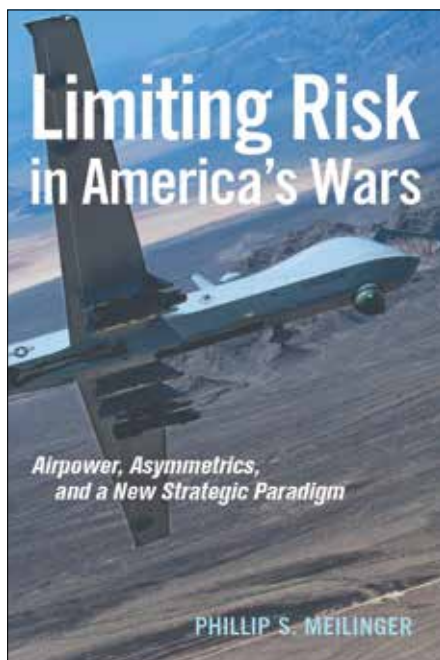


unique motivations. This pattern-seeking compulsion in turn prompted and itself fed what David Halberstam termed the “crisis psychology” of the Cold War: threats were everywhere and increasing, and thus they became existential. Instead, what we can learn from each book is that, often during the Cold War, the parts were greater than the whole. Nations and peoples worked out their own destinies, regardless of, and sometimes in defiance of, superpower goals. Perhaps the biggest lesson, as simple as it may be, is to be aware, not of connection and pattern, but of exceptionalism and singularity. JFQ

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Limiting Risk in America's Wars: Airpower, Asymmetries, and a New Strategic Paradigm

By Phillip S. Meilinger
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Reviewed by Tom Greenwood

In *Limiting Risk in America's Wars*, Phillip Meilinger boldly argues against conducting prolonged wars of annihilation with large conventional U.S. ground forces. This strategy has proved too costly and seldom achieves the political goals for which recent campaigns have been fought, he argues. Instead, Meilinger, a retired Air Force pilot, favors the indirect approach espoused most prominently after World War I by British military thinkers Sir Basil H. Liddell Hart and Major General J.F.C. Fuller. Building on their ideas, the author contends U.S. strategy would be better served if our forces undertook *second-front operations*, which he defines as a “grand strategic maneuver involving a major military force that strikes the enemy unexpectedly somewhere other than the main theater of action (the source of the enemy’s strength).” Such operations could help divert opposing forces, attack critical vulnerabilities, reinforce allies, develop asymmetric advantages, and be decisively exploited. In short, second-front operations could enable military forces to avoid prolonged and inconclusive conflicts and more rapidly achieve stated war aims at lower risk.

The foregoing summary of the author’s analysis may strike some readers as strategically valuable. It may be in some contexts, but it is deceptively simple (perhaps even facile) when one ponders just how difficult it is to open up second-front operations against nonstate actors whose foot soldiers wear no uniforms, defend no sovereign territory, and rely on illicit transnational networks to fund their operations. Moreover, few readers are likely to argue that deception and surprise—key tenets of the indirect approach—are less important today than they were in Sun Tzu’s day. But, as U.S. Navy SEALs learned in 1992 when they came ashore in Somalia under the glare of TV cameras, the proliferation of information technology makes achieving and maintaining surprise on the modern battlefield extraordinarily difficult.

The most controversial theme of this book, however, is that advanced precision munitions have now elevated airpower to be America’s most decisive arm. And

when combined with sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) networks and highly trained special operations forces (SOF), the author believes this triad now renders large ground formations (similar to those employed in Afghanistan and Iraq) irrelevant. In his view, the latter are unwieldy, easy to target, often misconstrued as occupation forces, and responsible for a preponderance of civilian casualties. Citing 2006–2007 statistics from Afghanistan, Meilinger writes:

Nearly 95 percent of the 35 airstrikes resulting in collateral damage involved troops-in-contact—those instances when the rigorous safeguards taken at the air operations center to carefully vet targets to avoid such mistakes were bypassed. Given that there were some 5,342 airstrikes flown by Coalition air forces that dropped “major munitions” during those 2 years, the number causing collateral damage was a mere 0.65 percent of the total.

He further asserts that this percentage could have been lower if there had been fewer situations where troops-in-contact needed in-extremis close air support. Unfortunately, he offers scant evidence that SOF troops-in-contact were more adept at accurately guiding air-delivered munitions on to enemy targets than general purpose forces. Nor does he examine the implications of greater risk for SOF units in different operational contexts.

