating areas inside the Gulf, despite the likelihood that future adversaries will invest in more-advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, mines, and, in Iran's case, submarines.

The combination of these rather optimistic assumptions—generous warning time for reinforcement and low risk of attack by long-range missiles or other capable weapons—sets the stage for official assessments that understate the importance of reposturing U.S. forces or providing them with new capabilities to offset growth in the future attack capabilities of adversaries. As we shall see, a shorter-warning scenario in the Gulf would show the benefits from strengthening U.S. prepositioned forces and assets there and procuring larger numbers of advanced munitions and other enhancements. Likewise, any assessment that credits adversaries with plausible capabilities to attack U.S. forces with ballistic or antiship missiles would highlight the need for theater missile defenses and longer-range attack assets. By contrast, the use of "watered-down" scenarios tends to emphasize force size over innovation.4

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4Prior RAND work has demonstrated the importance of "capabilities analysis" across a wide range of scenarios and cases within scenarios. For a summary of recent RAND work, see Paul Davis, Richard Hillestad, and Natalie Crawford, "Capabilities for Major Regional Conflicts," in Zalmay Khalilzad and David Ochmanek (eds.), Strategic Appraisal '97, RAND, 1997, pp. 141-178. An important conclusion of this work is that
A GENERIC SCENARIO FOR FORCE PLANNING

Prudence demands that we measure U.S. forces against the challenges that could be posed by representative adversaries that are reasonably competent and fairly well equipped. Accordingly, the analysis that follows is based largely on the challenges, objectives, and constraints that arise in the scenario outlined in Figure 2.2.

In positing this generic scenario, we recognize that regional adversaries generally do not need to defeat the United States and its armed forces in order to achieve their objectives. In the main, our adversaries in the post–Cold War environment seek to undermine U.S. influence in their regions so that they may have a greater say in that region’s affairs. This means that limited objectives—coercing neighboring states or seizing key territory or assets—might well serve to

Figure 2.2—Adversaries Will Seek to Achieve and Exploit Surprise

U.S. forces may suffer from growing shortfalls, the most important of which are associated with mounting effective operations early in short-warning conflicts.
meet the adversary’s objectives. And it means these adversaries will avoid a major engagement with U.S. forces, if they can.

The above, coupled with the realities that our adversaries will fight close to home and can generally be confident of having the initiative in the opening phase of a future war, suggests an enemy approach that relies on surprise, speed of maneuver, and efforts to impede U.S. access to the region and to suppress the U.S. tempo of operations. As noted above, a range of military capabilities well suited to this approach is available to potential enemies.

While all of this might seem obvious, it is worth noting again that much of the work supporting DoD’s program reviews downplays these very factors. Moreover, an approach that recognizes the inherent asymmetries in the strategic and operational situations of the United States and its potential enemies renders moot many of the arguments opposing certain new systems currently under DoD development. Some critics of ongoing modernization efforts seem to believe that if they can establish that a particular U.S. system under development is substantially more capable than those that will be possessed by our adversaries, they will have made the case that the system is “not needed.” Such judgments are too often based on simple system-versus-system comparisons that neglect the taxing circumstances under which U.S. forces frequently must operate.

An approach to force planning that encompasses strategic and operational asymmetries reveals that, in selected areas, U.S. forces may need capabilities far superior to those fielded by their opponents in order to prevail in future conflicts as quickly and as effectively as is called for by U.S. strategy. Projecting military power on short notice into the “back yard” of a major regional power is an inherently demanding enterprise, particularly when that enemy is willing to accept vastly more casualties than the intervening outside power. This situation places a high premium on forces that can deploy rapidly, seize the initiative, and achieve their objectives with minimal risk of heavy casualties. Only by using plausibly stressing scenarios as the yardstick against which to measure the capabilities of future U.S. military forces can the importance of innovation and modernization be given fair weight.
Figure 2.3 fleshes out our generic scenario; it depicts the forces that a typical regional adversary (e.g., Iran or Iraq) might bring to bear in the middle or later years of the next decade. These forces include several army corps (including 12 heavy armor or mechanized divisions), upwards of 500 combat aircraft (a portion of which would be of recent manufacture), chemical and biological weapons, and tactical and theater-range ballistic and cruise missiles. A more sizable nation, such as China, could certainly commit a larger force against its neighbors, though qualitatively the threat would look much the same. We judge this time frame—roughly ten years in the future—to be best suited as a basis for informing choices about today’s defense program, because it is set far enough in the future to account for lead times in fielding systems currently under development yet is near enough to the present to permit us to

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forecast with some confidence such factors as the U.S. regional posture and adversary objectives and capabilities.

In broad terms, we assume that the enemy’s chief objective is to seize critical assets some distance from the prewar border. Hence, mechanized ground forces spearheading the enemy advance are instructed to move as rapidly as possible. We also assume that the enemy is capable of a combined air and land operation, with reasonably modern surface-to-air defenses, interceptors, and attack aircraft. Most important, we assume that, for one reason or another, U.S. forces have not substantially reinforced the theater prior to the attack. In the vernacular, C-day (the day that large-scale U.S. reinforcement begins) equals D-day (the day that the enemy commences his attack). This could happen if U.S. indications and warning assets fail to detect or correctly assess enemy preparations for an attack, if U.S. decisionmakers delay reacting to warning, or if the leaders of countries threatened by the attack temporize in allowing U.S. forces access to their territory in the face of ambiguous indications of hostile intent. Assumptions about the employment of specific forces and systems are discussed in detail in Chapter Four, which presents our assessment of potential U.S. halt capabilities.

This case represents a stressing challenge for the defenders, even if weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are not used in support of the attack. Nevertheless, this case does not represent a “worst case.” In August 1990, the order to deploy U.S. combat forces to the Gulf came four days after Iraqi forces marched into Kuwait. If Saddam had chosen a more aggressive strategy, the first U.S. forces to arrive in theater could have found themselves fighting an enemy already well into Saudi Arabia. If one accepts the possibility of such an eventuality, the issue becomes whether and how such an attack might be defeated. The next chapter describes two contrasting approaches to defeating a heavily armored offensive.

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