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THE NUCLEAR THREAT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL POLICY.(U)
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STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE
US ARMY WAR COLLEGE
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THE NUCLEAR THREAT AS AN INSTRUMENT
OF NATIONAL POLICY

by

Colonel Ronald A. Roberge

8 March 1977

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FOREWORD

In this memorandum, the author views the threat of war or warlike acts as continuing to be an instrument of national policy for essentially all nations. He continues that, with the development of nuclear weaponry, this instrument of policy has been given a new perspective and importance. The nuclear strategy debate now emanates from a position of essential equivalence in nuclear capability between the United States and the Soviet Union, according to the author. He concludes that the dynamics of conflict escalation and perceptions of the threat of eventual escalation to general nuclear war are critical to a determination of the utility of the nuclear threat as an instrument of national policy.

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This memorandum was prepared as a contribution to the field of national security research and study. As such, it does not reflect the official view of the College, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.



DeWITT C. SMITH, JR.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

COLONEL RONALD A. ROBERGE has been Director of Nuclear Warfare Studies, Department of Military Strategy, Planning and Operations, since 1975. Prior to this assignment he spent three years on the Joint Staff as the primary staff officer for strategic nuclear policy matters. Colonel Roberge graduated from the US Military Academy and earned a master's degree in civil and nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has held various command and staff assignments in the United States and in Korea, Germany, and Vietnam.

THE NUCLEAR THREAT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATIONAL POLICY

At the advent of the nuclear era the initial perception of the utility of the new weapon was, as summed up by President Truman, somewhat simplistic.

*With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces.*¹

Fifteen years later Herman Kahn wrote:

*... we are increasingly aware that after living with nuclear bombs for fifteen years we still have a great deal to learn about the possible effects of a nuclear war. We have even more to learn about conducting international relations in a world in which force tends to be both increasingly more available and increasingly more dangerous to use, and therefore in practice increasingly unusable.*²

Still another 15 years have passed and while there is, to some extent, a better understanding and appreciation of the potential effects of a nuclear war, there is still uncertainty as to the true utility of nuclear weapons and the threat of their use in the conduct of international relations. Yet the world has survived the intervening 30

years without resort to nuclear war. What conditions prevailed and what decisions were made that allowed the world to conduct international relations and survive crisis of conflict under the shadow of nuclear war without triggering that war? What is the potential for another 30 years without nuclear war? Perhaps the world will continue to search unsuccessfully for an understanding of the utility of nuclear weapons as an instrument of national policy and continue to avoid their use. Or it might be that some nation will succeed in this search [or think they have] with the result, as some believe, that the world will see a nuclear weapon detonated in an act of aggression within the next 10 years. The proliferation of nuclear weapons makes the latter all too likely.

The potential for nuclear conflict is reinforced by the fact that the threat of war or warlike acts is today and will continue to be, for the foreseeable future, an instrument of national policy for essentially all members of the international community. For some, such as Switzerland, the threat is intended only to counter an actual act of military aggression against national territory. At the other end of the spectrum the threat of war is employed by the superpowers to protect their interests around the globe. The threat of war can be an effective instrument for both the defender and the aggressor. The basic intent of the defender in posing such a threat is to force a potential aggressor to recognize that whatever objective he seeks to attain has a cost associated with it. It is hoped that the resulting gain-risk calculation will lead the aggressor to abandon his objective completely or lead to a negotiated settlement of the conflict on terms acceptable to both parties. For the politically aggressive, the threat of war is used to deter interference with political or military moves designed to achieve a political objective. For the party contemplating interfering with the aggressor, the gain-risk calculation is employed to determine feasible and acceptable courses of action. Given the proliferation of effective military forces armed with modern implements of war and the fact that the risk will not always be perceived as outweighing the potential gain, there will be a temptation to solve international conflict through military means. Armed conflict thus becomes inevitable.

