Between Assured Destruction and Nuclear Victory: The Case for the “Mad-Plus” Posture*

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Nuclear strategy and nuclear war are neither pleasant nor easy to contemplate. They require thinking about the possibility of a horrendous loss of life, planning for an eventuality for which we have had no experience, and confronting a sequence of events that could destroy humanity. Over the years, contemplation of such matters has led many citizens to condemn nuclear deterrence as immoral and to call for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Modern day strategists have rejected nuclear abolition as both naive and dangerous. The knowledge of how to construct nuclear weapons, they have argued, cannot be uninvented even if their physical presence could be abolished; nor do the international political conditions exist that would permit their abolition. Unilateral nuclear disarmament could too easily subject the disarming nation to the political sway of another nuclear power. And even if each nation that had them were to abolish its nuclear weapons, all would still have to worry about the ever-present possibility of a covert attempt by others to rearm with them. This continuous danger would necessitate an international institution to police a nuclear disarmament pact, but historically the nations of the world have not proved capable of devising viable international political institutions of control.

Rather than reject nuclear weapons, strategists since World War II have divided into two distinct camps in their attempts to wrestle with nuclear strategy—the finite deterriers and the flexible responders.1 The former are commonly associated with assured destruction, countervalue or countercity targeting, and small nuclear forces; the latter, with war waged, limited nuclear options, counterforce targeting, and large nuclear forces. Finite deterriers have held to the position that what makes nuclear deterrence stable is the threat to destroy the cities of an adversary in a

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retaliatory blow. Because a second strike countervalue blow is sufficient, nuclear deterrence requires no counterforce capabilities and only a small number of nuclear weapons, as long as a portion of them are invulnerable to a first strike. The threat to devastate a potential attacker’s cities, even only a small number of them, is all that is required to dissuade him from attacking. And when both sides have an assured destruction capability, mutual assured destruction, or MAD, obtains and makes nuclear deterrence quite stable. Flexible responders argue that the threat to destroy cities in retaliation, when the adversary can do the same to the retaliator, has lost its credibility for dealing with a wide range of political/military contingencies and, therefore, that a range of options short of countercity blows is required to strengthen deterrence.

The finite deterrent position stresses that, because a nuclear war will likely get quickly out of control and involve massive numbers of explosions, limited nuclear options are superfluous at best and dangerous at worst. They are superfluous because they will have no utility in such an all-out war. They could not prevent cities from being devastated and can, therefore, serve no useful military or political purpose. They are dangerous because they foster the belief that nuclear war can be limited and, as a consequence, could make it appear less horrendous and hence more likely. The flexible response position stresses two counterpoints: first, in the era of mutual assured destruction, threats to retaliate massively against an adversary’s cities lack sufficient credibility to deter him from undertaking hostile acts against one’s allies; second, the threat of a retaliatory countercity blow, if it had to be implemented, would end all hope of quickly limiting and ending such a war short of total devastation to both.

In the last few years, as both the Americans and Russians have developed highly accurate, sophisticated, and ever larger numbers of nuclear forces, the difference between the two traditional camps has widened. The advance of technology and the growth in numbers have widened the gap because the flexible responders want to exploit further the potentialities for greater flexibility, while the finite deterriers fear a lowering of the restraints on nuclear use that the additional exploitation of flexibility could bring.

As a consequence, many finite deterriers no longer argue simply that a small number of nuclear weapons delivered on cities is sufficient for the stability of deterrence. Many now take the position that the only utility nuclear weapons possess is to deter the use of other nuclear weapons. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara has forcefully argued this position: “Having spent seven years as Secretary of Defense dealing with the problems unleashed by the initial nuclear chain reaction forty years ago, I do not believe we can avoid serious and unacceptable risk of nuclear war until we recognize—and until we base all our military plans, defense budgets, weapons deployments, and arms negotiations on the recognition—that nuclear weapons serve no military purpose whatsoever.
They are totally useless—except only to deter one’s opponent from using them.”

Similarly, several flexible responders now argue that nuclear wars can be successfully waged and won and that the best way to deter them and extend the American nuclear umbrella over its allies is to convince the adversary that one can indeed fight and win them. A prominent exponent of this view is Colin Gray, who has stated: “In order to extend deterrence credibly on behalf of distant allies, the United States needs both to be able to deny victory to the Soviet and—no less important—to avoid defeat itself. These requirements add up to a requirement for a capability to win wars.”

Thus, finite deterrers may be moving to the view that nuclear weapons have very limited military, and hence almost no political, utility because their initial use makes so little sense. Flexible responders may be turning from war wagers into war winners. The possibilities that have developed over the last ten years for greater flexibility in nuclear use have begun to drive both camps from their respective centers toward the extremes inherent in each.

