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A Focus on the On-Scene Commander

Frank M. Snyder

Bouchard, Joseph F. *Command in Crisis: Four Case Studies*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991. 325pp. \$45

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES that an international crisis would escalate into war as a result of tactical interactions between on-scene naval forces executing orders from national leaders trying to “manage” the crisis? Since war between the United States and the Soviet Union did not break out as a result of the many crises of the Cold War, a quick answer might be, “Escalation seems unlikely; at least it turned out that way.” The question, however, deserves a more thoughtful answer.

This book examines four major crises in which naval forces were used as instruments of national policy by both the United States and either the People’s Republic of China or the Soviet Union. The crises span fifteen years: the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1958, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and the crises during the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars.

The first two crises were triangular, involving two major powers and a client state of one of them. The second two were quadrilateral; that is, during a conventional war between two client states a crisis developed between the major powers. These narratives describe the way that U.S. national decision makers used on-scene forces as part of their strategy for “managing” the crises.

Regrettably there have been few accounts, aside from individual personal reminiscences, that deal in such a comprehensive way as this with the manner in which naval forces have been used during crises over the past forty years. Before we close the book on the Cold War, we should attempt to understand the many ways in which policy makers have tried to employ naval forces during the crises of that time, and to consider whether that employment may have increased the risk of escalation to war even though the determined intent of policy makers was to avoid it.

The good news is that these case studies allow one to gain some sense of the information available to decision makers, the strategic objectives on each side,

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the tasking assigned to on-scene commanders, and the manner in which the on-scene forces carried out their orders. The bad news is that the "analytical-inductive" scheme set up by the author to analyze his case studies is unduly complex, and to some extent irrelevant. The author's numerous and cumbersome questions may only distract the reader (as they did the author) from detecting some of the important lessons to be drawn from the case studies.

Bouchard's intent is admirable. Recognizing that the vast literature on "crisis management" has understandably focused on the pressures and uncertainties that face decision makers at the seat of government, he has focused our attention instead on how faithfully their national-level decisions have been translated into action by on-scene commanders. He points out some of the risks of escalation that were either not accounted for by national decision makers or were perhaps discounted by them, and describes the way that orders and reports may have been distorted by delay, by misunderstandings within our own chain of command, by misinterpretations of the intentions of the other side, and by plain old political-military tensions. But he does not speculate about whether the risk of escalation to war has been increased or decreased by the introduction of new technologies.

During forthcoming debates about inevitable draw-downs in military forces, the navy will undoubtedly argue that its importance should increase because of the obvious role that is played by the naval forces during crises. Bouchard believes that in much the same way that the Royal Navy served as an instrument of British foreign policy for three centuries before World War II, the U.S. Navy can be expected to thrive as an instrument of American foreign policy in the future.

But by what criteria should we evaluate the effectiveness and risks of using naval forces in performing that role? As these case studies illustrate, a crisis is a two-sided game: the effectiveness of each side depends on the actions taken by both. Yet, measures prudently taken to increase the security of one's own forces, for example, might easily be interpreted by an opponent as an immediate threat to the security of his.

Though these studies are useful and well-researched, there are details that we are still denied. For example, we are told repeatedly that during the 1973 crisis the orders restricting the movements of the Sixth Fleet were "extraordinarily rigid," giving the fleet commander "little or no room for tactical maneuver," and that the fleet commander several times sought permission "to move his ships" but was turned down. We are therefore dependent on the conclusions of the participants, rather than on the precise terms used to impose the restrictions and to request relaxations. What in fact did the messages say? What were the terms of the restrictions? What relaxations were proposed? What advice were the Joint Chiefs of Staff providing to the policy makers? The author leaves the impression that policy makers imposed unreasonable restrictions and remained

unpersuaded by reasonable requests. We do know what events took place, but even with the recollections of participants, we do not have the wording of orders or advice, so the record is incomplete.

To better appreciate the timing of decisions and the unfolding of events, this reader found it useful to establish a D-day for each crisis (the day that Quemoy was first shelled, the day that medium-range ballistic missiles were discovered in Cuba, the days when the Arab-Israeli wars began), and then relate all the decisions and events as having occurred so many days before or after that D-day.

