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The Role of Nuclear Weapons

Henry A. Kissinger

It is argued by many that the limitation of nuclear war is chimerical, that it is pointless to develop discriminating weapons if the opponent fails to follow suit, that death is as total if one is killed by a small nuclear weapon as by a large yield one. One of the difficulties about any debate on military problems in the nuclear age is that most of it depends on an assessment which cannot be proved definitely in advance of hostilities. No nuclear weapon having ever been used in wartime, except against an opponent without the ability to retaliate, it is not possible to prove conclusively what the consequences of a nuclear war would be. No one can demonstrate that a nuclear war can be kept limited with absolute certainty. It is clear however that the possibilities of keeping it limited are greatly enhanced by the ability to conduct military operations with discrimination and by bringing about an understanding that any conflict that may break out will be sought to be kept limited.

It is frequently argued that the concept of limited nuclear

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war is a contradiction in terms, that once nuclear weapons were used a war would become all-out whatever the protagonists' intentions. Neither side, it is maintained, will accept defeat without resorting to ever larger weapons. No limitation previously conceived will hold once military operations begin. It is important to distinguish, however, between objections which apply only to nuclear war and those which involve limited war in general. An enemy possessing nuclear weapons who is unwilling to accept defeat in a limited nuclear war may be equally unwilling to accept defeat in a conventional war. The reluctance to accept defeat seems to depend more on the objective in dispute than the weapons used to attain it. A Soviet conventional attack on Europe is more likely to unleash an all-out war than a Soviet nuclear attack on say Afghanistan. Moreover the primary problem of the West is not so much to defeat the Soviet Union as to deprive Soviet leaders of the belief that it can gain from aggression. Even if our military establishment enabled us only to achieve a military stalemate - the most likely result in a nuclear war - a great contribution to the security of the free world will have been made.

Moreover, in a war against a nuclear power the decision between conventional and nuclear weapons is not entirely up to us. An aggressor will always be able to shift to nuclear weapons even in a war which starts out as a conventional war, perhaps by using initially weapons of very low yield.

What then would be our possible rejoinders to the introduction of nuclear weapons into a limited conventional war, particularly if it were accompanied by a Soviet announcement that they would be used only against "tactical" targets or that only weapons of a certain size would be utilized? Two reactions are possible. We can either seek to deter the use of nuclear weapons by the threat of "massive retaliation," by reacting to any employment of using nuclear weapons by all-out war. Or we can respond by using nuclear weapons in turn, but within a framework designed to keep their employment limited.



Either course is subject to serious objections. The resort to all-out war would expose us to all the inhibitions of massive retaliation. Since an all-out war stakes the national substance, the decision to engage in it will depend less on the nature of the weapons employed by the enemy than on whether the provocation is considered "worth" a national catastrophe. And the judgment about whether the provocation warrants a final showdown will depend to a considerable degree on the importance which is attached to the area or the objective in dispute. Thus a Soviet attack on Western Europe with conventional forces may unleash an all-out war, while Soviet repression of satellite revolts with nuclear weapons may not. Even if nuclear weapons were employed against United States forces, say, in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, a resort to all-out war by us would not be a foregone conclusion. It is difficult to believe that we would rush into the cataclysm of a thermonuclear war to prevent the defeat of a few conventional divisions, particularly if the Soviet leaders showed their usual skill in presenting their challenge ambiguously.

Moreover, if we concede the first nuclear blow, we can be certain that nuclear weapons will always be used against us at a moment when we are most vulnerable, either physically or psychologically. In fact, the sudden introduction of nuclear weapons against a conventional force almost guarantees military success. Conventional forces must concentrate to be effective. The power of individual conventional weapons is so small, relatively, that they can hold a line or achieve a breakthrough only by massed firepower. But if troops are concentrated, they may supply the very incentive needed to tempt the opponent to use a nuclear weapons. Thus, in a conventional war against a nuclear power, the choice is between accepting military ineffectiveness by employing formations which have been dispersed as if nuclear weapons might be used, or courting disaster by concentrating forces. It may be argued that both sides will face the same problem and will labor under the same handicap. But the aggressor has the



advantage of initiative whether he uses conventional or nuclear weapons. Against a widely dispersed conventional defense, the task of even a dispersed conventional offensive is simplified, because the force required to overwhelm any given point is relatively small. And, if the aggressor suddenly resorts to nuclear weapons he may sweep all before him before effective retaliation can take place.

