

NOTES ON STRATEGY AND STATESMANSHIP

by Patrick J. Garrity



THE THIRD NUCLEAR AGE?

THE STORY IS TOLD ABOUT A YOUNG “WHIZ kid,” one of the civilian analysts and numbers-crunchers often associated with the RAND Corporation, who challenged what he regarded as the unsophisticated thinking of the uniformed U.S. military during the 1950s and '60s. The whiz kid got into an argument with a senior officer about future strategic war planning against the Soviet Union—the officer presumably shaking his head at the presumptuousness of this whipper-snapper who had never seen combat. “General,” the whiz kid interjected, “I’ve fought just as many nuclear wars as you have.”

Implicit in this clever rejoinder was the assumption that nuclear war, in some fundamental way, would be different from wars of the past—and that the whiz kid had given those differences considerable thought, much more so than the battle-experienced general. Indeed, thinking was the only way in which one actually hoped to “experience” a nuclear war, with the ultimate purpose of finding ways to deter it. A great deal of ink was spilled about nuclear policy during the Cold War—what one might call the First Nuclear Age—as public officials, military officers, and especially defense intellectuals tried to come to grips with the meaning of this apparently revolutionary technology.

Fortunately, we never had a real-world test of these analyses of nuclear policy, and the entire matter seemingly passed into the dustbin of history with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But now we see that this may not be the case. The competition among great powers has resumed (if it ever went away). We may console ourselves that, at least, we surely won’t face another Manichean Cold War, with Armageddon looming in the background. Yet the great powers—especially those revisionist powers dissatisfied

with the status quo—are still very much in the nuclear business. Russian strategic bombers are back flying near American, NATO, and Japanese airspace, and the Russian military has conducted large-scale nuclear exercises, reportedly including simulated strikes on Warsaw; while China is deploying a new generation of nuclear delivery vehicles.

Perhaps this is all just a bit of Cold War nostalgia or chest-thumping, for domestic purposes as well as for some cheap theater. But it may be worthwhile to dust off some of the old writings on nuclear policy to see what they have to say to us today. To be sure, much of this analysis was ahistorical, astrategic, and apolitical, and thus of questionable value. But a great amount of serious thought went into nuclear studies, and the results influenced decision-making at the highest levels. We may suspect that, at the very least, research from the First Nuclear Age identified certain key enduring questions and challenges that might serve as a guide for our own thinking and planning about nuclear security.

OF COURSE, THERE IS NO TURNING THE clock back to 1945 or 1965. The First Nuclear Age was superseded, if not supplanted, by a Second Nuclear Age, which we must also take into account. (Rod Lyon, a fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and executive editor of *The Strategist* blog, recently offered some interesting insights into the evolution of the “Second Nuclear Age” on that blog.) The defense strategist Keith B. Payne was one of the first to use the expression in his 1996 book, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*; the concept is most closely associated with Yale University’s Paul Bracken, author of *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age* (1999), who warned about

the destabilizing proliferation of technology in the post-Cold War era. Bracken was especially concerned about the combination of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles increasingly available to revisionist or rogue states, especially in Asia, where the security competition seemed to be heating up. According to Bracken, the Second Nuclear Age would be characterized by regional powers driven by nationalism rather than ideology; a willingness to use various kinds of weapons of mass destruction, not limited to nuclear weapons; fragile command and control systems; difficulties in communicating and bargaining with the West; and the possible diversion of resources by impoverished powers from conventional forces to permit greater nuclear capabilities. The great Second Nuclear Age fear was that the classically formulated deterrence doctrine, based on the assumption that both sides were rational actors, would not apply to states such as North Korea. To this, one might add the post-9/11 concern that nuclear weapons or other WMD might be developed by or fall into the hands of terrorists.

As concerns about Second Nuclear Age proliferation grew, so too did the fears that we might reach a “nuclear tipping point,” in which successful rogue-state proliferators would set off a chain of reaction (as it were) that would cause status-quo regional powers—such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—to go nuclear themselves. This brings us back to the questions and insights generated during the First Nuclear Age—modified to take into account the overlapping challenges of the Second. Certainly one could argue that the stakes, in terms of societal existence and national survival, are not quite as high as they were during the Cold War. But can we be sure?