The author does a nice job balancing his discussion of warfighting theory with historical vignettes that highlight both successful and unsuccessful indirect approaches and second-front operations. The successful campaigns he discusses are the French and Indian wars in America (1754–1763), Wellington in Spain (1809–1812), the Arab Revolt (1916–1918), and Operation *Torch* in North Africa (1942). The failed campaigns he analyzes are the Sicilian Expedition during the Peloponnesian War (415–413 BCE), Imjin War (1592–1598), Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt (1798–1799), Gallipoli (1915), and Norway (1940). Not surprisingly, he dedicates a separate chapter, titled “Descent into

Disaster,” to the so-called endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The author’s succinct and pithy campaign summaries are quite good; however, no mention of modern armaments and airpower in some of the vignettes makes their relevance suspect, if not disconcerting, given his overarching theme about the efficacy of airpower.

Why did some of the armies and fleets in the case studies do better than others? Meilinger argues it was not simply that these forces pursued an indirect approach and fought on multiple fronts. Rather, they did so while displaying a high degree of strategic, operational, and tactical finesse by being consistently more proficient than their adversaries in devising a logical and achievable strategic plan; conducting an accurate net assessment; providing sound leadership; obtaining timely and accurate intelligence; fostering a friendly and sympathetic population; fielding properly sized forces; developing specialized doctrine, tactics, and weapons; and exercising command of both the sea and air.

However, a central question left unanswered by the book is whether Meilinger’s proposed triad (airpower, ISR, and SOF) will be able to withstand rigorous historical scrutiny and meet our future needs. In the era of great power competition, can this concept be ultimately validated as the Defense Department’s warfighting concept for use against high-end peer competitors?

There are good reasons to be skeptical. First, in a degraded and contested future operating environment, sophisticated ISR systems may prove increasingly unreliable, thereby impeding joint force target identification and kill chain processes so essential to sustaining high-tempo operations. The inability to locate enemy mobile targets could result in reduced U.S. and allied air target engagement and sortie generation rates, rendering second-front operations more problematic. More recent campaigns have enjoyed unusual freedom of action given the adversary’s inability to compete in the air domain.

Second, the increasing range and lethality of threat missile systems will require highly capable and robust U.S. and allied air defense units. While a

quantitative analysis of U.S. air missile defense requirements is beyond the scope of this review, transforming fixed air bases—both overseas and at home—to successfully survive a long-range enemy cruise missile attack portends to be a Sisyphean task. As T.X. Hammes has noted in *Joint Force Quarterly* 81 (2nd Quarter 2016):

An opponent does not have to fight modern fighters or bombers in the air. Instead, he can send hundreds or even thousands of small UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] after each aircraft at its home station. Support aircraft, such as tankers . . . are even more difficult to protect. Even if aircraft are protected by shelters, radars, fuel systems, and ammunition dumps will still be highly vulnerable.

Third, distributing combat power across a theater may be a prerequisite for joint forces to survive and effectively operate inside the enemy’s weapons engagement rings. If so, then credible land forces will continue to play a vital role in executing a number of critical missions (for example, deterring, deceiving, protecting, raiding, reinforcing, clearing, attacking, holding, and evacuating, to name just a few). While SOF can perform some of these missions, they are ill-suited for others and generally lack sufficient organic combat power needed to defeat even modestly sized enemy formations. While large U.S. conventional ground forces bivouacked inside static forward operating bases may be a recipe for stalemate (if not defeat), it is an exaggeration to argue that conventional land forces have no operational utility in a high-end war. Ongoing efforts by the Army and Marine Corps to equip conventional forces with long-range precision surface fires could defend strategic chokepoints and free up maritime or aerospace forces to commence second-front operations that the author so strongly advocates. For this reason, readers should not be quick to dismiss the important role conventional land forces will continue to play on the modern battlefield within a joint context.

Fourth, assuming air installations can be adequately protected, it is not clear

what the author’s theory of victory is for employing airpower—beyond minimizing military and civilian casualties—which is a recurring theme in the book. Historically, airpower has been less than decisive. While the World War II Bombing Survey acknowledged the significant impact of strategic bombing campaigns in both theaters, it did not determine they were decisive. Historians, including Geoffrey Wheatcroft (*New York Review of Books*, 2018) most recently, conclude that the operational and strategic effects of airpower have been hyped since Kitty Hawk. Airpower’s utility has garnered positive reviews in contemporary conflict (the two conventional Gulf Wars) as its precision capabilities have improved. Yet even with complete mastery of the air over Iraq, Afghanistan, and other ongoing campaigns, airpower has not yet proved that it can deliver decisive effects.

These reservations notwithstanding, Phillip Meilinger has written a thoughtful and provocative book that warrants close attention from *JFQ*’s readership. The changing character of war suggests it may be worthwhile to use this book as a springboard for once again reexamining airpower’s potential contribution to multi-domain operations in the 21st century. *JFQ*

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