It is no different with the impact of nuclear technology on strategy. As long as nuclear war is considered by analogy to conventional war, strategy will be stymied by the incommensurability between the power of the new weapons and the rigidity of traditional tactics.

The tactics of conventional warfare were based on the same principle of specialization of functions which has given such a strong impetus to industrial technology. The fighting units were designed to inflict the greatest amount of destruction at the lowest possible loss to themselves, but they were completely dependent on service organizations for their supply, maintenance and equipment. Since the combat units had only a limited staying power when deprived of their logistic support, encirclement was the most efficient offensive tactic.

These tactics assumed that each side was in substantial control of the territory behind its battle zone and that the front was in effect a line without flanks. To be sure, in World War II deep thrusts by armored units were common. But they were in the nature of advancing the front line as far as the supply of fuel would carry the attacker. A tank force which lost contact with its supporting units or whose supporting units could not catch up with it sufficiently rapidly was totally vulnerable, as Germany learned during its Russian campaign. Because the supplies and ammunition for conventional war were too bulky to be stored in the immediate combat zone, conventional warfare placed a premium on interdiction campaigns against cities, communications centers and industrial installations.



But such tactics would produce appalling casualties in a nuclear war. Whatever the degree of disperison, a linear concept of defense would invite the aggressor to step up the power of his weapons to achieve a breakthrough. Limited nuclear war is unthinkable as long as the reliance on traditional tactics causes the most profitable targets to be identical with the largest centers of population.

The tactics for limited nuclear war should be based on small, highly mobile, self-contained units, relying largely on air transport even within the combat zone. The units should be small, because with nuclear weapons firepower does not depend on numbers and because a reduction in the size of the target will place an upper limit on the power of the weapons it is profitable to employ against it. The units must be mobile, because when anything that can be detected can be destroyed the ability to hide by constantly shifting position is an essential means of defense. The units should be self-contained, because the cumbersome supply system of World War II is far too vulnerable to interdiction. The proper analogy to limited nuclear war is not traditional land warfare, but naval strategy, in which self-contained units with great firepower gradually gain the upper hand by destroying their enemy counterparts without physically occupying territory or establishing a front-line.

While it is impossible to hold any given line with such tactics, they offer an excellent tool for depriving aggression of one of its objectives: to control territory. Small, mobile units with nuclear weapons are extremely useful for defeating their enemy counterparts or for the swift destruction of important objectives. They are not an efficient means for establishing political control. The Hungarian revolution of October and November 1956 demonstrated the difficulty faced even by a vastly superior army in attempting to dominate hostile territory. The Red Army finally had to concentrate twenty-two divisions in order to crush a



practically unarmed population. No such concentration is feasible in a nuclear war. Nuclear units of high mobility should, therefore, be used to make the countryside untenable for the invader. They should be supplemented by stationary defensive positions in deep shelters, immune to any but direct hits by the largest weapons to discourage sudden coups against cities.

A defense structure of this type would pose a very difficult problem for an aggressor. To defeat the opposing mobile units he would require highly mobile detachments of his own. To control hostile territory and reduce nuclear hedgehogs, he would have to utilize massive forces. Against determined opposition, it will prove very difficult to combine these two kinds of warfare. Stationary, well-protected hedgehogs should force the aggressor to concentrate his forces and to present a target for nuclear attack. Mobile nuclear units should be able to keep the enemy constantly off balance by never permitting him to consolidate any territorial gains and by destroying any concentration of his forces. If these tactics were coupled with rapid offensive thrusts by units of the defensive force deep into the aggressor's territory, which in Europe at least can be assumed to be hostile to the U.S.S.R., the Soviet Union might soon confront an untenable situation.