In my view, both these camps miss the mark. On the one hand, finite deterrers are naive because they do not understand the effects on statecraft that the nuclear revolution has produced. Nuclear deterrence dissuades an adversary from taking actions other than simply using his nuclear weapons against another state that may or may not have them. Nuclear deterrence produces restraining effects that are based on the fear of nuclear war, but such effects extend far beyond simply dissuading initial nuclear use. With or without the McNamara position, finite deterrence severely downplays these larger political effects. On the other hand, the flexible responders, when they become obsessed with flexibility and move toward war winning, are also naive because they do not understand the effects on warfare that the nuclear revolution has produced. War waging has some specific but quite limited virtues for deterrence, escalation control, and damage limitation. War winning, however, is impossible precisely because of the fact that there is no defense now against all-out nuclear use and probably not for the foreseeable future. A nuclear war could therefore be controlled and won only if one side consciously chose to lose the war, an event as unlikely in the future as it has been rare or nonexistent in the past. It is not necessary to win a nuclear war in order to deter it; one has only to ensure that both are likely to lose it.

There is a reasonable position between these two extremes. It embodies elements of both finite deterrence and flexible response. In what follows, I etch this position out by treating in turn, first, the political effects of

nuclear deterrence and, second, the irrelevance for the stability of deterrence of symmetry in counterforce capabilities. I thus will lay the groundwork for a position between these two extremes by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the finite deterrent and flexible response positions, respectively, in the next two sections.

In the last section of this article, I conclude that if we think about nuclear strategy politically, we find that there is a viable position between the finite deterrent and flexible response positions that, for lack of a better term, I call the “MAD-plus” posture. It is one that relies heavily on the restraining effects of mutual assured destruction, but that favors some limited war-waging capability for both escalation-signaling and damage-limitation purposes. It favors some limited counterforce (what I later term “weak” counterforce) but not a “robust” counterforce capability that would undermine MAD. The purpose of a weak counterforce capability (which both the Americans and the Russians now have), or, better put, a targeting policy directed at soft military targets, is to avoid initial attacks on cities and thereby limit damage. The MAD-plus posture also favors some investment in command, control, communications, and intelligence (what is referred to as C³I) to preserve control in any nuclear war that starts out limited precisely for the purpose of keeping the war limited. Some C³I is necessary in order to maintain control over the nuclear exchanges and thereby buy enough time so that political leaders in both capitols can negotiate quickly to bring the limited war swiftly to an end. In essence, the MAD-plus posture is a hedge: it relies mainly on assured destruction but favors buying some limited options or flexibility for added insurance.

THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Nuclear weapons have political consequences that extend far beyond their military effects. Neither the assured destructors nor the flexible responders, however, accept this premise. Because the former argue that the only thing the possession of nuclear weapons does for a state is to prevent another state from using them against it, nuclear weapons dissuade only nuclear use and therefore only a small number are needed. Because the latter argue that a small number of nuclear weapons is sufficient neither to deter a nuclear attack nor to limit damage should one occur, a state needs a large number of them to deter attacks on itself and its allies and to limit damage to both should war occur. For the finite deterriers, only the civilian population of the adversary need be held hostage; for the war wagers, in addition to civilians, the adversary’s nuclear weapons, other military forces, command centers, and political control structures must be subject to devastation.

Oddly enough, from the same mistaken premise, they draw opposite conclusions. While the finite deterriers call for fewer of them and the war wagers for more of them, both share a common misunderstanding about the political role of nuclear weapons. Both have grossly underestimated
the powerful restraining effects that the possession of nuclear weapons have had on superpower statecraft and on that of the other states that possess them. Nuclear weapons do things other than simply prevent other states from using them. The existence of nuclear weapons not only dissuades nuclear use but also dampens down the likelihood of the use of conventional forces against an adversary that also possesses nuclear weapons or against a close nonnuclear ally of a nuclear state. Nuclear weapons have made a general war, either conventional or nuclear, between the superpowers and their associated clients less likely. Nuclear weapons make a superpower and its associated clients that are involved in a conventional war more careful than they would otherwise be about how they conduct it for fear of going beyond the permissible limits and provoking intervention by the other superpower. The threat of retaliation, the possibility of escalation, the concomitant risk that things could get out of control, and the knowledge that if they do all is lost—it is these four factors that have forced nuclear statesmen to be more cautious than their pre-World-War-II "conventional" predecessors.

