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The Return of Naval War Gaming: Global 2008

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Proceedings. Annapolis: Mar 2009. Vol. 135, Iss. 3; pg. 79, 2 pgs

Abstract (Summary)

Equally important is the necessity to understand that war gaming is not rigorous, quantitative analysis, nor is it "duplicable." Because war games are inherently about human interaction, the interplay of human decisions and the outcomes of those decisions make it impossible for two games to be the same.

Full Text

(1641 words)

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From 4 to 8 August, the War Gaming Department at the Naval War College hosted Global 2008 on behalf of the Chief of Naval Operations. The goal was to examine the challenges, issues, and implications of implementing the new U.S. maritime strategy, A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower.¹ Reflecting the cooperative theme that underscores the maritime strategy, among the roughly 200 participants were representatives from 19 foreign navies, as well as members from other branches of the U.S. military, several U.S. government agencies, international and nongovernmental organizations, and participants from the defense and shipping industries.² The success of this exercise underscores the importance of international and multi-agency cooperation in helping to meet the challenges of the future security environment.

In 1979, the U.S. Navy initiated the annual Title X Global War Game as part of its Cold War strategy development process. The effort included analysis of future force structures, consistent with the Navy's Title X authority to man, train, and equip naval forces. Hosted by the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, these Global War Games were held in abeyance after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. Dr. Robert Rubel, dean of the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the college, said the reason for this was partly a lack of "compelling geopolitical reasons."³

However, in response to increased interest by senior Navy and Marine Corps leaders, and with the recent release of the new maritime strategy, the Title X Global War Game was reinstated last summer and now serves to inform the Navy Strategic Planning Process.⁴

Recent high-level strategic guidance, such as the 2008 National Defense Strategy, underscores many of the themes in the maritime strategy. These themes were mirrored in Global 2008. Significantly, these macro-trends portend a future that will require "whole of government" approaches; partnerships with allies and friendly nations in a variety of scenarios, both traditional and non-traditional; and enhanced collaboration with nongovernmental entities. At the same time, we will have to maintain credible combat power and assure a persistent global presence.

In a recent Foreign Affairs article titled "A Balanced Strategy," Secretary of Defense Robert Gates clearly describes what he sees as a critical shift needed in U.S. security arrangement to realize these capabilities. He notes: "The United States needs a military whose ability to kick down the door is matched by its ability to clean up the mess and even rebuild the house afterward."⁵ This builds on the secretary's call for a set of first-ever campaign plans that will describe how combatant commanders will "do business during peacetime, in wartime, and every time in between."⁶

Why the Games Are Important

While they cannot validate assumptions, war games such as Global 2008 can highlight relationships and issues that may warrant further analysis. "Games have a significant educational component. The players themselves have an educational experience playing the game."⁷

As the Naval War College's Dr. Rubel explains, "war gaming is still more a craft than a discipline, and it is quite possible for rank amateurs, dilettantes, and con artists to produce apparently successful but worthless or misleading games."⁸

Peter Perla at the Center for Naval Analyses defines war gaming as "any type of warfare model or simulation, not involving actual military forces, in which the flow of events is affected by and, in turn, affects decisions made during the course of those events by 'players' representing the opposing sides."⁹ According to Perla, this can range from small table-top games to more complex scenarios such as the Global War Game series.

Equally important is the necessity to understand that war gaming is not rigorous, quantitative analysis, nor is it "duplicable." Because war games are inherently about human interaction, "the interplay of human decisions and the outcomes of those decisions make it impossible for two games to be the same."¹⁰

Understanding the distinction between what the games can and cannot provide is critical in evaluating their impact. When the Navy decides to make investments in an endeavor like Global, this is only one part of the toolbox that collectively helps senior leadership to establish the context for answering questions such as what kind of Navy we need.

As Dr. Rubel describes it, war gaming "is inherently a research tool" by which knowledge is gained primarily through "visualization," or players' ability to see relationships in complex environments." In the same vein, as Perla notes, "If physical or technical parameters are of greater interest and importance than human decisions, then war gaming is less relevant than other forms of research."¹²

Additionally, war gaming can be used to socialize concepts and achieve "buy in" from a wide range of stakeholders. As Dr. Rubel explains, Title X war games such as Global 2008 "frequently have this as at least a tacit purpose."³

Accomplishments of the 2008 Games

Global 2008 explored how the execution of the maritime strategy might look under any of four alternative futures. The Navy strategic planning process developed these scenarios from regional and global perspectives, delving into the methods and means required for their implementation.

These possible futures aligned along two distinct axes: one ranged from a high to low level of cooperation in the sharing of resources; the other from high to low in the empowerment of extremist elements. During the course of the week, players developed ideas about how their particular future would look in their specific region, through the lens of political, military, economic, sociological, informational, and infrastructural concerns. They then identified maritime tasks and capabilities that would be required for success.

International participants brought a wide range of expertise and perspectives. They were divided into seven player cells: six regional cells that mirrored the current geographic combatant command areas of responsibility, and one global cell tasked to look at their futures from a global perspective. Global 2008 was carried out at the unclassified level, which provided for a much richer and diverse set of participants. However, it also limited the level of detail in which certain topics could be discussed.

Several overarching themes emerged that were ultimately confirmed by the Global 2008 out-briefs. Foremost among these, the necessity for interagency and international collaboration loomed large as a key requirement of successful implementation of the maritime strategy. To this end, there was an emphasis on practices and technology that facilitate cooperation and coalition building. Moreover, nontraditional and soft-power activities were common to three of the four alternative futures, with a clear emphasis on activities aligned with the prevention of war.

Some obvious themes also emerged at varying levels, including the continuing imperative of building partnerships as a cost-effective means of accomplishing shared goals, while at the same time creating opportunities for developing relationships and building trust. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, in particular the cooperative training that accompanies these missions, likewise reinforced the theme of working with our allies and partners.

The maritime services and our partners will continue to explore the implications and challenges of implementing the new U.S. maritime strategy. The insights gained from the Global series will be critical to ensuring that the strategy matches its environment. Building on Global 2008, future Navy Title X War Games will further develop the application of the new strategy. The resulting analysis will inform capabilities analysis, force design, and future concept development.

[Sidebar]

BUILD GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE In addition to war games, the Naval War College, Rhode Island, sponsors ongoing initiatives that involve other countries. On 13 January 2009, Naval Staff College director Captain Robert Winneg welcomed 34 officers from nations around the globe. Their five-and-a-half-month graduate program emphasizes naval planning and decision-making, especially in terms of broadening their understanding of sea power's role in international affairs.

[Reference]

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2. Department of the Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, October 2007, p. 11. Available at www.navy.mil/maritime/MaritimeStrategy.pdf. As the strategy points out, while maritime forces can surge in response to crises, "trust and cooperation cannot be surged." By broadening participation in events like Global, not only is the efficacy of outcome increased, but so is the understanding that this new focus on cooperation is not simply words printed on paper. Instead, it is truly a pillar of the maritime strategy. See also John Lehman, "A Bravura Performance," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* magazine, November 2007, pp. 22-25, and other articles on the topic in the same issue.
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