Ever wonder what escalation to nuclear war may look like? Given the propensity to transition from diplomacy to bullets, that ladder may be a very short one. And if it is that short, one could ask, it is ever worth it? Many will argue that it is never is. But the reality is, for better or for worse, that the “many” are not in charge. For some, diplomacy, even saber rattling, may not be enough. In some circumstances—say a NATO treaty violation—the case for military action may be very hard to resist. And if that first step toward armed conflict involves countering a Russian or Chinese incursion into disputed or even undisputed territory, then one can see that the nuclear card could be played should things go sour for one of the involved powers. Fortunately, cooler heads offer a means to forgo the path to nuclear war. One such person is Michael O’Hanlon who, in The Senkaku Paradox, offers a realistic alternative and an education in modern economics and warfare.

The Senkaku Paradox poses a scenario in which a U.S. administration faces an emboldened China and/or an aggressive Russia in pursuit of a power grab. Rather than all-out war, either may attempt to test U.S. resolve by taking a sliver of a Baltic State by force of arms or a disputed territory, such as the Senkaku Islands in the Pacific, claimed by both Japan and China. Bound by a NATO treaty in one instance and by similar allied commitments in the other, the U.S. would be obliged to respond. But what exactly should that response look like? Some would argue it should be a military enterprise because allies, treaties, and perhaps even the aggressor expect it to be so. But must such an incursion be faced solely with military strength? Not necessarily, O’Hanlon argues. Something different may, in fact, be more effective and more aligned to the magnitude of the aggression. The reason is that the Senkaku Islands or that village in Latvia is not worth an all-out military retaliation. Thus, the paradox: the reason to fight may be in the alliance and treaty commitments. The will do so may be there, but the effort to mount such an assault, the complexity, the cost, and the consequences to the U.S. do not meet the value of what was taken—especially not when an escalation to nuclear war is factored in. The strategic response to a fully committed military operation that satisfies allied commitments is, the author contends, a response that should be proportionate to what was lost.

O’Hanlon’s dissertation goes further to explain that the U.S. does not possess the military hegemony it owned in the 1990s. China has arisen economically and militarily. Russia, too, has recovered from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to become a worthy antagonist again. Both have access to technology that has closed the military gap with their primary foe, the U.S. In fact, although the U.S. continues to improve its military capability, technology acquisitions by nuclear-armed China and Russia have diminished the probability of American battlefield success in territories and waters far from its shores where logistics become problematic. The U.S. may be able to mount a military response in Eastern Europe or in the western Pacific, but it will be a difficult enterprise, will not be assured of success, will involve loss of life and assets, and could, under certain

Book Review

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The Senkaku Paradox: Risking Great Power War Over Small Stakes
Michael E. O’Hanlon

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circumstances, bring the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The recommendation O’Hanlon makes is to formulate a retaliatory action that accommodates the scale of the aggression. His action does not completely forgo military action, but instead, puts it in a supportive role rather than employing it as the primary response. U.S. retaliation to a small scale territorial aggression, so the author’s argument goes, should be considered carefully. There are other means besides bullets and cruise missiles. The other weapon is, for now, something that the U.S. can still brandish with great effect: it can wield a very hefty economic stick.

To support his contention that a costly military action is inadvisable when small stakes are involved, O’Hanlon provides a wonderful, easily understandable journey into military technology and its applications in the theater of war. As mentioned, the globalization of technology has all but eliminated U.S. air, naval, and ground forces hegemony. How that affects U.S. field operations is described from a comfortably high level that will be accessible to most readers. It is as interesting as it is cautionary. He focuses of course, on comparisons with Russian and Chinese assets, the two potential aggressors postulated in his initial argument of proportional response. The bonus here is that O’Hanlon is unafraid to predict what the future of military technology will look like. He must, because to make his case he must convince the reader to abandon the notion that the U.S. will easily and inevitably prevail in any military action. If the gap between U.S. enemies has closed, any military exercise, especially one far from U.S. shores and, in fact, proximal to the aggressor as O’Hanlon postulates, will be a difficult and costly venture. The trend is likely to continue with the U.S. in a continuous technology race with China and Russia for the foreseeable future.

O’Hanlon is a fearless analyst unafraid to predict what the conventional military comparison between the nuclear powers could look like in 40 years. He provides a very readable analysis of how the narrowing technology gap has affected the calculus of military response and the probability of success (the bits of statistics he presents should not dissuade the curious reader). In fact, in two appendices, O’Hanlon explains how he predicts such technological change and even grades himself on predictions he made of current military tech 10 years earlier in a separate publication (Incidentally, he gave himself an “A-”!)

Similarly, there is an equally digestible survey of the machinations of the world economy from the military perspective, and where the vulnerabilities of the U.S. economy lie. To me, this was a fascinating chapter because, as I suspect, the economy remains a black box of complication to most of us. This is not a very in-depth chapter nor does it contain any math, modeling, or even a few predictive economic equations. It is a high altitude overview, mainly focused on strategic materials useful for manufacturing the equipment that have implications in a conflict, but it also covers how these materials move around the globe to build the products we are so familiar with (computer technology being the most prominent). Again, China and Russia as the primary competitors are the focus of a comparison with the U.S. Here, O’Hanlon’s crystal ball is also invoked to help predict what the strategic economic landscape of 2040 will look like.