Most wars have occurred because someone miscalculated but in a very particular way—either about what the opponent would do, what he could do, or what could be done to him. Stalin may have lost twenty million Russians in World War II, but he certainly did not expect that outcome when he made his deal with Hitler. Hitler may ultimately have been mad, but he was banking on a short war and Allied weakness. Bethmann Hollweg may have sought relief from imperial Germany's political and military encirclement by deliberately launching a Continental war, but he certainly did not seek a world war. In these cases and others, miscalculations occurred because someone was more certain about what would happen than they should have been and than events ultimately warranted.

The nuclear age does not encourage such miscalculations to arise out of such supposed certainties. The threat to both parties that matters could quickly get out of control, together with the horrendous costs that would be imposed on both if they did, has built in a bias in nuclear statecraft toward a degree of caution and restraint that, although it can never eradicate miscalculation, has, nevertheless, minimized it greatly. That is all we can expect. But that is significant. Nuclear weapons have narrowed the range of matters about which statesmen can be certain because they have widened the range of those over which uncertainty reigns. Ironically, miscalculation has decreased because uncertainty has increased. It is the potential for loss of control through escalation that has built into nuclear diplomacy a degree of uncertainty about the course of events that is greater than what once obtained. It is not so much the destruction that is assured, but that which could occur if matters got out of control, that is the basis for the MAD world in which we live today.

The existence of nuclear weapons has thus introduced a clear and pronounced restraint into the conduct of superpower diplomacy that has
affected world politics generally. Wars have continued to occur, certainly; but they have not escalated into a general one between the superpowers. Clearly crises have occurred because risks have been taken by the superpowers. We do not live in a risk-free world. But when excessive risk taking has resulted in crises, the potential for escalation has worked to defuse them. The Cuban missile crisis is a case in point. Khrushchev would clearly not have put offensive missiles into Cuba had he known that Kennedy would have reacted as forcefully as he did. He would not have knowingly and willingly put himself and his nation into the position of being humiliated, as both subsequently were. Once he saw how strong a stance Kennedy took, he backed down. But Kennedy, though insistent on getting the missiles out, also acted with restraint: he started with the least bellicose action to get the missiles out (the blockade) and did all that he could to help Khrushchev save some semblance of face, both done from his awareness of what a single misstep could bring.

The Cuban missile crisis must therefore be seen as the exception that proves the rule. Superpower statesmen have to calculate carefully because the costs of miscalculation are potentially so horrendous. Sometimes they make mistakes. But the last forty years of American-Russian relations have seen only one grievous one. And when one occurs, both nations have acted quickly to rectify it because each has a shared interest in avoiding an all-out confrontation. Each superpower will not cease testing the other, to see what it can get away with. But it will calculate as carefully as it can before it probes because it has to. Thus, nuclear deterrence can work to produce more probing actions but quick retreat if the probe hits steel. Since 1945, the "stability-instability paradox," well known to nuclear strategists, has worked more to dampen down undue risk taking by the superpowers with respect to whether they provoke crises and how they manage them than it has to embolden either to careless adventurism.⁴

Thus, because significant political effects flow from the possession of nuclear weapons, it is wrongheaded to argue either that the only function of nuclear weapons is to deter their use by another, or to assert that the capability to wage and win a nuclear war is necessary to deter it. Therefore, Robert McNamara is clearly wrong when he argues that nuclear weapons are "totally useless" except to deter another state from using them. The dampening down of risk-taking behavior in general, not simply initial nuclear use, flows from the existence of nuclear deterrence. So, too, is Colin Gray wrong when he argues that a denial of a Russian victory requires an American one. It is sufficient to demonstrate simply that the Soviet Union could not win a war and could suffer terribly if it persisted, even if the United States also lost it, to deter the Soviet Union. In the nuclear era, one nation does not have to win for the other

⁴ The term was first introduced by Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in The Balance of Power, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965). It refers to the fact that stability at the level of all-out nuclear war can produce instability at lower levels of violence.
to lose. Both can lose and therefore decide the risks are not worth taking. Thus, it is the generalized caution imposed on the superpowers by their mutual possession of a retaliatory capability that invalidates the claims of both the finite deterrers and the war wagers.\(^5\)

The fear that things could quickly get out of control, together with the costs involved if they do—these are what work to dissuade nuclear statesmen from taking undue risks. If escalation could be controlled, there would be no risk in escalating. In the nuclear era, it is precisely the potential for the loss of control that is the keystone of restraint and the essence of deterrence. In his final work, *War and Politics*, Bernard Brodie put the case well when he argued:

> We have ample reason to feel now that nuclear weapons do act critically to deter wars between the major powers, and not nuclear wars alone but any wars. That is really a very great gain. We should no doubt be hesitant about relinquishing it even if we could. We should not complain too much because the guarantee is not ironclad. It is the curious paradox of our time that one of the foremost factors making deterrence really work and work well is the lurking fear that in some massive confrontation crisis it might fail. Under these circumstances one does not tempt fate. If we were absolutely certain that nuclear deterrence would be 100 per cent effective against nuclear attack, then it would cease to have much if any deterrence value against non-nuclear wars, and the arguments of the conventional buildup schools would indeed finally make sense.\(^6\)

In short, what makes nuclear deterrence extend so far is the fear that it might not.