The problem then becomes one of how to employ the various elements of military power to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion. For the aggressor, the party initiating the military actions, this means attaining at least part of the initial objective so that some advantage can be shown and the use of force justified. For the defender

this might mean terminating the conflict with a minimum loss of territory and damage to his society, or, as a result of his own gain-risk calculation, he might be tempted to escalate to an objective of punishing the enemy for the aggression. Where national territorial integrity and only conventional forces are involved, the issues can usually be fairly well defined and the balance of force fairly accurately calculated. As the conflict moves into the global arena, where interests are ill defined and subject to change, the calculations involved in the gain-risk equation, even with only conventional forces involved, become exceedingly complex. The introduction of weapons of mass destruction into this equation changes dramatically the balance of force calculation and elevates even the localized conflict over territory to a level of uncertainty comparable to the global conflict between superpowers. Given the Soviet and US penchant for getting involved in local issues, all conflicts contain the potential for escalation to superpower confrontation and nuclear warfare.

Such is the dilemma the United States and the Soviet Union face today. As the champion of peace with a nuclear arsenal sufficient to devastate the world, the United States is apparently unable to employ the threat of war to protect its interests while the Soviet Union uses it to allow unopposed intervention around the globe. There is a lack of credibility in the perceived utility of nuclear forces as an instrument of US national policy in dealing with conflict prevention, control and termination. Because of the potential for collision of Soviet and US interests throughout the world and the subsequent threat of conflict escalation to a massive nuclear exchange, many believe that the utility of the threat of intervention with conventional forces shares this lack of credibility in perceived utility. In reality, the opposite may well be true. The threat of escalation may make the threat of war, to include the threat to employ nuclear weapons in a limited way, an effective instrument of national policy thereby allowing the United States to actively oppose Soviet intervention. If the United States is to continue as a primary power in the international arena, the problem of the utility of military power at all levels of the force spectrum must be solved. Of utmost importance is an understanding of the conditions under which nuclear weapons must be considered in the risk-gain calculation.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Recognizing that history does not provide absolute answers to the

problems of the present or the future, it might still be useful to draw some conclusions from conflicts of the past 30 years in which consideration was or could have been given to the threat of nuclear war. A concurrent review of the state of strategic relationships and attitudes toward the utility of the nuclear threat during the same period should provide insights of value in the exercise of projecting the utility of our nuclear arsenal into the future.

Actually the debate over the potential utility of nuclear weapons started even before the advent of the weapon in 1945. The issue of this debate was whether or not the atomic bombs that were to become available in 1945 should be used in an effort to terminate the war with Japan. At the center of the debate was the issue of the morality of the use of such an instrument of mass destruction against the civilian populace. This then led to discussions of appropriate targets, the forerunner of the countervalue-counterforce debate. An apparent compromise was reached when the targets finally selected were identified as industrial complexes critical to Japan's conduct of a protracted war. It can easily be imagined that, throughout the discussions, the apparent failure of strategic bombardment to bring the war with Germany to an early conclusion created uncertainty as to expected success of the venture. *Perhaps an invasion of the islands of Japan, which the US Army advocated, would still be required and the use of the atomic bomb would prove counterproductive by stiffening the resistance of the Japanese people and forcing a bloody battle to the last man. But hopefully the Japanese would choose surrender in lieu of facing the continued devastation of their cities and massive loss of life.* History records as a success the first and only use of nuclear force as an instrument of national policy. It should, however, be recognized that at the time the United States had a demonstrated overwhelming superiority of conventional warfighting capability and the Japanese could not have anticipated a more advantageous termination of the conflict.

The United States emerged from the war as the world's most powerful nation, without having suffered from the ravages of war. In his report to the Secretary of War in 1945, General Marshall stated: "For the first time since assuming this office six years ago, it is possible for me to report that the security of the United States is entirely in our own hands."³ Yet, despite the fact that in the years between 1945 and 1949 the United States was the sole custodian of the atomic bomb, this sense of euphoria could not be sustained.