WE MUST BEGIN WITH THE MOST BASIC set of questions: have nuclear weapons forever severed the link between politics and military strategy, thus making great power war impossible (or impossibly destructive if it does occur)? Or, is it possible for one side to gain meaningful political or military advantages by some means short of all-out war, without triggering nuclear Armageddon—through, for example, a successful first strike, escalation control, coercion, or arms-racing? Or, is there a different way of thinking about policy and strategy that makes sense of it all?

The course and outcome of the Cold War suggests some tentative, but by no means conclusive, answers to these basic questions. It appears that one side (the American-led coalition) was able to gain a decisive strategic advantage by successfully pursuing a long-term competitive approach across the spectrum of conflict and competition. The way in which the United States deployed and spoke about its nuclear posture—including strategic defensive weapons after 1983—was an integral part of this approach. American national security strategy sought to shape the political-military-economic environment in such a way that the Soviet bloc lost the ability to successfully compete in peacetime. The mere existence of nuclear weapons surely played a major factor in the Soviet decision not to resort to war as a way out of this dilemma. But in a more active sense, the American coalition used its nuclear policy and posture (offensive and defensive), first, to offset any Soviet attempt to develop war-winning nuclear capability, and second, along with other elements of national power, to place economic and technological burdens on the Soviet bloc with which the Soviet system could not cope.

Such general conclusions must be provisional, especially since Western strategy was by no means as smoothly conceived and executed as this high-level summary would suggest. We only had one opportunity to actually wage the Cold War (unlike the hundreds of computer simulations of a nuclear war, most of which turned out very badly for all concerned). Adjust any number of variables during the Cold War—such as better aim by an assassin—and the outcome might have been different. Looking forward, however, we do have a strategic template that may reasonably be applied by the United States to future great-power strategic challengers—one in which nuclear weapons matter without being used.

More particular questions were extensively explored during the First Nuclear Age that are also worth our remembering. Is nuclear deterrence—or, differently put, the balance of terror—inherently delicate or robust? Do military-technical factors create outsized opportunities (or pressures) for combatants to try to gain

nuclear advantages, especially through first use on the battlefield or a disarming strategic first strike? Early in the Cold War, Albert Wohlstetter famously worried about the latter possibility: that the vulnerability of U.S. nuclear forces might be such as to tempt the Soviets to strike first. This scenario suggested that one or both sides, during a crisis, might feel that they were in a use-or-lose situation. In later years, McGeorge Bundy insisted that the mere existence of nuclear weapons was sufficient to ensure that no political leader would ever contemplate such an action, however theoretically attractive it might be. This view was in turn challenged by another group of analysts, such as Scott Sagan, who argued that complex, “fail-safe” technological systems tend to behave in unexpected ways, leading to a loss of control, overriding the intentions of those who operate the system.

The Cold War record would seem to point towards the existential deterrence model, at least when it comes to dissuading powers from executing (or excessively fearing) bolt-out-of-the-blue nuclear attacks. But the force postures of various nuclear weapons states, including those of smaller nuclear powers, continue to change. For instance, the Russians and Chinese are taking steps to ensure the security of their nuclear forces against traditional forms of attack, while the American posture is certainly less robust, at least in terms of absolute numbers, than during the Cold War. At the same time, Russian and Chinese (and some American) analysts warn that precision-guided, stealthy, hypersonic conventional weapons—or cyber-attacks—may create opportunities (and pressures) for preemptive attacks against an opponent’s nuclear infrastructure, including its command and control, *without the use of nuclear weapons*. This potential first-strike vulnerability certainly applies to the capabilities of the smaller nuclear powers.