Finally, if nuclear weapons have these political effects, it is because of the destruction they can wreak and the way that they can do it. As Thomas Schelling put it many years ago, "Victory is no longer a prerequisite for hurting the enemy."\(^7\) One can now destroy the enemy without having first vanquished him. Nuclear weapons have therefore separated the power to hurt from the power to defeat, what Schelling called, respectively, "coercive power" and "brute force." Because each superpower has it within its power to absorb a first strike from the other and still retaliate with a large number of warheads, the incentive for striking first is low. Each, therefore, can destroy, but not disarm, the other. What is balanced in the nuclear age is the power to hurt, not the power to disarm. What has ultimately ended all wars, as Schelling reminded us, was not the military


defeat of the adversary but the ability to threaten credibly to destroy him after he was defeated militarily unless he surrendered. The outcome of the brute-force exchange had to occur first before the exercise of coercive power to bring surrender could come into play. What nuclear weapons have done is to reverse permanently the traditional sequence of warfare: it is no longer necessary to vanquish the enemy in order to be in the position of threatening to destroy him. The latter can be done now without the former.

This condition, assured destruction, leads to the following three propositions:

First, if you do not have to destroy the other fellow’s nuclear forces to devastate him, why bother?
Second, if you cannot destroy the other fellow’s capability to devastate you, why try?
Third, great disparities in offensive forces can be safely tolerated when the power to hurt, not the power to disarm, is what is being balanced. The balancing of terror, that is, is not highly sensitive to changes in the quantitative balance of forces as long as the attacker-to-target ratio is greater than one to one.\(^8\) With populations vulnerable, force ratios have less “force” than they once did. From a military standpoint, then, force ratio disparities are not worrisome. Militarily, it is not necessary to match forces; but, I shall argue later, there are political reasons for doing so—for having a rough parity in numbers of offensive forces.

Thus, the virtue of the assured destruction or finite deterrent school is that it reminds us of the fundamental condition of the nuclear era: as long as defense of populations is impossible, matching the adversary in the number of forces he has is not necessary. Its vice is that it is far too restrictive in its view of what nuclear weapons do in fact restrain and deter.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF COUNTERFORCE SYMMETRY

Is the flexible responder’s world, with its emphasis on war waging (if not winning) and counterforce targeting better than the finite deterrers MAD world, with its emphasis on limited forces and countervalue targeting? Is it better to be able to target only cities rather than to be able to knock out military forces? The answer is, It depends on what one means by counterforce, on what types of forces one wishes to knock out. If by a counterforce world we mean one in which any nuclear power possessed a first strike capability against any other nuclear power’s nuclear forces,

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clearly a MAD world is preferable. A true or “fully robust” counterforce world would be one in which all nuclear powers felt that each had an effective disarming capability. In a surprise attack, one adversary could knock out the other’s offensive (and potential retaliatory) forces. If we are interested in preventing the use of nuclear weapons, which we should be, the attempt to attain such a capability is insane. As Schelling once put it, “Military technology that puts a premium on haste in a crisis puts a premium on war itself.” A counterforce world would encourage speedy decisions, hasty actions, preemptive strategies, grandiose ambitions, aggressive foreign policies, and the like. Clearly a counterforce world lessens the political restraints on the physical use of nuclear force. It is desirable, therefore, that nuclear statesmen continue to feel insecure about defense against nuclear attack and about their own first strike capabilities and secure only about their own and their adversary’s retaliatory capabilities.

If a fully robust counterforce world is not desirable, is something short of it, what we might term a “weak” counterforce world, also undesirable? Is a world, that is, in which both sides possess considerable counterforce capabilities, but those still well short of a disarming capability, destabilizing? The answer to this question should be no simply because, no matter how extensive their counterforce capabilities are and no matter how great the asymmetry between them may be in this regard, neither side would be emboldened to strike first when the other would retain the capability to retaliate on its cities. Weak counterforce capabilities can and do exist in a MAD world. But that does not alter the fundamental condition of mutual vulnerability to which both superpowers are subject.

In order to develop this argument more fully, I will attack the position, first developed by Paul Nitze in 1976, that asserts that a perceived asymmetry in counterforce capability (in Russia’s favor) both weakens deterrence and puts the United States at a disadvantage in crises and intense bargaining situations. His argument received wide currency in the United States and was reflected in the Carter administration’s PD-59 and “countervailing strategy” pronouncements. As explained by then Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, the countervailing strategy held to the view that, although the United States did not believe that either nation could prevail militarily in a nuclear war, nevertheless, for the stability of deterrence and the advantageous resolution of crises, the United States had to strengthen significantly its own war-waging posture and thus “countervail” against the Soviet Union.

