

2009

## Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict

Thomas Nichols

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Nichols, Thomas (2009) "Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 62 : No. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol62/iss1/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

possibility that democracies grow faster economically than other regimes and thus accumulate more resources in the long run. Such questions are minor, though, and the overall case is quite persuasive.

This book is a must for scholars of military effectiveness or civil-military relations. The statistical sections will satisfy researchers; they might be a bit difficult for general readers, but overall the work should interest a broad audience of national security professionals. Desch's writing is excellent throughout, with lively case studies and clear explanations of his theories and results.

One hopes that policy makers will read this book. As Desch notes, democratic triumphalism has become popular in Washington. The mistaken belief that democracy itself is a "force multiplier" could lead officials to underestimate the risks of U.S. interventions or to encourage unduly weak but democratic U.S. allies. Desch offers a warning that it is superior strategy, resources, and skill, not the magic bullet of democracy, that remain the keys to victory.

DAVID BURBACH  
*Naval War College*



Doyle, Michael. *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008. 200pp. \$24.95

Even before the United States and its allies embarked on war in Iraq in 2003, the question of whether it is acceptable to strike enemies without clear provocation was an increasingly vexing one to policy makers, academics, and legal experts. "Preemptive war" (attacking an enemy who is clearly about to strike

you first) has always been an acceptable response to a dire and clear threat. But "preventive war" (striking a potential enemy while circumstances are favorable to the attacker, or striking in early anticipation of a possible, or even only theoretical, threat) has traditionally been regarded in the international community as not only unwise but immoral.

In this slim, tightly reasoned volume, one of America's foremost foreign-policy thinkers tackles the problem of preventive war and reaches surprising conclusions. While rejecting the so-called Bush Doctrine, which putatively grants to the United States almost unlimited permission to attack almost any threat in any form, Doyle delivers a clear warning that the previous rules of war do not apply in the twenty-first century. Doyle struggles (as have other scholars in many nations over the past decade) to find criteria that would allow preventive attacks in an internationally acceptable framework. He settles on four criteria: lethality, likelihood, legitimacy, and legality.

The book is actually a collection of essays by four other scholars, who supply a foreword and criticism of Doyle's chapters, to which Doyle responds in a conclusion. The debate format is lively and makes this work a particularly useful tool for introducing students at advanced levels to the subject.

Although Doyle's prose is direct and clear, in places he makes overly structured arguments, and his attempt to set his four criteria into a matrix produces something more like a rigid template. Doyle certainly recognizes that the perception of a threat, versus the actual threat, is often idiosyncratic and affected by a slew of factors, but his

criteria are more likely to make sense after the fact than at the outset of action. The moral questions he raises are, and should be, crucial to policy makers, but his framework is more suitable as an after-action analysis than as a guide to preventive attack.

That said, *Striking First* is an excellent, thought-provoking, and highly readable volume, indispensable for both specialists and interested general readers. No future discussions of this problem (and there will be many) can afford to ignore Michael Doyle's contribution.

THOMAS NICHOLS  
Naval War College



Mahnken, Thomas G., and Joseph A. Maiolo, eds. *Strategic Studies: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 464pp. \$49.95

Tom Mahnken and Joseph Maiolo will not be unfamiliar to readers of the *Naval War College Review* or to students of strategy and policy. Mahnken, a former professor at the Naval War College, is currently visiting fellow and professorial lecturer in the Strategic Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies; Maiolo is a senior lecturer in war studies at King's College London. Seeking to enhance the teaching of this important subject, Mahnken and Maiolo have put together a collection of previously published essays on the theory and practice of strategic studies.

This collection is wide ranging, both topically and chronologically. It begins by examining the uses of strategic theory, with essays by Bernard Brodie, Lawrence Freedman, and William C.

Fuller, Jr. The second section examines the "classics," with selections from Sun Tzu, Basil Liddell Hart, and Thomas Schelling. A look at conventional warfare on land, sea, and air is found in the third section, in articles by Richard Overy, Brian Holden Reid (on J. F. C. Fuller), and Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman on airpower in Kosovo, along with a selection of Julian Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Nuclear strategy is not neglected, with a selection from Bernard Brodie's *The Absolute Weapon* and Albert Wohlstetter's famous article "Delicate Balance of Terror." The fifth, and by far the largest, section is on irregular warfare and small wars. The essays here are both new and old classics: T. E. Lawrence, Mao Tse-tung, David Galula, David Kilcullen, Andrew Mack (on big nations losing small wars), and Peter Neumann and M. L. R. Smith (on strategic terrorism). To conclude, there are essays by Andrew Krepinevich, Michael Evans, Colin Gray, Adam Roberts, and Hew Strachan (all since 2003), which engage the future of conflict and of strategy making.

One should not quibble too much with the editors' selections (or omissions); Mahnken and Maiolo acknowledge from the outset that space prevented them from including all they wished. Still, some readers may question the description of strategy that Mahnken and Maiolo offer in their introduction. By strategy they largely mean *military*, rather than national or grand, strategy, but they do not specify. In a collection such as this, a more precise explanation of strategy at the beginning would have been helpful for framing the collection's essays. Nonetheless, this text will be extremely useful as a starting point for