For his analyses, Bouchard has developed a "stratified interaction model," which he claims offers a good description of the interactions during each crisis (an inflated claim). The model postulates that while orders and reports are passing vertically between the decision makers at different levels on each side of a crisis, these same decision makers are also interacting with corresponding decision makers on the other side of the crisis. He has identified three decision-making levels: political, strategic, and tactical (which war colleges and joint doctrinal publications now call the "strategic," "operations," and "tactical" levels respectively). The author's focus is on interactions at the tactical level; he does mention interactions at the political ("strategic") level, such as the use of the "hot line," but he makes no mention of interactions (if there were any during these four crises) at what he calls the strategic ("operational") level. Bouchard set out to identify the factors that would cause what he calls inadvertent escalation: "Any increase in the level or scope of violence in a crisis that was not directly ordered by national leaders or anticipated by them as being the likely result of their actions." None of the four cases he studies resulted in such an inadvertent escalation.

The author's analytical method asks eight related questions about each of the crises (actually, twenty-three questions, clustered into eight groups). The first three clusters are used to establish whether his "stratified interaction" model applies to each crisis. It would have been simpler to have made "stratified interaction" one of the criteria for the selection of the crises for study.

The first question inquires whether interactions at the tactical level resulted from *direct* or *indirect* control by the president and secretary of defense (the National Command Authorities). The author clearly accepts a conclusion which he claims has been reached repeatedly in studies of international crises: "that the success of crisis management is critically dependent upon top-level political authorities maintaining close control of the actions of their military forces." The nature of such "control," achieved or attempted by the National Command Authorities (NCA) over the actions of on-scene tactical commanders, is variously characterized by the author as being "positive," "direct," "real-time," "close," "monitored delegated," "autonomous delegated," "decentralized," "indirect," and "by negation." With the exception of "indirect control," these terms are defined vaguely by the author, if at all, yet they do convey a general

if imprecise sense of the limitations imposed by national-level decision makers over the authority of on-scene commanders.

Readers are likely to be misled by the author's definition of indirect control as exercised by the National Command Authorities. His definition includes standing orders and contingency plans, the contents of which would neither be approved nor fully known by policy makers. He gives operation orders the label "mission orders," which unfortunately can too easily be read as "mission-type" orders—an entirely different meaning than he intended. He includes rules of engagement as a form of indirect control, but since they are customarily approved by the NCA and then passed without modification to on-scene commanders, they are really a form of direct control. Bouchard finds that in his four case studies, "direct" control (undefined) was not generally used by the NCA, the command of military forces having already been delegated down a chain of command. What he may be trying to convey by "control" is that in specific crises, the normal discretion exercised by an on-scene commander is either withdrawn by the NCA or is modified significantly. Mechanisms available to the NCA for ordering such changes include operation orders, rules of engagement, or less formal communication—currently conveyed through the chairman, though at the time of these crises communication was through the Joint Chiefs of Staff or their executive agent, the Chief of Naval Operations.

The author, indeed, finds that the presidents in each of the four cases exercised command through channels that already existed: the Chief of Naval Operations as executive agent in the first two cases, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a collective body in the second two. The case studies illustrate that in any given crisis, the guidance of the NCA may extend to: allocation of forces to participate in the crisis, and the timing of their movement to the scene; the positioning of specific naval forces; the tasks (such as escort or quarantine) that the forces at the scene are to perform; the procedures to be employed (for boarding ships, for example); or the rules of engagement that spell out the circumstances in which the use of force is permissible.

What the author characterizes as "mechanisms" of control really reflect those specific aspects of an on-scene commander's discretion that (in a given crisis) the NCA determined were to be subject to restraint or modification. The author, however, prefers to characterize such restraints or modifications as degrees of control. He did find that during the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy and his advisors were forced by the immense scale of operations being conducted to focus their attention on particular operations, but did not attempt to control such operations while they were actually in progress. Bouchard concludes that the NCA attempted to exercise centralized control through a command system that he alleges was designed for decentralized control, but there is no discussion of this important idea.