As the United States dismantled its forces and looked to the United Nations to keep the peace, the Soviet Union replaced peaceful cooperation with hostility and intransigence. The nuclear debate was regenerated as the US policy of "containment" of Soviet expansion was spelled out. Doubts were expressed about the effectiveness of nuclear weapons in deterring Soviet aggression, particularly the expanding hegemony over Eastern Europe. Nuclear weapons were scarce and too costly to allow for a rapid expansion of the stockpile without some assurance as to the utility. In many circles there was little military or political importance attached to the new weapons because they were seen as a simple extension of conventional bombardment and everyone knew how that had failed as the ultimate weapon of World War II. Consideration was given to the possibility of fighting a tactical war on the ground with atomic weapons alone, but was considered infeasible because of lack of knowledge of weapons effectiveness in such a use. The utility of threatening a preemptive attack against the Soviet homeland using all available nuclear weapons was considered. In view of the American tradition of not starting wars, this was not considered to be a credible threat in the eyes of the Soviets.

Faced with these considerations, the United States was unable to pursue an aggressive policy throughout these years. When it had possessed a significant conventional capability as well as the bomb, the United States had been able to force Russia to back down in Iran in 1946. Russia, militarily strong but economically weak, withdrew because the United States and Great Britain demonstrated a level of resolve that threatened to end in war if Russia did not yield. It is difficult to say how much the uncertain threat of the atomic bomb entered into Soviet risk calculations, but it certainly must have been a factor leading to the conclusion that the objective was not worth the risk at that time. However, during the remaining years of the period, devoid of significant conventional capability yet retaining a monopoly in the bomb, the United States was unable to pose a credible threat of war as the Soviets embarked on aggressive programs in Europe with the coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade.

US leadership, while seeing no clear guarantee of military victory in the atomic bomb, saw no military alternative to containing Soviet expansion. The actions and declarations of the Truman administration further undermined the credibility of the weapon in a deterrent role by indicating that it would only be used in response to a major attack upon Western Europe. Truman's own view, which sums up the

uncertainties and contradictions of the time, has been quoted as follows:

I don't think we ought to use this thing unless we absolutely have to. It is a terrible thing to order the use of something that is so terribly destructive, destructive beyond anything we have ever had. You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses. So we have got to treat this differently from rifles and cannon and ordinary things like that.⁴

Thus, even while the basing of nuclear-capable B-29 strategic bombers in West Germany and Great Britain demonstrated the willingness of the United States to brandish and use this weapon,⁵ the administration developed alternative programs of economic aid and collective security to provide for the strategic defense of Western Europe.

Still the lure of finding some real value in the ultimate weapon continued to attract supporters. As the Berlin blockade ended in the spring of 1949, some American leaders could conclude that the brandishing of the nuclear threat in the form of an upgraded Strategic Air Command had deterred an approaching Soviet aggression. Thus the issue of reliance on these weapons was not totally settled on either practical or ethical terms when the US monopoly was eliminated by a Russian A-bomb test in August 1949. This ushered in the period of expanding nuclear arsenals as the Soviets attempted to catch up and overtake the US lead in nuclear capability.

Despite its continued atomic advantage the United States chose to fight a conventional war in Korea. Following the North Korean attack in 1950, the war developed into the archetype of limited war with sanctuaries reciprocally respected in Manchuria, Japan, and Okinawa, as well as US shipping lanes. President Truman attempted to leave open the possibility that nuclear weapons might be used but Britain's Prime Minister Clement Attlee forced him to make a more explicit promise of abstention.⁶ There have been several reasons given for President Truman taking this course of action. One was that there were too few weapons to allow their use in Korea and still deal with the real threat in Europe. The US Government was concerned that the Korean War was a feint preceeding a major attack in Europe. Another was that there were not suitable targets for such weapons of mass destruction, no strategic bombardment targets, and that tactical nuclear doctrine had not been developed to the point that these weapons could be used with

confidence in the tactical role. A third reason was that, since the Soviets had nuclear weapons, the United States was faced with the reality of mutual deterrence. The real reason may well have been a moral reluctance to use the weapon for the second time against an Asiatic nation.