I begin with Nitze's argument because he stated the asymmetry position in the most extreme form. In his influential article, he argued:

In sum, the ability of U.S. nuclear power to destroy without question the bulk of Soviet industry and a large proportion of the Soviet population is by no means as clear as it once was, even if one assumes most of U.S. striking power to be available and directed to this end.

A more crucial test, however, is to consider the possible results of a large-scale nuclear exchange in which one side sought to destroy as much of the other side's striking power as possible, in order to leave itself in the strongest possible position after the exchange.13

Nitze was concerned about the potential postattack position of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. If the Russians could wipe out most of America's land-based missile forces in a first strike and if the Americans did not have the same capability to wipe out most of Russia's land-based missiles in a first strike, then the Soviet leaders might be tempted to launch an attack on America's land forces, but they would more likely be emboldened to take risks that they otherwise would not because they would be acting from a supposedly superior position. In short, argued Nitze, asymmetries in counterforce capabilities, even if MAD still obtained, could be destabilizing and produce a more dangerous world for the United States. The countervailing strategy picked up this line of reasoning when it argued:

The Soviet Union should entertain no illusion that by attacking our strategic nuclear forces, it could significantly reduce the damage it would suffer. Nonetheless, the state of the strategic balance after an initial exchange—measured both in absolute terms and in relation to the balance prior to the exchange—could be an important factor in the decision by one side to initiate a nuclear exchange. Thus, it is important—for the sake of deterrence—to be able to deny to the potential aggressor a fundamental and favorable shift in the strategic balance as a result of a nuclear exchange.14

Why, however, would asymmetries in counterforce capabilities be destabilizing if neither side had a robust or truly disarming counterforce capability? Why would the Russians attack land-based missiles when they could not get at the sea-based ones? Did the fact that the latter were invulnerable to a disarming attack not make the former, in effect, invulnerable also? The crux of Nitze's and presumably Brown's worry was this: the United States would be "self-deterred" from retaliating against Russian cities once it had suffered a massive strike against its land-based

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forces. It would not hit back at Russian cities because that would cause a retaliatory Russian strike against American cities. The United States would be left in the same position many argued it once was in the fifties with its policy of massive retaliation: shoot off everything or do nothing. After its disarming blow against the land-based forces then, the Soviet Union would be in a position to intimidate the United States. In order to remedy this potential for “self-deterrence,” the United States had to develop counterforce capabilities symmetrical to what the Soviet Union already had. America had, in short, to develop more of a war-waging capability in order to bolster deterrence.

The Nitze scenario and variants on it—and especially his call for the United States to develop a more formidable war-waging capability—received firm support from President Reagan’s Commission on Strategic Forces in its April 1983 report:

In order to deter such Soviet threats we must be able to put at risk those types of Soviet targets—including hardened ones such as military command bunkers and facilities, missile silos, nuclear weapons and other storage, and the rest—which the Soviet leaders have given every indication by their actions they value most, and which constitute their tools of control and power.

Effective deterrence of any Soviet temptation to threaten or launch a massive conventional or limited nuclear war thus requires us to have a comparable ability to destroy Soviet military targets, hardened and otherwise. . . . A one-sided strategic condition in which the Soviet Union could effectively destroy the whole range of strategic targets in the United States, but we could not effectively destroy a similar range of targets in the Soviet Union, would be extremely unstable over the long run.

. . . We must have a credible capability for controlled, prompt, limited attacks on hard targets ourselves. This capability casts a shadow over the calculus of Soviet risk-taking at any level of confrontation with the West.\(^{15}\)

Early in the Reagan administration, Secretary of Defense Weinberger’s call for the United States to be able to wage a “protracted” nuclear war through to a successful conclusion signified the final step in this line of reasoning. Under the early Reagan, America’s policy shifted from countervailing to prevailing, from war waging to war winning. The later Reagan administration backed off from war winning in its subsequent pronouncements, but it continued to invest considerable sums to procure a formidable war-waging capability. But whether it be for war waging or war winning, the rationale has been that because they (the Russians) have it, we need it. Is this the case? Why should symmetry in counterforce capabilities be necessary? Why must we be able to wage a nuclear war as effectively as some argue the Russians can and/or intend in order to

\(^{15}\) “Report of the President’s Commission on Strategic Forces” (April 1983, mimeographed), pp. 6, 16, 17.
deter it or in order to limit damage in it if it should occur? Is symmetry in war-fighting capabilities between the Russians and the Americans necessary for nuclear stability?