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Is it possible to learn the wrong lessons about control? The author quotes the view of a senior naval officer that the most important lesson of the crisis during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war was that on-scene commanders should be left alone to position their forces in a way they feel is best. In that case, the “extremely dangerous threat” by the Soviet navy could have been effectively countered, as the author puts it, only by destroying Soviet launch platforms before they were able to fire their weapons. While that may be the lesson that naval officers hope that crisis managers would learn, the real lesson from that 1973 crisis for naval officers is that the National Command Authorities may in the future—as they did in 1973—be unwilling to grant an on-scene commander’s request for the freedom of maneuver he feels he needs.

While Bouchard has provided us with useful case studies that span fifteen years and clearly reflect the advances in the technologies of telecommunications, sensors, and missile guidance during that period, he has downplayed these advances even as his case studies illustrate them. The radio communication to the fleet during the 1958 crisis was based on manual encryption and slow single-channel teletype over high-frequency radio circuits. He points out the long delays in receiving messages. By the fourth crisis, in 1973, these methods had been replaced by on-line encryption of messages over multi-channel circuits at higher speeds, some of them over satellite circuits instead of high-frequency radio. Before another fifteen years would pass, it had become possible in one instance for an on-scene commander, during a shooting war in the Persian Gulf, to request a modification of the rules of engagement through the chain of command and receive the president’s decision within three minutes. Surely, such advances will serve to increase the degree of control that crisis managers will feel they can exercise over unfolding events.

Bouchard’s second question is whether tactical forces were tightly coupled, by which he means whether or not each side had good intelligence on the other’s forces and operations. His answer, unsurprisingly, is yes—that the forces of the major powers were “tightly coupled” during the four crises. He quotes Admiral Arleigh Burke, commenting on the 1958 Taiwan Straits crisis, as saying, “we sort of abided by rules of the other side, and they abided by our rules,” but Bouchard fails to pursue this idea. What does it take to discover the rules on the other side, and how do we make clear to them what our rules are? Do “crisis managers” encourage or discourage this process of discovery? These questions are not discussed.

Bouchard answers his own third question—whether tactical forces were used as political instruments—in the affirmative. The author supports the view that “military actions have to be coordinated with diplomatic actions in an integrated strategy for resolving the crisis acceptably without war,” yet throughout this work he labels the strategy pursued by national leaders as a “political-diplomatic” **strategy rather than diplomatic-military.**

The author touches briefly on one aspect of using naval forces for “signalling” during crises that merits more discussion. In describing the crisis of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the author alleges that the “Navy chain of command was not kept informed of the political and diplomatic aspects of the crisis,” and the “on-scene commanders lacked important information on the political context on the crisis and had to interpret Soviet behavior on the basis of the military and naval moves being made by Soviet forces.” The author concludes that on-scene commanders who lack information about the “political context” within which their forces are used for signalling purposes will be apt to interpret military moves only in a military context. This is an important point, because it is unlikely that any NCA will, without urging, share such information with on-scene commanders. Has its lack been serious enough to cause misjudgments on the part of on-scene commanders? The author does not say. Did the principal military advisors (a role now played by the chairman) have a responsibility to urge that dissemination occur? If there has been decoupling in the past because on-scene commanders did not understand the political context, should the chief military advisors share the blame? Bouchard goes so far as to conclude that an on-scene commander with an appreciation of the political objectives being pursued by national leaders could well decide to ignore orders that are inappropriate for the local situation and pursue a course of action that better supports crisis management efforts. He does note with approval that during the month prior to the 1967 war, the navy chain of command correctly estimated what the U.S. policy would be, and imposed suitable restrictions on fleet movements in the Mediterranean. There has been a long tradition (in the Royal Navy and our own) of informed and responsible employment of naval forces in the national interest.

Bouchard’s fourth question asks if tactical interactions became decoupled from the strategy being pursued at the political (strategic) level. Without specifically saying whether or not decoupling occurred, the author simply lists many potential causes for it that he feels were present during each crisis. In discussing the Cuban missile crisis, the author concludes that communications delays give rise to decoupling and degrade crisis management, a conclusion that may be justified but is not supported by the case studies. The reader should be warned that the author uses the terms “coupling” and “decoupling” both in a horizontal sense (between tactical forces of the two sides in a crisis) and in a vertical sense (between interactions at the tactical level and the crisis management strategy pursued at the political (“strategic”) level).