CAN NUCLEAR DETERRENCE BE EXTENDED? During the Cold War, the canonical question was whether the United States would risk Washington to protect Bonn or Paris. The history of NATO can in many ways be summarized as an ongoing policy struggle to answer that question in a credible way, one that neither put Washington at excessive risk nor left America’s European allies excessively exposed to Soviet conventional or limited nuclear attack. The policy struggle proved successful in the end, culminating in the decision in the early 1980s to deploy U.S. intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) in Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20 buildup and ensure the strategic “linkage” between America and its NATO allies. But this decision was a very near-run thing, as anti-nuclear forces in Europe and the United States almost derailed the process.

NATO’s boundaries have now been expanded considerably to the east. Although the fundamental issue of extended deterrence has not been posed quite as acutely as in the past, the background question remains, at least in theory. To what extent is the American security guarantee—which at least implicitly includes a nuclear component—now credible when it comes to Warsaw or Vilnius (or, at a stretch, Kiev)? And to what extent do traditional American allies, especially the Germans, *want* the nuclear guarantee to apply to the east? The same general issue applies to America’s East Asian allies, such as Japan, in light of China’s assertiveness and its growing conventional and nuclear capabilities. And it could apply to North Korea, if the DPRK acquires nuclear-armed ballistic missiles capable of reaching U.S. territory. It certainly applies to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and others, if Iran should become a nuclear weapons state. By the same token, to the extent that China acquires allies, is Beijing prepared to extend a nuclear guarantee to them (e.g., to Pakistan)? What implications does this have for the United States and increasingly friendly states such as India?

The answers to such questions, of course, will have a great deal to do with how the interrelated problems of the Second Nuclear Age play themselves out. During the Cold War, the French convinced themselves that the United States could not be depended on to sacrifice Washington for Paris, and thus that it was imperative for France to develop an independent nuclear capability. (There were other reasons for Charles de Gaulle to move in this direction, including the perceived need to recover French prestige.) France was the only Western-oriented power to do so, however. Britain’s nuclear forces remained closely integrated with those of NATO. Israel, which never declared that it had nuclear weapons, was a special case. But if Second Age nuclear threats grow along with those of re-emergent great power conflicts, nations such as Japan will certainly revisit their willingness to rely on an American nuclear guarantee.

DOES POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CULTURE matter? Much of the initial nuclear analysis in the United States during the First Nuclear Age assumed that both sides could be treated as “rational actors,” who viewed nuclear weapons and their political and military effects in much the same way. The rational-actor model pointed toward the emergence of a stable, or at least predictable, nuclear superpower relationship, and suggested that both sides would move towards secure, second-strike forces. As the Cold War went on, however, it became apparent that the Soviets (at least the Soviet mili-



tary) had a very distinct concept of “stability,” and thought differently than the United States about the strategic and warfighting utility of nuclear weapons. These differences were often thought to stem from the different historical experiences and ideologies of the two sides—that is, from a unique “strategic culture” or “operational code.” The degree to which these differences of perspective mattered—and especially whether the Soviets actually thought they could fight and win a nuclear war, as some Western analysts concluded—was a matter of considerable dispute, as was the entire concept of “strategic culture.”

Whatever the cause, the Soviet nuclear force posture, including its military doctrine, did not always conform to American notions of rationality. (The French too went in a different direction with their independent nuclear force.) Late in the Cold War the United States articulated a countervailing nuclear strategy, one designed specifically to take into account the distinct Soviet notion of nuclear warfare as well as the specific value structure of the Soviet leadership. This included making it known to Moscow that American nuclear forces had the capability of destroying, with high confidence, the ability of the Soviet Communist Party to maintain control of the USSR and its empire in the event of war; and of holding at risk whatever strategic nuclear forces that the Soviets might try to keep in reserve. The United States assumed that such threats had greater deterrent value, and credibility, than that of a retaliatory targeting policy that stressed the massive destruction of the Soviet population.

Today, Putin’s Russia seems to put considerable public emphasis on the importance of nuclear weapons in its overall security posture, but how this will play out remains unclear—is this merely an extension of the Soviet-era logic and culture, applied to a weakened Russian state, or is something different at work? The logic behind the development of China’s nuclear posture also seems to be changing; does this reflect deep cultural roots in Chinese thinking about strategy *writ large*, or merely an opportunistic response to China’s growing technological capability?

