

REVIEW ESSAY

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT: GETTING IT RIGHT

Richard Norton

Brooks, Risa A. *Shaping Strategy: The Civil-Military Politics of Strategic Assessment*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008. 315pp. \$26.95

An impressive array of cross-disciplinary studies has long pointed to the critical importance of accurate assessment as a precondition for successful decision making. The argument is as simple as it is powerful: get the assessment right and you still might fail, but get it wrong and you are all but guaranteed to fail. Nowhere is the importance of assessment more important than in the arena of national security, where leaders risk their states' futures and, in cases involving armed conflict, the lives of their citizens and, at times, national survival.

Given the importance of strategic assessment, any insight into how to improve the process and protect against failure is both useful and welcome. *Shaping Strategy* provides just such insight. With work clearly rooted in what scholar Graham Allison has titled "government politics," Risa Brooks argues that two

key variables—the degree to which military and political leaders dominate power relationships among government leaders and their respective organizations, and the degree to which those leaders agree or disagree over military and political preferences—are critical in the quality of strategic assessments.

Brooks breaks down the components of strategic assessment into four discrete subcategories: information sharing, strategic coordination, structural competence,

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and the authorization process. This provides an elegant matrix by which to analyze the impacts of different power relations and preferences on strategic assessment.

She first looks at Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s, essentially contrasting the strategic assessments of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar el-Sadat. Her work in this regard is excellent; it is painstaking and convincing. She then briefly reviews six additional cases: five are Great Britain before the First World War, Germany in the same years, Great Britain during the First World War, Pakistan from 1997 to 1999, and Turkey from 1996 to 1999. The sixth and most recent, lesser case focuses on the strategic assessment conducted by the United States prior to initiating Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, the 2003 war with Iraq.

Brooks concludes that strategic assessment will be more successful when political leaders are dominant in power relationships and when divergence of preference from their military leaders is low. In contrast, strategic assessment is most likely to be poor when military and political leaders share power and preference divergence is high. In the majority of the selected cases, the evidence for this conclusion is compelling.

However, the case of the United States raises some questions. Brooks holds the U.S. strategic assessment in the case of Iraq to have been very poor, basing this judgment on the clear failure of postcombat stability operations. She points out that relations between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his senior military leaders initially had been marked by significant strain, only to note that by 2003 most, if not all, senior military leaders had been selected by Rumsfeld, greatly reducing those tensions. Brooks also fails to address the contradiction between the stunning successes of U.S. forces in the combat phase of IRAQI FREEDOM in contrast to later failures in stability operations. In other words, how did the same people get the first part so right and the second part so wrong? She is also silent on how the State Department was all but excluded in planning Phase IV (the occupation), and on the degree to which Secretary Rumsfeld may have been influenced by strategic assessments made by different government agencies, such as the CIA, as well as by Iraqi exiles and powerful political individuals, such as the vice president. This is interesting, because Brooks's approach—examining power distribution and preference divergence—should shine an explanatory light on these intracabinet and extramilitary relationships as well.

One of the major strengths of *Shaping Strategy* is Brooks's refusal to oversell her research and conclusions. National-security decision making is one of the most complex of human activities. It does not lend itself to prescriptive panaceas or simplistic explanatory theories. Brooks's research is all the more

important because it does not pretend to do either but rather provides a useful tool and a practical caution for explaining why strategic assessments tend to fail under certain conditions and thereby how national leaders might be able to reduce the risks of such failures.