In the end, Bouchard—undermining the importance of the question—seems to be saying that vertical decoupling will not cause escalation. He concludes instead that “tactical-level military interactions normally will not escalate to war without a deliberate decision by national leaders,” and that the factors that cause national leaders to abandon diplomatic efforts and resort to war are by far the most important factors affecting escalation control efforts. He does not discuss

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whether or not the loss of or severe damage to major warships might become just such a factor. It is still possible to remember another naval incident during this same period—in the Tonkin Gulf—that had a great effect on both the executive and the legislature.

For his fifth question the author asks whether national leaders and on-scene commanders held different perceptions of the vulnerability of on-scene forces to preemptive attack. He finds that different perceptions did exist during the 1962 and 1973 crises. One of the important concepts used in the study, noted above, is that of the “crisis security dilemma”: that many of the “prudent precautions” each side might take to increase its own security could easily be interpreted by the other side as actions that decrease *its* security. Thus, when military forces are used for signalling purposes by crisis managers, it is possible that the actions taken by one side—either for signalling purposes or for the purpose of ensuring survival—could be interpreted by the other side as disclosing an intention to launch a preemptive attack. One of the author’s requirements for crisis stability is that “neither side has an incentive to launch a preemptive attack on the other side,” but he fails to see that there may *always* be an incentive (at least an argument) for preemption, and that stability exists when the incentive *not* to preempt exceeds that “to preempt.”

The sixth question attempts to identify the factors that inhibited the transmission to the strategic and political levels of any escalation that resulted from tactical-level decoupling. Bouchard finds the main inhibiting factors to be caution and prudence by on-scene commanders. The seventh question inquires whether political signals sent by military forces were misperceived. The author believes that in 1973, secretary of state Henry Kissinger did not properly perceive the intent of Soviet naval movements.

The final question deals with three specific types of politico-military tensions: those between political and military considerations, those between political assertions of control and the military desire for flexibility, and those between performance during crises and readiness for wartime missions. The author finds some tensions between political and military considerations in all four crises.

Likewise, Bouchard finds (but does not discuss) how tensions increased with each succeeding crisis between the political (“strategic”) assertion of top-level control and the desire by on-scene commanders for flexibility and initiative. The four crises, spaced about five years apart, can be read as showing some evolution in technology, an important subject that, as noted, the author does not discuss. Now that modern telecommunications systems have made it possible for crisis managers to engage in gunboat diplomacy in real time, can the responsibilities of on-scene commanders and commanding officers for the safety and survival of their commands still be reconciled with the risks created by advances in sensors and missile guidance systems?

As for tensions arising from the contention between performance of crisis missions and readiness for war, the author reports that peacetime crisis operations have sometimes been viewed as reducing the capability of forces to carry out their wartime missions and notes that prior to the early 1970s, the United States Navy did not conceive of peacetime missions as a category separate and distinct from wartime missions. Bouchard asserts that the view consistently and strongly held by navy leaders for over forty years, and central to navy thinking today, is that wartime missions have priority over and are the foundation of peacetime missions. Yet during each successive crisis he found (but again did not explore) a gradual lessening of concern by on-scene commanders that crisis operations reduced wartime readiness.

Readers who are comfortable with numerous lists will find sixteen of them in the introduction alone. As nearly all books do, this one contains some errors. For example, the use of "hot pursuit" is used when "immediate pursuit" is intended; the adjective "principal" is several times misspelled; CW (continuous wave) communications are equated both to radiotelegraph (which it is) and to radioteletype (which it is not); backlogs were blamed on a requirement for "on-line" encryption, when "off-line" was apparently meant; and CincLant is quoted as having been critical of the Defense Communications System during the Cuban missile crisis, whereas the criticism is misplaced because portable equipment, interservice incompatibility, lack of equipment, and lack of frequency coordination were then the responsibilities of the services.

Joseph Bouchard, an active duty naval officer with a doctorate in political science from Stanford, deserves our thanks for creating this study. The book was apparently derived in part from his doctoral dissertation and relies on numerous documents as well as interviews or correspondence with a large number of participants in the four case studies. In short, this is a useful text for anyone interested in understanding how command has been exercised during crises, if they focus on the four case studies and draw their own conclusions from them about what lessons we learn.