CAN NUCLEAR WAR BE LIMITED? OR, alternately, can a major war between two nuclear weapons states remain confined to non-nuclear weapons? After its stated reliance on massive nuclear retaliation

during the 1950s, the United States struggled to find ways in which it could apply military power effectively in the event of a major crisis or war, without bringing about a catastrophic nuclear exchange. It also sought to prevent the Soviets from applying military power selectively, thus compromising extended deterrence (Washington also feared that Soviet support of anti-Western insurgencies in critical areas outside of Western Europe might outflank and compromise NATO, without any direct conflict between the two sides). Ideally, the United States would have been able to exercise escalation dominance or control over the Soviets. That meant the development of sufficient American and allied capabilities, militarily or psychologically, at a given level of conflict, such that the USSR could not respond effectively. Moscow would then be left with no other recourse than resort to all-out nuclear use (which it would want to avoid, as being suicidal). The United States, for instance, explored or developed limited nuclear strike options designed to disrupt Soviet military operations, while leaving Soviet cities basically intact (at least in theory—in practice, this was not so easily accomplished). It also devised precision-guided weapons and ground maneuver forces that threatened to disrupt a Soviet invasion of Western Europe without NATO having to resort to nuclear weapons.

In retrospect, based on the results of extensive U.S. and allied war games at the time, and what knowledge we have been able to learn about actual Soviet military planning since, it seems very unlikely that an East-West conflict would have remained non-nuclear, and highly likely that it would have escalated into an all-out nuclear exchange. To be sure, civilian leaders on both sides undoubtedly would have tried to intervene to halt the escalatory process before that point was reached. It is not certain though that their respective military plans and postures would have allowed this, short of unilateral capitulation (which might have been impossible to bring about, in any case). Civilian and high-level military leaders on both sides were well aware of this likely outcome, a fact which undoubtedly induced considerable caution by those leaders during the Cold War. This supports the case that nuclear deterrence was relatively robust. Still, this fact did not stop the intense Cold War peacetime competition nor the search for effective, limited military options or work-arounds to the nuclear dilemma.

IN THE PRESENT CONTEXT, IT APPEARS THAT the United States, at least, does not take seriously the prospect of societal-threatening use of nuclear weapons by the great powers. Nor does it base its military planning on such a contingency. The notion of escalation dominance or control, when it comes to nuclear weapons at least, has largely disappeared from our strategic lexicon. It is certainly possible that Moscow and Beijing likewise assume that existential deterrence is the default condition, at least when it comes to the possibility of general nuclear war. But if so, do they believe that it is therefore possible to use conventional forces, or conduct limited nuclear operations, outside the United States proper, in the belief that they are immune from U.S. retaliatory nuclear strikes against their homeland? Russian nuclear exercises, and some statements by Putin and other Russian officials, seem to point in this direction. A plausible case can be made along these lines for China, as well. The evidence is not conclusive, however. We simply have never arrived at the point of testing the assumptions of the various parties. The reality of things, including the current state of the overall military balance, which still favors the U.S. and its allies, should not incline Moscow or Beijing to push matters too far up the escalatory ladder. But that may be based on rational-actor thinking. And circumstances may change.

The above list of questions raised by the First Nuclear Age is by no means exhaustive. Does deterrence work best by strategies of punishment or denial? Can arms control reduce the risk of nuclear war and temper great power competition? Can nuclear weapons be used coercively? (For those interested in working through these issues systematically, I recommend Lawrence Freedman’s authoritative summary, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, third edition [2003].)

I suppose these questions are obvious and, for those of us who qualify as Cold War veterans, perhaps a bit stale because they were exhaustively and exhaustingly considered at the time—without any definitive resolution (thankfully, one might add). But when one peruses current official U.S. policy pronouncements and the publications of today’s whiz kids, it is far from clear that these questions are receiving the attention they deserve.

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