

Soviet-era Planning Holds Lessons for Modern US Middle East Strategy



By Matthew McInnis

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The Defense Department recently declassified a briefing Dr. David Crist prepared in 2020 on US war planning in the Middle East against the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1987. On this episode of Overwatch, Dr. Crist talks to ISW Research Director Matthew McInnis about this assessment and what it may reveal about a possible future conflict with Iran and strategic competition with Russia and China in the region.

Dr. David Crist is the Executive Director of the Joint Staff History and Research Office and an advisor to US Central Command Commander General Frank McKenzie. He is also the author of "The Twilight War" which is still considered a must-read for students of the US-Iran conflict since the 1979 revolution.

You can see the entire declassified briefing on the ISW website.

Matthew McInnis:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

My name is Matt McInnis, and I'm the Director of Research here at the Institute. We are very pleased to be joined today by Dr. David Crist, who serves as the Executive Director of the Joint Staff History and Research Office and as an advisor to US Central Commander General Frank McKenzie. He's also the author of *The Twilight War*, which is still considered a must-read for students of the US Iran conflict since the 1979 revolution. The Defense Department recently declassified a briefing Dr. Crist prepared last year for General McKenzie on US war planning in the Middle East against the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1987. Dr. Crist has agreed to talk with us about his assessment and what it may tell us about a possible future conflict with Iran, and even for a strategic competition with Russia and China in the region. You can see the entire briefing on the ISW website.

Matthew:

David, thank you so much for joining us today. To set the stage, can you tell us more about this briefing and how it came about?

David Crist:

Yeah. Thanks, Matt, and great to be here with you. It started as an analysis that General McKenzie asked for on looking at campaign planning, campaign designs in the central command region. And, in fact, broader through history, with an idea that as he looked post, with the idea of great power competition, a decrease in US resources in the Middle East as we pivot to the Pacific to examine essentially what CENTCOM's posture and campaign design should be for the central region. And so it was a paper I presented to him in a large part because it seemed to rhyme so much with the issues of today.

Matthew:

So if you can take us back to this time in the late 1970s, early 1980s, so what was driving US fears at this point in time? I mean, did we really think the Soviets were going to invade Iran?

David:

It seems a bit fanciful today when you look at it, and it was in fact for some planners at the time who never thought this was a realistic scenario. But if you look at the context of when this planning started, which was really amidst the Cold War, the prospect of a large war against the Soviet Union that would be global in nature. It was—the Iranian revolution had just happened, and nobody quite knew the way that was going to go. And there was

potential for the Tudeh party, which is a Communist party in Iran was quite strong at the time, and there was concern the Soviets would try to support them. There was concern the Soviets, who had just invaded Afghanistan in 1979, might actually try to do something to forestall potential Islamist subversion of their own Muslim population based on the Iranian revolution.

And of course, then there was the larger context of a Cold War. And under the Carter administration, there was a realization—Brzezinski famously said that he thought the Achilles heel of the West was the Middle East. In short that the Soviet Union could invade or take over Iran and thereby control access to Persian Gulf oil, and that was an indirect way of pressuring NATO and the West without ever having to go to war. So, he was very concerned that the Soviets would recognize this, try to see that the oil was a way of a sort of asymmetric strike back at the West. So, all of these issues were in play and uncertainty, of course, you don't know how the Iranian revolution is going to happen. And then you top it all off with Saddam's invasion of Iran, which adds one more layer of uncertainty, because what happens if the Iranians lose that war and fragment, and the potential for the Soviets to then come in to try to take advantage of it?

Matthew:

So, back then, what was the state of the US military in the region? Especially back in the late 70s, early 1980s, what would have been the biggest challenges for possible operations in that theater?

David:

Yeah, the US Central Command was called Sleepy Hollow at the time. It was, it's hard to believe now because it's the place where now 20 plus years worth of conflict. But at the time, it was, the US military was focused on Europe and the Pacific. Middle East was very much secondary. There was only one small American base in Bahrain at the time that supported the US Navy, the leased force. We had no other permanent bases in there. When it started, we hadn't even started constructing them. The allies, Saudi Arabia and the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] states were, we hadn't really worked with them. We weren't quite sure exactly how supportive they would be. They were standoffish with the United States. So, the challenges were pretty dramatic. You have no bases in the region, you have to deploy forces, there's the tyranny of time and distance. In other words, you have to deploy forces from the United States to get to the Middle East and then be prepared to fight, and you hope you get there before the Soviets have actually taken military action. Otherwise, you're deploying forces in the middle of a conflict, which is problematic. And again, there was minimal US commitment of forces. There was no assigned or allocated forces, to use a term, to the Middle East. So, any forces we had to use for the Middle East, for example, the 101st Airborne was one that, what had to come to the USN was also slated to go to Central Europe if there was a conflict there. So, how do you balance all that? So, it was really a, it was an economy of force theater at the time. It was a, and one of which the US did not have much permanent military presence.