Whatever the reason for US abstention, the war was terminated on terms advantageous to the United States in that the Communist forces failed to achieve their objective. If the United States had perceived it to be in its interest to punish North Korea through conquest, the Soviet Union might have had to face the question of the utility of its own nuclear capability. Yet, by failing to come to the assistance of its ally during the dark days preceding the intervention of China, the Soviet Union perhaps was signalling that it had opted out of a conflict that had turned into a protracted confrontation with the United States, instead of resulting in the expected easy victory. To face a nuclear power with a completed act of aggression poses a significantly different situation for the employment of the threat of war and nuclear confrontation. The defender who is fighting for his or his allies' survival, where the threatened or actual use of all the military capability at his disposal can be justified, becomes the attacker where the risk of nuclear war may not be balanced by expected gains. Perhaps, in the end, the threat of nuclear war implicit in the nuclear capability of the two superpowers is what forced the conflict to the negotiating table.

Given the fact of US nuclear superiority at the time, it may well have been that the utility of the nuclear threat lay in keeping the other nuclear power from becoming actively engaged in the conflict, thus avoiding direct confrontation and the threat of escalation of the war. This then allowed the United States to create a favorable conventional military imbalance and win a conventional victory and negotiated peace. That there was never any question in the minds of US leaders and people that neither North Korea nor China were any match for the United States may have influenced the decision not to use nuclear weapons. The splendid victories of World War II were still vivid in the minds of the American people, especially the military. At the same time, the overwhelming threat of Soviet land power in Central Europe tended to create an overall balance of US nuclear capability. The possibility of losing Western Europe certainly acted as a deterrent to a US nuclear attack, of the scale that could be mounted in 1951, on the Soviet Union.

As the nuclear debate entered the mid-1950's, the US position on

the utility of nuclear weapons hardened. Reflecting the nation's disaffection with the Korean War, the continued intransigence of North Korea, and the rising costs of maintaining adequate conventional forces, the Eisenhower Administration made the decision to place greater reliance on the first use of nuclear weapons. In the words of one White House advisor:

The President made it clear from the beginning that defense strategy plans were to recognize the existence of atomic weapons and the fact they would be used if needed. There was no hesitation in his mind. He became irritated with plans based on any assumption these weapons were not to be used. In effect, he told these people, 'This isn't a debate any longer; we must face fact.' He was very clear on the point that strategy and budgets be developed on that decision.⁷

Nuclear deterrence was extended in 1953 with warnings to the Chinese Communists that nuclear weapons might be used if they did not terminate their role in the Korean War and with the deployment of missiles to Okinawa capable of delivering nuclear warheads to Chinese targets.⁸ Without the means to escalate effectively their role in the Korean War, which had reached a stalemate, and recognizing the willingness of the United States to accept a negotiated truce, this final move by the United States may well have influenced the Communist Chinese decision to move the war to the negotiating table.

The new reliance on nuclear weapons was further reinforced by the cancellation of a programed expansion of conventional army forces in the fall of 1953. President Eisenhower also approved a National Security Council recommendation that nuclear weapons be included in all contingency plans, even for small aggression in Europe. This move gave official recognition to a proposal of General Omar Bradley, who as early as 1949, had urged the development and acquisition of tactical nuclear weapons on the assumption that their use would increase the firepower of Western forces and, therefore, presumably balance the superior numbers of the Russian Army.⁹ This also provided a hedge against the possibility that nuclear weapons might not be decisive in the strategic sense by providing for their use directly on the battlefield, to win a military victory. The buildup of tactical nuclear forces in Europe followed.

