



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

**Improving Strategic Decision and
Senior-level Teamwork in U.S.
National Security Organizations**

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A Method for Improving Strategic Decisions and Senior-level Teamwork in U.S. National Security Organizations

By Dr. James Thomason and Mr. James Bexfield, FS, Institute for Defense Analyses

Making good decisions is hard. Good analysis helps, but it is not, and should not be, the sole basis for a decision. Good decisions consider non-quantifiable factors such as the value structure and experiences of the decision maker and those who serve as advisers. Incorporating these factors can be difficult as decision makers often have conflicting priorities and are confused by the contradictory inputs from staff. A method developed by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) that systemically captures these informed personal views to help decision makers better understand their own views on national security issues and where they fit relative to their peers, may prove immensely valuable. The Integrated Risk Assessment and Management Model (IRAMM) could be the answer to improving the decision-making process.

“This is what’s missing from our decision-making – IRAMM captured how I think about the world of national security threats. This voyage of self-discovery was the first time I thought at strategic levels about the big issues the country faces. I now have a better understanding of why I hold the views that I do. Comparing and defending my views to those of my peers resulted in some changes, but more importantly, helped me articulate my positions better.”

A senior decision maker who recently experienced the IRAMM process

The IRAMM structured interview and decision support process not only assists senior leaders in gaining a clearer understanding of their views and the views of their senior staff, it also helps build teamwork among the senior staff. This teamwork can generate imaginative solutions to challenging problems and promote the consistent application of organizational policies. IRAMM’s risk-based metrics are rigorous enough to support sound comparisons of alternative programs, postures, and policies that have clear links to administration priorities. The model enables subjectively informed risk-based assessments of the adequacy of current, mid-term, and longer term forces to address scenarios of concern to the leadership. Another benefit of the IRAMM structure is the national-level perspective it provides which makes it a useful tool for supporting the development, coordination, and implementation of national defense and security strategies, including the articulation of the resulting strategy to others.

How it works: IRAMM is a multi-step process that begins with the senior leader (sponsor) identifying the participants (usually senior staff); the major “Challenge Areas” the nation may face in the future, such as major combat operations (MCOs), irregular warfare, cyber warfare, homeland defense, etc.; and any special topics to be addressed in the interviews. The product of participant interviews are risk profiles with rationales, ideas for mitigating risk in the challenge areas, and insights on special topics. This is followed by a participant group discussion where differences are debated, promising solutions are evaluated, and, potentially, new perspectives are generated. Finally, these refined results are provided to the senior leader who uses them to inform future activities. The three major parts of the process are further described below:

The Interviews (1-1.5 hours): Each participant is interviewed individually. The interview begins with an overview of the process and background on the challenge areas.

- The participant (respondent) identifies scenarios for the first challenge area along with the likelihood they will occur and the military, economic, and political consequences to the nation if they do (with rationale), using as a basis the currently planned future force and asset structure and the IRAMM consequence scale.
- Next, the interviewer calculates strategic risk scores for all the scenarios in the first challenge area and uses a pairwise comparison technique to ensure the scores are consistent with respondent beliefs, with scores adjusted, as needed.
- The interviewer aggregates the scenario scores to produce a risk score for the first challenge area.
- The process above is repeated for the other challenge areas. Pairwise comparisons are again used to ensure internal consistency.
- Lastly, respondents are shown their risk profile and are asked for additional rationale supporting their views and comments on special topics. They are given the opportunity to suggest promising risk-mitigating solutions.

Several variants to the above process are available. For example, the entire process may be repeated to assess the risks associated with different capability, force posture, or policy options. Another variant explores the risk associated with scenarios being pre-specified by the sponsor, such as the DOD priority planning scenarios.

The Group Meeting (1-2 hours): Participants attend a group meeting to review results, either with or without the senior leader. Participants are provided with a short paper that contains a graph of their risk profile along with the non-attributed profiles of the others (see Figure 1) ¹ and the rationale and comments they provided in the interview for reference during the subsequent discussion. An IRAMM facilitator begins the discussion by reviewing the aggregate results² and summarizing the areas of agreement and disagreement with rationales. The rest of the meeting usually leads to lively, productive discussions of basic concepts and beliefs and results in the generation of promising program/policy options to mitigate strategic risks. It often results in respondents modifying their views, so they are able to adjust their initial scores and rationales prior to the results being provided to the senior leader.

¹ The example uses four challenge areas. Many different sets of challenge areas have been used in multiple IRAMM applications.

² These results are displayed without attribution. Figure 1 is an example on one such result with the blue line recolored gray.