Matthew:

So, all that considered, so what were the main features of US Central Command's plan to respond to an invasion? Can you describe to us a bit of this operational planning?

David:

Yeah, well, they settled on two concepts that they used to call horizontal and vertical escalation. And I'll take horizontal first. Horizontal was the idea of you expand the battle-space within Iran and outside of Iran. So, rather than strike back the Soviet Union directly, say from Persian Gulf bases, you would do indirect. You would do it from Turkey, you would do it from Pakistan, you'd do it from farther west, all to sort of confuse the Soviets on where our direction when it happened. And then within Iran itself, you would have sort of a depth plan, which was that you would have special forces that would go in very early in a campaign to try to disrupt and do sabotage

operations and develop an opposition against Iran with indigenous forces or what might be left of an Iranian military. And that would hopefully buy you some time for US forces who are coming from the United States to deploy either into the Gulf itself, if those bases were available or the conflict hadn't started, or farther west in Jordan and Egypt and Somalia and Sudan, and then from there, those would be mustering stations. In which case, you would use US air power to drive back the Soviet forces. Then you would exert forces farther east into the Gulf or into Iran proper, depending on the nature of the threat. Again, combined with attacks using other combatant commands. For example, Pacific command, then today PACOM, could construct, use strikes from Pakistan or from the Indian Ocean into Iran or EUCOM could do the same from Turkey. So, you would expand the conflict.

The vertical escalation is an interesting one, which was the idea of using nuclear weapons. And it's, I looked very hard at the planning for that, and I've found no dissenting views on the use of nuclear weapons. And they had a sort of a scale of different options that were presented. The lowest level was the passive option, which was use of man pack nuclear weapons that would be deployed with the special forces that would go in early in the campaign. They would be used to blow up mountain passes and logistics roads that the Soviets would need to enter into Iran or to resupply themselves, depending on if they're already in the country, all the way up to bringing in B-52s and nuclear weapons. And it was clear from at least the chairman's comments in about 1980-81, that if this, in the event of a large scale war with the Soviet Union, i.e. and Europe as well, that the forces we're never going to have the forces we commit to the Middle East, so nuclear weapons and regional surrogates, the Egyptians were considered key in that, would be the primary way that we try to deter the Soviets.

The deterrence is an interesting aspect because the intent behind all this was if you had enough unambiguous warning to the Soviet invasion or attack or a coup or whatever was going to precipitate an event, that you would then deploy forces into the region that were strong enough to hopefully deter Soviet with strong messaging from taking more aggressive action on Iran, but then what you would have the capability for fall-on forces actually decisively defeat them. And so there was a strong deterrence hope with this about initial phase of any campaign.

Matthew:

Yeah, I know I admitted I had a double-take when I first saw the discussion on nuclear weapons. I mean, we don't think about that very often in our current US planning. But back during the Cold War, it was almost a presumption that war could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. So, I mean, it's fascinating in this context.

David:

Yeah, a lot of the systems, we've since, especially the tactical nuclear weapons systems, we don't have in our inventory anymore. But at the time, it was integral to all conventional operations in Europe or in this case, in the Middle East.

Matthew:

So, going back to something you said earlier, time and distance were the main problems for CENTCOM back then. Could we be facing a similar challenge these days for future military operations there in the region? And how is CENTCOM preparing or hoping to manage these challenges in future conflicts?

David:

That's a great question. I think it gets to the crux of why the paper was done in the first place is that during the Cold War, the United States faced a significant problem, which was Soviet air power and their rocket forces. All of which could deny US access to eastern bases in the Gulf region: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman. Ones that we would hope to use or build out that would allow us to project forces into Iran in the event of a war. Those are all under the range of these Soviet missile or aircraft forces, so those could all be untenable. You couldn't intro-

duce forces in those in the middle of salvos of rockets. So, what CENTCOM did at the time is they developed a scheme of western bases. And these western bases were, as I mentioned earlier, were a string of different types of different capabilities.

