



War Gamer in Chief: A Game Director's View of DEGRE 13¹

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Watching the members of the Red, Blue, and Green player cells sitting together in the brightly illuminated, horseshoe-shaped Decision Support Center at the U.S. Naval War College, I found myself mesmerized by their expressions. For the past three days, they had been fierce adversaries and erstwhile allies, launching wave after wave of brutal attacks against each other, or attempting to assuage the frazzled nerves of their partner nations. A flurry of strategic conventional, cyber, and space weapons exchanges had occurred, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, ships, and infrastructure. Vast swaths of natural, cultural, and agricultural resources had been obliterated, and harsh economic circumstances had unfolded.

Brought together for the final plenary session of the Deterrence and Escalation Game and Review 2013 (DEGRE 13), the 80 participants, representative of a wide range of military, economic, commercial, and political interests were charged with identifying what had gone wrong; specifically, they were left to discuss how such tragic outcomes could have been averted.

¹ The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of Defense.

Listening to the conversation of each game cell's leader, I was struck by the differences in their thinking. Isaacs (1999) affords us the appropriate scholarly context. He notes that the Red and Green cells' thinking in DEGRE 13 was indicative of closed systems; specifically, that "closed systems value tradition. They place community and history first and the individual second. A closed system regulates the life of its members, and respects the network or fabric of relationships within which people operate" (p. 218). Such thinking "allows interested parties to work *on* the system, and it allows everyone to recognize how they fit *in* the system (Hurst and Jorgensen, 2009, p. 67).

In contrast, Isaacs contends that the Blue cell's actions in this game represented an open system, favoring "learning through participation, democracy, pluralism, and collaboration" (p. 224). Ironically, it is the open system—not the closed one, that hamstrings itself by strictly adhering to the "tyranny of the process" (Isaacs, 1999, p. 225), namely its doctrine, policy, rules of engagement, and functional stovepipes. At its core, the Blue cell in the DEGRE 13 game represented fission-based thinking, whereas the closed system of the Red and Green cells was far more willing to value the richness of its combined resources in order to achieve efficacy—a vastly more fusion-oriented perspective. In short, the Blue cell saw the world from a fundamentally different perspective than either the Red cell or the Green cell. When the stakes are as high as nuclear escalation dynamics, we owe it to humanity to explore a broad range of perspectives, and to seek to listen and understand other stakeholders' perspectives in addition to our own.

Serving as a game director on projects such as the DEGRE 13 game has expanded my appreciation for non-linear thinking, particularly as such activities relate to problem solving and applied research. Much of what I have learned from this most recent game (as well as the three

previous years that I served as the DEGRE game director) has changed my perspective on the importance of understanding *process*, not merely the analytic outcomes that games produce.

Physicist Brian Greene (2011) defined *systems thinking* as the mathematics of understanding *processes*, not simply analyzing *products*. The DEGRE series has taught me that to be successful as a game director I must cast aside my desire to focus on content and outcomes, and instead seek to both listen to and understand the views of those around me. I must remain patient, gently working with the subtle forces that surround me in order to affect change. By connecting my team with this process-oriented approach, DEGRE 14 will likely generate far more meaningful and insightful findings than could be found in previous DEGRE war games.

References

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