Mean Risk Ranking

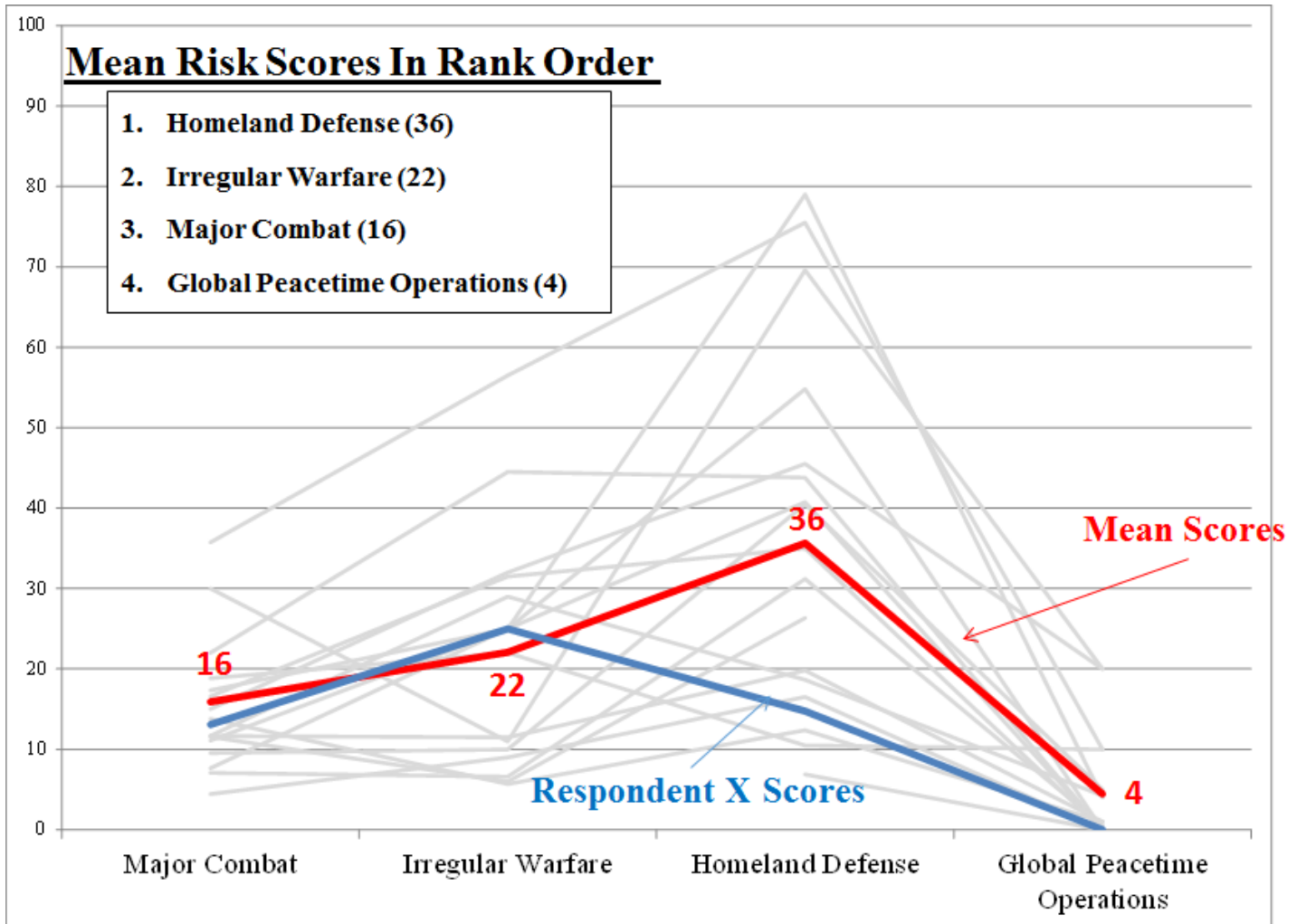


Figure 1: Example of a Respondent Risk Score in the Context of all Risk Scores

Provide Results to the Senior Leader: The senior leader is presented the results by the IRAMM team. The product includes an overview of the process, the mean score and the spread of scores for each challenge area, a summary of the rationales provided by the participants with areas of agreement and disagreement, new risk-mitigating solutions, and comments on special topics. The product is provided on a not-for-attribution basis with individual results by name known only by the IRAMM team and closely guarded. This is an important feature of the process that enables participants to express their true views. Subsequent actions by the senior leader have included requests for additional research to probe deeper into an area. Oftentimes, the rationale used to support participant inputs is found in official publications and the promising new alternatives identified in the interviews are explored in greater depth.

IRAMM Applications: IRAMM use has varied widely. Mr. Ken Krieg, then Director of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Program Analysis and Evaluation (now Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation), sponsored an IRAMM application to make senior level discussions more productive and efficient. He also valued the team building aspect of the application. General Peter Pace, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, used it to better understand the risk calculus of his combatant command commanders and other senior players. The National Commission on the Future of the Army used a tailored version of IRAMM to address systematically the

risk portion of their congressionally directed charter. They stated in their report that “IRAMM allows knowledgeable experts to express their views on strategic risk during one-on-one, not-for-attribution interviews.” Another use of IRAMM was in a study that prioritized national investments in strategic materials (including rare earths) for the White House and Congress. In this case, IRAMM was used to generate inputs for an optimization model (see Reference #2). In total, over 75 senior leaders in the U.S. national security community have utilized and participated in the IRAMM assessment process.

IRAMM provides a structure that senior leaders can use to think “strategically” and gain a clearer nationwide perspective of key challenges. Its risk-based approach produces both quantitative assessments and supporting rationales. Comparisons across respondents, enabled by strong consequence scales, enrich group discussions, strengthen understanding of issues, facilitate agreements among the staff, and help establish priorities.

*“I think this [IRAMM] process can serve as an important basis for you and your senior people to organize your thoughts and to identify, in the same language, areas of agreement and disagreement about capabilities worth protecting, items calling for further attention/investment, and candidates for selective disinvestment. In other words, it can help to elicit, tee up, and draw together for integrated discussions among senior players a variety of **possibilities** for strategy and risk-driven alternatives to salami slicing.”*

*Mr. Frank Carlucci, Secretary of Defense, 1987-1989, sharing the value of IRAMM
in a letter to then Secretary of Defense Hagel in May 2013*

IRAMM is a decision-support aid that supports subjective decisions required by the senior leadership. Its approach brings an enterprise-wide perspective by efficiently summarizing the views of senior advisors while ensuring they take advantage of the best available “objective” evidence from analyses and intelligence reports when articulating their views. These risk-based views can help senior leadership build a case for their decisions. The methodology also helps build and sustain strong teamwork among the senior staff in a manner that often generates creative solutions to problems, enhances understanding of priorities, and results in more consistent application of policy. In summary, it can help a leader do a better job running their organization.

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