David:

So there was a very large air base in what is today Northern Somaliland. There was bases in Egypt and Sudan, western Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and there was some hope that we could use bases in Israel too in the event of a conflict. And it was all designed to provide safe areas for introduction of US forces. Then we could exert our military power farther east once we got the rockets and aircraft under control or managed, neutralized. Well, in Iran today, you face a similar conundrum because Iran's rocket forces, which is their major strategic deterrent, their theater ballistic missiles, and short-range missiles and their plethora of different capabilities and this now growing UAS capability, which I would add to all that. It essentially, it forces the US in a very similar strategic conundrum, which is how do you introduce forces when they may or maintain forces in an area where they are quite vulnerable to these sorts of capabilities?

And so this has led CENTCOM to do a lot of thinking about basing west other areas and avenues that you could get after the Iranian problem without being so reliant on bases that are so vulnerable. The ones we have in the UAE or Bahrain today, Saudi Arabia, Qatar as well. And so all those are key bases to us, but they're also extremely vulnerable. And it's the exact same realization only to a very different adversary that we faced during the Cold War too within a high-end threat, but still presents the same problem of how do you introduce troops into the Middle East when they may be under attack or sustain them when they're under a rocket and aircraft attack?

Matthew:

So, what other parallels do you see between then and now?

David:

The real main one I see is CENTCOM is going back to being an economy of force theater. As we draw down our US forces, which is a conscious desire of this administration as it was in our last administration, to rebalance and reshift effort over to the Pacific. It means that in fact CENTCOM isn't going to have the four forces that they have operated with under the last 20 years, really, that are deployed to deal with whatever contingency emerges, primarily against Iran. So, what the US is going to face again is a similar problem we had in the Cold War, which is flowing forces from external, the United States for ground forces, perhaps the Pacific for Naval forces into an area once a crisis happens.

And so the concepts are very similar. It's the tyranny of time and distance. Can you deploy forces fast enough in the theater to, particularly in the case of Iran, to actually be able to get enough combat power in there and quickly impose your will on the Iranians? Or you're coming in piecemeal. You're coming into the bases and operating bases that are vulnerable to Iranian missile attack or UAS attack.

And again, the whole concept is how would you deploy forces quickly into the Middle East with the ability to then deter and fight against an adversary? We're in a better position than we were during the Cold War, because our basing infrastructure is better. We have a longterm relationship with the Arab countries in ways that we didn't have during the Cold War. So, all those are positives. But the fundamental concept of an economy of force theater, and then having to go 6,000-8,000 miles from where the forces are stationed in to deal with the contingency is a major issue. And it's the same logistics problem we faced 30 or 40 years ago.

Matthew:

So what can all this mean for our growing competition with China and Russia as their influence grows in the Middle East?

David:

It's—the competition with China and Russia are both interesting in the sense that what it puts the Middle East in is in the larger context of a global problem. Really, we've looked, the US Central Command and the United States has looked at Iran for example, or Iraq or Afghanistan, really, as a theater-only problem. Resources went to CENTCOM. CENTCOM was the one person who managed it, and frankly, it was one combatant commander. When you deal with Russia or specifically China, you're dealing with a problem that touches on every combatant command. And so CENTCOM is now not the sole theater, but one part of an entire linked of combatant commands to deal with a global problem. And so for CENTCOM, it's how do we get after, or how do we look at something we haven't had to look at for really since the Cold War, which is an external power using our capabilities within the Middle East to go after a power that's not in the region?

So in the case of China, it would be China's influence in Djibouti or China's influence in the Middle East, as far as influence. Their ability to get oil out of the region, which they're relying upon. All these kinds of things are, if you're dealing with a conflict with China, your focus is on maybe economic pressure, for example, on Arab states that might be sympathetic to the Chinese, preventing oil exports that they will need, these kinds of things. With Russia and China, it's competition of interest within the Central Asian states, which has really been the backwater for CENTCOM for almost its inception. So suddenly these areas that we hadn't focused on, suddenly become perhaps the more important areas to look at for long-term influence. So for a United States military in the Middle East, it really is a change of approach to how do you participate and to address a much larger global problem set, as opposed to, as I said, one that is entirely in your backyard, so to speak.

Matthew:

Well, thank you so much, David. This has been a fascinating conversation and thank you for joining us today. Again, the declassified slide presentation will be available on our website at understandingwar.org. This has been Overwatch. Thank you for joining us.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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