In January of 1954, Secretary of State Dulles delivered his famous massive retaliation message. Based on an overwhelming American superiority in nuclear weapons, the world was warned that the United

States had made the decision in military planning to "depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate, instantly by means and at places of our choosing."¹⁰ Thus was the threat of escalation introduced as an element critical to the military balance. This issue has become central to the debate on the utility of nuclear weapons.

The next test of the effectiveness of nuclear weapons as an instrument of national policy came in 1956 with the invasion of the Suez Canal area by Great Britain and France. Only this time it was the Soviet Union with its growing nuclear capability who rattled its missiles. The Soviet Union threatened to bring its medium-range atomic missiles to bear if the invasion did not cease. What should have been a local confrontation escalated to a potential US-Soviet confrontation when the United States responded by alerting the Strategic Air Command and deployed bombers to forward bases.¹¹ While maintaining this posture, the United States forced its allies to abandon the aggression. One might well ask what role the nuclear threat played in the final outcome. The potential for escalation in which the United States might be forced to rescue two important allies from nuclear blackmail may well have influenced the early US intervention. However, the Soviet rocket threat probably had less influence on the British and French withdrawal than the pressures their ally brought to bear, such as withholding currency support in the face of a run on sterling.

As the debate entered the 1960's, the famed "missile gap" tended to undermine the strategy of massive retaliation. The issues became more sophisticated as it became apparent that each major power had the capability to devastate the other completely. The threat to use strategic nuclear forces lost credibility as a deterrent to local aggression and even to Soviet aggression in Western Europe. The tactical nuclear weapons already deployed to Europe now posed a dilemma to both sides with the implied threat of escalation to strategic nuclear war. Thus both sides were very careful not to get into confrontation with each other over the Berlin crisis early in President Kennedy's administration. Consequently, the emerging nuclear strategy put less emphasis on the first use of strategic nuclear weapons but did not renounce it. The total military strategy called for a flexible response capability and placed renewed emphasis on conventional capabilities.

The Cuban missile crisis provided the first test of this strategy before it could be fully supported with changes in conventional force posture. However, the location of Cuba gave the United States a far

greater capability than the Soviets to escalate with conventional force. The confrontation was conducted under the threat of mutual annihilation as expressed in open threats by both sides if either stepped outside of an ill-defined concept of operation. The United States threatened the use of its massive retaliatory power against the Soviet Union if a nuclear missile were launched from Cuba and the Soviet Union implied the same if the United States attempted to invade and conquer Cuba. Because of these mutual threats both nations proceeded with caution although, because of an obviously greater concern over the outcome, the United States was able to be more belligerent than the Soviet Union. In this case the nuclear threat was probably effective in defusing what, in earlier times, would most probably have ignited a war. Nations have gone to war over less. However, had the United States not had the capability to pose an overwhelming conventional threat to Cuba, the outcome may well have been different. As it turned out, the gain-risk calculation engaged in by both sides under the threat of nuclear war worked out to the advantage of the United States.

As the nuclear capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union moved toward parity in the late 1960's and 1970's, both nations, through their actions, expressed the desire to keep wars limited and avoid direct superpower confrontation. The nuclear debate centered on the question of how large a strategic retaliatory force should be and what combination of weapons systems would be needed in order to deter the Soviet Union from an attack on the United States and, if deterrence failed, assure a decisive retaliatory strike. The People's Republic of China acquired a limited nuclear capability during this period but, since this did not pose a significant threat to the United States, it did not impact on US nuclear strategy although it did have an impact on Soviet strategy.

Up to the present, the variations in the perceived value of nuclear weapons in international relations has been related to the comparable nuclear capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union. When only in the hands of the United States, these weapons were often perceived to have no impact in international relations except as a simple extension of a conventional threat of war and war-fighting capability. As the Soviet Union developed a capability but remained essentially inferior to the United States, the value of US weapons was perceived as applying mostly to balancing Soviet conventional capability, particularly in Central Europe. Their deterrent value in Europe and elsewhere was perceived by some as being based on the risk of

escalation to strategic nuclear war inherent in aggression leading to active Soviet-US confrontation. As the balance of nuclear power approaches and reaches parity or essential equivalence, it becomes possible that the deterrent value for anything except a strategic exchange will be cancelled out. Will a Soviet Union that believes it can fight and win a general nuclear war be deterred by the threat of escalation to that war? While it is not implausible that Communist China was deterred from an attack in Taiwan or Korea by the threat of nuclear attacks, will a nuclear armed China count the same threat as credible? The nuclear threat has had apparent utility as an instrument of national policy in the past. Can that utility be maintained in the future?