My judgment is no. I should like to offer seven reasons why I think the Nitze counterforce scenario, its many variants, and the entire symmetry-in-war-waging argument makes little military, and even less political, sense.

1. If the war wagers and counterforcers can argue that the United States would be deterred from attacking Russian cities in retaliation for a Russian first strike counterforce blow against America’s Minuteman force, why can the “MAD men” not argue that, similarly, they would likely be deterred from attacking the Minuteman missiles in the first place because they cannot be certain that we would not retaliate against any, a few, or all of their cities? If self-deterrence works to prevent us from retaliating, would not self-deterrence also work to prevent them from attacking? Why does self-deterrence work only for us and not for them?

2. If neither the United States nor the Soviet Union is prepared to threaten to attack cities, even if neither would ever want to execute that threat, then each cannot deter the other, no matter how effective their war-fighting capabilities are. To repeat, what provides restraint is the fear that things will get out of control and that all could be lost—both sides’ cities, that is—if caution is abandoned. The war wagers, however, argue that the Soviet leaders value their machinery and their mechanisms of political control more than they do their populace. They do not accept the MAD world logic. The conclusion, they assert, is that our threat to devastate their population carries little weight with them.

How, however, in reality, can that conclusion make any military or political sense? First, a significant percentage of Russian hard targets are located in or near cities so that extensive counterforce attacks would produce civilian casualties that would likely be indistinguishable from purely countervalue attacks.16 Colin Gray, for example, admits as much when he states: “Not only would one be assaulting the highest of Soviet values by counter-military targeting, and thereby minimizing if not removing entirely any Soviet incentives to exercise restraint, also one would be licensing a campaign that—if it were to be waged efficiently on both sides—would have to produce a vast amount of civilian damage. Both superpowers have very many military assets co-located with civilian society.”17 If extensive counterforce attacks would have much the same results for civilians as would pure population attacks, why do we need to fine tune our forces for hard target kills when we cannot avoid extensive civilian damage in the process? And would that be the best way for the

United States to limit damage to its civilians when the Russians know that American leaders value their populace highly? Second, would it not be extremely difficult to convince the Soviet leaders that limited counterforce strikes against military targets so colocated were aimed, not at their populace, but at them (or vice versa)? Is an attack on Moscow (or Washington) meant to be “only” decapitating, the precursor to a rolling or tit-for-tat exchange, or merely a one-time shot to show that we (or they) mean business? How could they (or we) know which was the case?

Third, finally, either extensive countervalue attacks or extensive counterforce attacks against the Soviet political mechanisms would kill so many Russian civilians that there would be little left to control! Political leaders do not value political control mechanisms per se; they value the power over others that such mechanisms yield. If there is no one left (or very few) to control, what, precisely, can be the point of the machinery for control? Surely mechanisms for control, apart from the objects of control, have little political meaning to those who possess them. Either type of attack, therefore, will eradicate the civilians. And since the leaders need the civilians to control, why go after them the hard way (counterforce) rather than the easy way (countervalue)? If there is logic to this argument, then the Soviet leaders must value their populace as much as American leaders do, even if they do so for different reasons. Thus, even the war wagers’ emphasis on control mechanisms leads one inexorably back to populations and to the logic of MAD.

3. Third, what will end the nuclear war as well as prevent it is the threat of wiping out cities. Who has more weapons left over after an extensive brute-force exchange or after a series of small exchanges is irrelevant to the conclusion of the war as long as each party can still devastate the other. Postattack calculations about throw weight ratios, warhead ratios, missile ratios, and the like, make little sense. What has always brought a war to a successful conclusion for one party or a draw for both is the need to settle in order to avoid further or extensive civilian deaths. It is hard to see how disparities in force sizes, however measured, will make any difference to war termination when both will surely retain enough forces to threaten however many cities each still retains intact.

4. The Nitze scenario of an extensive Russian first strike against American’s Minuteman force, although theoretically possible, glosses over the real and intractable operational difficulties the Soviet Union would have in executing such an attack. The fratricide problem alone makes the timing of such an attack inordinately complicated.18 Although no one would advocate such a posture unless there were no choice, the United States could always resort to a launch-on-warning or -on-attack posture. It is difficult to imagine a Communist Party chairman of the Soviet Union imagining that an American president would simply watch

the Russian missiles rain down on the United States. Would he not have to calculate that, if he shot at all of America’s land-based silos, he might in effect be shooting at empty ones?