The end result: the military hegemony of the U.S. is not likely to assure success in faraway theaters now or 40 years hence. The world has already changed to meet current U.S. might and will continue to do so. Despite O’Hanlon’s predictions that U.S. prowess may prevail now or perhaps even in the future, it may pay dearly in the process. But in economics, the U.S. has a meaningful weapon it can leverage to inflict harm on an enemy that exceeds the gain of its aggression.

O’Hanlon does not propose that we totally abandon armed responses. Instead, he proposes other purposes for the armed forces that, together with economic strategies, would make continuing the aggression as difficult for the aggressor as it would be for the U.S. to respond. In short, the author proposes economic sanctions coupled to naval or ground interventions that are far from the Chinese or Russian mainland, and utilizing allied assistance that, for the most part, slow or curtail the flow of money or goods into either nation’s economy. This tactic takes the U.S. military effort far from the aggressor, stretching out the enemy’s assets and logistical efforts as far or farther from their homeland than those of the U.S. For China, that might mean slowing maritime freight (strategic minerals) out of Africa or the Middle East (oil for example), employing U.S. naval intervention to ultimately slow elements of the Chinese economy. Coupled to this would be economic sanctions imposed on the aggressor nation. Russia could expect the U.S. and its allies to purchase gas elsewhere. Incorporating the assistance of U.S. allies is key as they are more dependent on Russian supplies and, with their assistance, the economic noose can be tightened as much as is needed. This two pronged approach, while not necessarily immediately effective (in fact, it is unlikely to be), is proffered as a much more proportional response to a small stakes power grab by either U.S. rival and one more likely to be accepted politically.
at home and by U.S. allies, as long as the aggression is seen to be so serious that should it go unanswered it may preclude more significant aggression.

With this narrowly-focused problem, the added attraction of comparisons with the two major rivals of the U.S. for global political influence, and predictions of what the military strengths of the nation will be based on economic prowess in 2040, one has a supremely fascinating read made only more accessible by O’Hanlon’s gift of interesting expository writing. It is far from dry, to the point, and yes, comprehensible. It is thoroughly well-written from stem to stern. It is not a novel but it almost achieves the level of enjoyment one experiences when reading a good story. O’Hanlon is gifted. It is that simple.

O’Hanlon’s argument is presented in six chapters. The first two introduce and expand on the issue of proportionate response, while the third is a “crystal ball” chapter, projecting what the technological and military world of the great powers will look like in 20 years. Chapter four explains O’Hanlon’s limited military intervention, supported by his plan to introduce economic sanctions as described in chapter five, and the argument is completed by a final chapter of conclusions and recommendations. But that is not all. There is bonus material. O’Hanlon, who rightfully provides as much material to support his contention as possible included the two aforementioned appendices: one discussing military developments from 2000 to 2020 and one projecting the advances in military tech from 2020 to 2040. The first includes O’Hanlon’s self-assessment looking back on his predictions made in 2000, which he uses to imply that his clairvoyance about the next 20 years can be considered acceptably accurate.

These appendices are as well-written as the main text is. Moreover, the information they contain on military technology is fascinating. The author—avoiding a rabbit hole—emphasizes only key areas that are impactful to U.S. security. It is supportive of his arguments and simultaneously informative. His self-assessment of predicting military technological progress is also quite a learning experience. It goes without saying that showcasing the author’s predictive ability does not come off as a conceit (it was fun to read about), but is meant to illustrate how military progress is made, in what areas, and what those impacts are on field capability and the risk/benefit decision to initiate war. O’Hanlon has gifted the reader with an estimate of where the U.S. will be militarily in 40 years and thus how well it can perform against future Chinese and Russian forces in a real conflict. The conclusion, that the effort will be difficult, supports his contention for smart, strategic, thoughtful responses to small scale incursions designed to test U.S. and allied resolve—responses that may slow, divert, and perhaps even end the conflict before it can escalate towards a nuclear conclusion.

This fine discussion is supplemented with three black and white maps of potential areas of conflict, notably the Pacific, Indian, and European theaters. There are 39 full pages of notes followed by a nine-page index. I counted 13 useful tables, including those in the two appendices. That is all this book needs. It rests on the firm bedrock of good writing, persuasive arguments, some interesting data, a bit of statistics (again, do not fear) and the author’s broad understanding of political science and the logistics of warfare. Because it goes beyond just military strategy, the book is a resource. There may be precious little about nuclear weapons, but remember that a reason for the existence of this book is to present a policy to avoid escalation of a limited aggression by an adversary and the potential military escalation to a level where nuclear weapons may be considered.

Coincidentally, as I write this review, tensions between China and the U.S. over Taiwan have escalated. Twenty-six Chinese warplanes recently entered Taiwan’s air defense zone over a consecutive two-day period (January 2021). The Chinese apparently also carried out an exercise against the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier stationed in the area. A spokesperson for the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command indicated that this is a continued attempt by China to use its military as a “tool to intimidate.” China’s development of anti-ship missiles is no doubt fueling this muscle-flexing. This is a very harsh reminder that O’Hanlon is not speaking theoretically. The U.S. is facing a new reality in which potentially aggressive antidemocratic nations, fueled by their relatively newfound wealth, have become worthy battlefield opponents. O’Hanlon is trying to shake up old-school American thinking. We won’t necessarily win a fight far from our shores that are proximal to the enemy—or find it advisable to enter into it over small stakes (that may be obliterated in a full-scale response). We need to exploit our strengths: the economic clout of the U.S. and its allies. Together that power is much greater than China’s or Russia’s. With a shrewd supportive military response, a U.S. coalition can inflict enough economic damage to stem further aggression before the nuclear option is ever considered.