THE PRESENT AND BEYOND

Today, if asked to identify the most urgent nuclear issue facing the world, most people would probably echo the words of Congressman Clement J. Zablocki. In the foreword to the report on Congressional hearings on the Vladivostok Accord, Congressman Zablocki stated:

No issue facing the world today is more urgent than that of reaching meaningful agreements which limit strategic nuclear weapons. Only when such agreements are achieved can the world be free of the fear of war; without them the prospect of global devastation will always remain a looming threat.¹²

There can certainly be no argument with the desirability of establishing some meaningful limitations on strategic nuclear weapons, but to what purpose is debatable. An agreement that is reached to stabilize nuclear arms competition and avoid the economic burden of a runaway arms race would be of value. An agreement that leads to a significant reduction of opposing strategic forces and especially one that precipitates a move toward elimination of these forces may not be particularly desirable because it may make general war more acceptable.

It is perhaps not particularly advantageous to design a world that is free from the fear of war when there is still a possibility of waging war to attain political objectives. Would not the elimination of the prospect of global devastation simply make war more acceptable and therefore more feasible? If the threat of war does not contain an element of terror, then does not war itself to include general war become more available as an instrument of national policy? Perhaps the most urgent

issue is not to limit strategic nuclear weapons, but to understand the role of the nuclear threat as an instrument of national policy and to develop an appropriate supporting strategy: a strategy that takes into consideration the realities of the Soviet's nuclear capability and strategy.

The well-documented Soviet nuclear posture is capable of a devastating counterforce strike against the land-based strategic systems of the United States while retaining an assured countervalue strike. It is also capable of selective counterforce or countervalue strikes. In the tactical nuclear area the Soviets have sufficient systems in the field to insure that any nuclear battle the United States may initiate becomes a two-way street.

Soviet nuclear strategy seeks to enhance its conventional superiority by neutralizing the actual or threatened use of US nuclear weapons.

In the Soviet view the best available safeguards against such use are: [1] amassing sufficient Soviet strategic nuclear power to convince the US that attacks against the USSR cannot prevent a devastating Soviet response; [2] eschewing direct confrontation with the US that might trigger a nuclear strike; and [3] maintaining a declaratory strategy which emphasizes the probability that any nuclear conflict between the superpowers would escalate to massive intercontinental warfare.¹³

If this strategy is successful in rendering the US nuclear threat impotent, the Soviets would then be relatively free to apply military pressure in those areas of the world where they could insure a *preponderance of conventional military power*.

The United States now recognizes that its conflict with the Soviet Union must be waged as a political struggle primarily rather than purely a military struggle. In the political game of conflict escalation the threat of force plays a significant role, and can play a dominant role if the actual employment implied by the threat is perceived as credible and has the potential of leading to an unacceptable war. The threat of massive retaliation, while still credible as a deterrent threat against massive nuclear strikes on the United States, has no credibility and therefore no utility for any other purpose. Recognizing this fact and still hopeful of finding the right formula for maintaining the credibility of a nuclear threat, the United States has adopted a change in nuclear strategy. On January 10, 1974, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger announced that "there has taken place . . . a change in the strategies of the United States with regard to the hypothetical

employment of central strategic forces. A change in targeting strategy as it were."¹⁴ What he was referring to was a strategy, a targeting concept, that would provide for selective options against different sets of targets. These options hopefully could be of utility in conflict escalation across the broad range of possible political-military situations which could conceivably confront the United States. The potential for US-Soviet nuclear confrontation inherent in the proliferation of nuclear weapons to their client states certainly qualifies as one situation in which such options might have utility.