5. A massive disarming strike against America’s Minuteman force would require something approaching 2,000 separate explosions. Would that be a truly limited and containable strike? Would a decision by the Soviet leaders to launch an attack of such magnitude not be equivalent to a declaration of World War III? Why would they go after America’s land-based forces when America’s sea-based forces remained intact? Are not land-based systems invulnerable because the sea-based ones are? Given the civilian casualties that an attack of such magnitude would have for the United States, could the Russian leaders seriously think that an American president would leave Russian cities intact? Why would they take such a risk? Why would they feel more emboldened in a crisis when such presumed capability carries such a high risk of an American counterresponse?

6. The United States today already possesses considerable counterforce capabilities and will, shortly, have even more. If these are to be used intelligently, that is, for deterrent purposes, they should be directed in our declaratory posture toward soft, not hard, military targets. If we ever need actually show that we are serious about escalation and if we want to hold our cities and theirs in hostage in the early phases of a nuclear war, surely limited counterforce attacks against credible, but containable, soft military targets is the least destabilizing counterforce posture available. If they ever were to occur, counterforce attacks should be limited and undertaken, not to disarm or to sever political control, but to demonstrate resolve in a way that still manages to limit the damage done.

7. Most of the above points have been directed to prewar deterrence. Should such a war occur, the best way to limit damage is not to institute extensive and wide-ranging counterforce attacks but, rather, to negotiate to stop the war immediately. The next best way is to limit any exchanges that may occur. The worst way to attempt to stop the war is to engage in massive counterforce exchanges that will heighten the incentives to preempt and that will, in any case, bring horrendous civilian deaths. And the deliberate, extensive targeting of Russian command, communications, control, and intelligence facilities is absurd. We (and they) need someone who is in control and with whom we can negotiate. We and they both require that someone remain in charge to limit the exchanges. In short, damage limitation does not require an extensive counterforce targeting capability. The execution of such a strategy on a large scale would likely produce the very results that it is intended to prevent—namely, extensive damage.

Beyond all these points lies a final one that renders the attempt to acquire a war-winning posture illusory. If a full-scale nuclear war is inherently uncontrollable, it is wasteful, if not absurd, to try to develop
fully the means to control it. Selectivity, protractedness, fine tuning, discrimination—all these are entities not likely to exist or persevere in a protracted nuclear war of any size. Desmond Ball has persuasively shown that command, control, and communications systems are inherently more vulnerable than the strategic forces themselves, for both the Americans and the Russians, and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. The consequence of this fact is that "the capability to exercise strict control and co-ordination would inevitably be lost relatively early in a nuclear exchange." Any nuclear war, then, once it begins and if it continues, is likely to get out of hand. As long as that condition obtains, the pursuit of the ability to conduct a fully controlled and sizeable nuclear war is a fool's chase. It is not that we should not take precautions to preserve some options for selectivity and controllability. These are prudent measures. But to believe that matters can, in fact, be controlled and to operate under that assumption is wrong. The probability that things will get quickly out of control remains uncertain enough that gambling it will not is foolhardy. Because that is so, we are driven back to the MAD world of deterrence, almost, that is, but not quite.

THE CASE FOR THE "MAD-PLUS" POSTURE

Is there, then, nothing at all to be said for war waging, even after we have thrown out both war winning and symmetry in counterforce capabilities? Is finite deterrence, with its emphasis on small nuclear forces and countervalue targeting, the only sensible posture to take? Are there valid reasons why it is sensible not to have a nuclear force that is dramatically smaller in size than one's adversary's? Are there valid reasons to have some limited war-waging capabilities? I believe there are valid reasons both to match roughly one's adversary in numbers and to have a limited war-waging capability, though I stress the word "limited." I offer three reasons.

First, what makes military sense in the nuclear age—the absence of a compelling need to match exactly the adversary in the number of nuclear forces he possesses—makes little political sense for the two superpowers because their nuclear forces are used to protect territories other than merely their own. The logic of finite deterrence is impeccable for the restricted case of an attack on a superpower's homeland. (This is often referred to as type 1 deterrence, deterrence of an attack only on one's own territory.) For as long as a percentage of one's forces is invulnerable to a first strike, the adversary's cities can be held hostage to retaliation by a relatively small number of weapons. To deter one su-

superpower from attacking only it directly, therefore, the other superpower needs to have a force merely some fractional size of the former's.