The ultimate aim should be units which carry to its conclusion the analogy between limited nuclear war and naval strategy. Since the mobile units will not be able to rely on a logistics system of the traditional type, they should be able to carry all their supplies and maintain their own equipment. A great deal of thought will have to be given to measures for reducing the bulkiness of equipment, particularly to developing a substitute for the internal combustion engine, whose demands for fuel and maintenance severely limit the range and staying power of mobile units. Since mobile nuclear units will often be operating deep within enemy territory, they will also have to acquire an understanding of political relationships, particularly of methods for organizing and supporting partisan activities. In short, the units for nuclear war should be



conceived to approximate a naval vessel as a self-contained tactical formation, but also to act as a political and military spearhead for disorganizing the enemy rear.

It is clear that units of this type cannot both remain mobile and capable of fighting conventional war. Without nuclear weapons they would not have the firepower to defend themselves, and the amount of ammunition required for conventional weapons would present almost insuperable logistic problems for mobile warfare. To be sure, it is possible to create dual-purpose forces, trained for both conventional and nuclear war. But whatever the training and weapons of such forces, they will find it very difficult to shift from conventional war to nuclear war on the opponent's initiative. While conducting "conventional" operations, even dual-purpose forces will have to establish an approximation to a continuous line and a specialized supply system. They would, therefore, be highly vulnerable to the sudden introduction of nuclear weapons by the enemy. The side which cedes the first nuclear blow to its opponent compounds the traditional disadvantage of the defensive with a deployment disastrous in nuclear war. The side which has the initiative, on the other hand, can disperse its formations before resorting to nuclear weapons. It will therefore be much less vulnerable to retaliation by its opponent. The only safe way for conducting a conventional war against a nuclear power is to have a reserve in the combat zone deployed for nuclear operations. But this, in turn, would transform conventional war among nuclear powers into the most unstable kind of warfare, because each side will constantly be tempted to anticipate its opponent in the first use of nuclear weapons.

But how can we be certain that an opponent will obey any limitations which we may seek to develop? It must be admitted that we cannot be certain. Any doctrine of limited war must be based on the assumption that both sides will be eager to avoid all-out war. If we cannot make all-out war an unattractive course, we will surely be confronted with it. If our readiness for all-out war is adequate,

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however, it does not end the range of our peril. The whole post-war period indicates that the diplomatic advantage goes to the power which can confront its opponent with contingencies from which he can extricate himself only by all-out war but to deter him from this step by an adequate retaliatory capability. The great pressure of Soviet conventional forces throughout this period was not that these were decisive but that they gave the Soviet Union an option which did not involve a holocaust. The increasing Soviet nuclear capability will lead to the neutralization of Eurasia unless we take steps to counter it and in a manner which does not involve the destruction of civilization.

The threat of nuclear attacks has been a feature of Soviet diplomacy over the past two years from Suez to the Syrian crisis to Lebanon. Unless the free world develops a military capability which offers other means of resistance than an all-out show-down, these threats will become increasingly plausible. Conversely if the Soviet Union fails to develop more discriminating weapons, it will face the same psychological dilemma as the West: a gap between its threats and the strategy it is willing to implement. We cannot base our defense on the assumption that the Soviet willingness to run the risks of all-out war exceeds our readiness to engage in limited defense. For such an attitude will make aggression certain and defense impossible. It is not for nothing that the Soviet Union has persistently pressed its ban the bomb campaign and is constantly engaged in diplomatic maneuvers to increase the West's inhibitions against nuclear resistance to Soviet aggression. For they understand very well that without nuclear weapons no resistance is possible at all.

One way of reducing these inhibitions is to extend the discrimination of nuclear weapons. This will be true even if by some miracle the West suddenly developed the spirit of sacrifice required for a substantial conventional capability. For now that the Soviet forces are equipped with nuclear weapons



a conventional war can remain non-nuclear only if we are prepared for nuclear conflict. Otherwise we might merely furnish an incentive for the Soviet Union to use nuclear weapons against our forces and insure their victory. In that case we would be faced again with all the dilemmas of massive retaliation. We would then have to decide whether the destruction of a few conventional Western divisions is "worth" the tens of millions of casualties of all-out war. Those who now argue that an all-out war can never be considered even in defense of our very existence are not very likely to change their attitude in such a situation. Our choice in short is between developing a spectrum of nuclear weapons or increasing sterility which may lead to impotence.