In his posture statement to Congress in February 1974, Secretary Schlesinger elaborated on this strategy:

Rather than massive options, we now want to provide the President with a wider set of much more selective targeting options. Through possession of such a visible capability, we hope to reinforce deterrence by removing the temptation for an adversary to consider any kind of nuclear attack. . . . But if, for whatever reason, deterrence should fail, we want to have the planning flexibility to be able to respond selectively to the attack in such a way as to [1] limit the chances of uncontrolled escalation, and [2] hit meaningful targets and with sufficient accuracy-yield combination to destroy only the intended target and to avoid widespread collateral damage.¹⁵

While the emphasis here is on deterrence of "any kind of nuclear attack," these options also provide for flexibility in the first use of nuclear weapons as a counter to conventional aggression. The United States position in this regard was most recently stated by Secretary Schlesinger. In discussing tactical nuclear capability Schlesinger has indicated that:

They help to deter a limited first-use of nuclear weapons by an opponent and along with the conventional and [strategic] nuclear forces help create a general deterrence against either conventional or nuclear aggression. Second, should deterrence fail, the tactical nuclear capabilities provide a source of nuclear options for defense other than the use of the strategic forces. Third, given our doctrine of flexible response, we do not preclude the use of nuclear weapons by the United States and its allies in order to prevent a successful aggression.¹⁶

The United States and the Soviet Union, based on their declaratory policies, appear to have embarked on mutually exclusive nuclear strategies. The Soviet strategy is to neutralize the threatened or actual use of US nuclear weapons thereby enhancing the utility of their

already substantial conventional capability. The United States seeks to enhance its conventional capability by making the first use of nuclear weapons in limited conflict a credible threat.

In attempting to adapt the nuclear force threat to a specific crisis or conflict, US employment options would have to provide for flexibility in either applying or withholding nuclear forces to achieve political-military objectives, rather than purely military objectives related to destruction of enemy forces in the field. The objective would be to terminate the conflict at the lowest level of violence consistent with US interests.

The primary purpose in posing a nuclear threat would be to focus on the will of the enemy, to force him to reconsider his actions, and to demonstrate that US capability and resolve to counter his aggression exceeds what he may have anticipated. The objective then is to induce a major shift in the perceptions of enemy political leaders about prospects for an early or easy victory by placing at risk enemy resources incommensurate with his potential gain. Giving the enemy pause to reconsider his actions could then provide the time and opportunity for diplomacy and might establish an atmosphere that would allow the United States to enter into negotiations with a situation that is not in the enemy's favor.

An enemy who has declared that any use of nuclear weapons leads automatically to massive strategic exchange would most certainly want to consider the consequences of his actions before continuing an aggression in the face of such a threat. Certainly there is nothing to prevent controlled responses to the first use by the United States, but that of itself requires a recalculation of the gain-risk equation on both sides, hopefully resulting in an acceptable change of objectives. As to a response with a massive strike against the United States, the ever present threat of massive US retaliation and the rationality of man and his desire for the survival of his society would weigh heavily against such an act of suicide unless the survival of that society were already in the balance.

The US strategy and the Soviet strategy can both be characterized as attempting to exploit the latent threat of escalation to achieve political objectives. The success of such a strategy is extremely sensitive to the significance of the political objective. This must be measured in terms of its perceived impact on the survival of the state, the preservation of its people, and the necessity for a world environment favorable to national objectives, and can only be determined as the conflict

develops. While execution of a limited nuclear option under these circumstances would at best be the least miserable of a poor set of choices available at the time, it certainly cannot be ruled out in advance.

CONCLUSIONS

The existence of nuclear weapons in the arsenals of the world's major powers and the eventual attainment of a nuclear capability by other nations are facts of life. It is also true that as nuclear capabilities have grown in destructive potential, policymakers have become less certain of the values in defense of which force can be justifiably used.

Yet the threat of war in world affairs remains enormously important and the relative strengths of the United States and the Soviet Union will continue to be determining factors in international politics even though neither can fully exploit its strength. The debate reduces to determining if the ultimate threat of nuclear war is needed to compensate for failure to anticipate and prevent political defeat that is perceived as threatening the survival of the United States as a free and independent nation in a favorable world environment.

If in fact nuclear weapons have deterred general war and if their initial use at any level of conflict is perceived to inevitably lead to general war, then would not their threatened use at a low level of conflict deter an aggression, political or military? Or if their initial use is not perceived to lead inevitably to general war could they then not be used in a limited way to stop a military aggression? Regardless of the answer each nation provides to these questions in developing a nuclear strategy, the United States and the Soviet Union cannot avoid the obvious conclusion that each side's nuclear posture will influence the other's actions in confrontations between them or with Communist China.

During the era of US superiority in nuclear capability the influence of this superiority was summarized by William R. Kintner:

Obviously we can solve few political problems by just projecting our superior nuclear posture. Our hydrogen bombs cannot prevent Egyptians, Indonesians, or South Vietnamese Buddhists from burning USIA libraries. However, the possession of strategic superiority, together with the threat that its possible use implies to Communist leaders, will put a restraint on the Soviet's instigation and exploitation of crisis.¹⁷

If the words "strategic superiority" are replaced by "strategic

parity," can the United States achieve the same degree of restraint on the Soviet's instigation and exploitation of crisis? And what if "strategic superiority" were to be replaced by "strategic inferiority"?

Without the threat of nuclear confrontation below the level of massive strategic exchange, there are many places in the world where the United States would be unable to counter effectively the superior conventional capability that the Soviet Union could bring to bear. In the past, the US position of strategic superiority has sufficed to dampen Soviet ardor for taking advantage of this situation even without an explicit threat of escalation to nuclear conflict. Under conditions of strategic parity the threat must be more explicit, secure in the knowledge that the shape of nuclear war can be influenced. Under conditions of strategic inferiority, the threat would be empty posturing.

The nuclear threat does have utility as an instrument of national policy but not as an act of desperation. The threat must be explicit and understood by the potential enemy early in the crisis development, before he is tempted by his gain-risk calculation to resort to war to achieve his political objectives. Only in this way can both general war *and* nuclear holocaust be avoided.

ENDNOTES

1. President Harry S. Truman announcing the use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima, August 6, 1945.
2. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, p. 3.
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an analysis of the impact of nuclear armaments on US national and military policy since World War II. After a short assessment of the potential for nuclear conflict, the immediate post-World War II years are reviewed with the conclusion that the threat of the atomic bomb was of little or no value for specific application during this period of US nuclear monopoly. The era of US superiority during the 1950's is assessed, to include discussions of the nuclear threat during the Korean conflict, the concept of massive retaliation of the mid-1950's, and a short review of the Suez crisis of 1956. The evidence supporting the efficacy of the nuclear threat remains inconclusive. As the debate enters the 1960's, and the move to parity or essential equivalence, the issues become more sophisticated. The Cuban Missile Crisis provided a theater for nuclear threats but Cuba's proximity to the United States gives conventional military power the major role. Because of the threat of escalation of a conflict to mutual annihilation, the United States and the Soviet Union tend to avoid direct political or military confrontation. Based on this, the nuclear threat appears to have great utility in deterring conflict but has less value in deterring initial aggression. In looking at the present and beyond, it becomes necessary to balance desires for some meaningful limitations on strategic nuclear weapons against the possibility that reduced levels of these forces may make general war more acceptable. US and USSR strategic nuclear policies are compared and assessed as to the support these policies provide to national objectives. It is concluded that the nuclear threat, as posed by both superpowers, does have utility as an instrument of national policy but not when employed as an act of desperation.

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