What works for type 1 deterrence, however, has not proved politically feasible for type 2 deterrence. The latter encompasses the difficult problem of "extended deterrence," that is, extending the protection of each superpower's nuclear umbrella over its nonnuclear and small nuclear allies. The political imperatives that are rooted in these type 2 deterrent uses of their nuclear forces have pushed the superpowers to maintain a rough equivalence in the sizes of their forces and sometimes to strive for a superiority, that is, for a disarming or robust counterforce capability. For extended deterrent purposes, like it or not, if one superpower has a force dramatically smaller than the other, it looks weaker to the allies over whom the superpower's nuclear umbrella is being extended. Simply put, America's allies, especially the NATO allies, would feel better with an American superiority, bad with an American inferiority, and can tolerate an American equality with the Soviet Union. For the superpowers who have extended deterrent uses for their nuclear forces, the military logic of finite deterrence for the type 1 case is not sufficient for the political logic of alliance management inherent in the type 2 case, no matter how "illogical" the logic of the extended deterrent world may seem. Political concerns, therefore, dictate that having a small nuclear force when one's superpower adversary has a large one is politically disadvantageous and hence untenable. One of the underpinnings of finite deterrence—that large disparities in force sizes do not matter—does not hold.20

Second, finite deterrence has difficulties handling escalation scenarios that involve competitions in risk taking. Although it is true that, strictly speaking, what happens on the battlefield is not central to the outcome of any nuclear war that may begin, it is not totally irrelevant. To see the force of this argument, we must distinguish between how nuclear weapons are initially used and what subsequently happens on the battlefield.

In the nuclear era, it is the case that defeat on the battlefield cannot easily, if at all, be translated into victory in the war simply because the side that has suffered a temporary battlefield loss can always up the ante

20. I do not accept the converse, however: that an American nuclear superiority—a robust or disarming counterforce capability—would "solve" the problems inherent in extended deterrence. First of all, neither superpower would allow the other to acquire such a capability, which makes the issue academic. Second of all, for the NATO alliance at least, even when the United States was perceived by its allies to be ahead, in the fifties and sixties, still they were not satisfied. The United States in its era of nuclear advantage had to take many additional actions in the theater (within Western Europe) to assuage its allies, such as permanently stationing 300,000 American troops there. For lack of space, I simply assert this proposition: extended deterrent problems cannot be solved by seeking superiority or advantageous positions with central strategic systems; they must be handled with in-theater solutions. The way to extend deterrence, that is, to make the territory being protected look sufficiently important to the United States such that its extension of its nuclear umbrella over it looks credible. See my forthcoming NATO in the Era of Parity: Extended Deterrence and Alliance Politics (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1985) for a full treatment of this issue.
and go to a higher level of violence if he deems what he is fighting for worth the escalation. Battlefield victories have little meaning if the adversary can still destroy you after suffering them. In the nuclear era, “escalation dominance”—the ability to contain or defeat an adversary at all levels of violence except at the highest (all-out nuclear war)—is not feasible simply because the adversary can suffer defeat at one level and go to the next higher one.\(^{21}\) It is not the military outcomes of battles that will determine how intensely the war is waged and when it will stop. Rather, it is how much each adversary values what he is fighting for that will determine the scope, scale, and intensity of the conflict. Resolve, not battlefield victory, is the crucial element in any competitive risk-taking situation. Each party has a shared interest in avoiding an escalation to all-out war where they both would be destroyed. Each will be forced to weigh how much he and his adversary value what both are fighting for in order to determine how firm to stand. As has been pointed out many times before, this is the proverbial game of chicken. Ultimately, one side is likely to give way to avoid devastation. It is true, therefore, that when defense of populations is not possible, escalation dominance loses its utility.

What happens on the battlefield, however, can have meaning for structuring the dynamics of competitive risk-taking situations. Battlefield actions are important for what they signal about resolve, not whether they defeat the adversary. How battles are started can affect both the perceptions of resolve and the subsequent dynamics of a competitive risk-taking situation. It is not sufficient to argue, therefore, that escalation involves a competition in risk taking and simply leave matters at that. How, exactly, does one demonstrate resolve if one has to fire one or several nuclear weapons? Are demonstration shots—those that involve explosions in remote areas where there are no military forces and civilians—demonstrations of one’s resolve to use nuclear weapons or of one’s fear of using them? Is it sufficient simply to fire one off to a place where its military effects are harmless? Or does one need to make a significant military statement by the initial use of one’s nuclear forces, \textit{knowing full well that any military gain thereby achieved is only temporary if the adversary decides to reciprocate}? Does it make sense to use such forces initially against the adversary’s cities, even if only one small city is destroyed? That may demonstrate resolve all right, but will it not overly provoke the adversary and cause him to return the blow, when in fact the point of one’s initial use was to cause him to stop his military action?

These questions are perplexing. The initial use of nuclear weapons in small numbers involves what Schelling once called “threats that leave something to chance.”\(^{22}\) The line between deliberate escalation in order

\(^{21}\) The best recent, if not the best, discussion of the difference between escalation dominance and the competition in risk taking, is to be found in Jervis, \textit{The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy}, chap. 5. I have benefited enormously from this chapter and book.

to stop a war and escalation that gets out of control is a fine one, indeed. By definition, escalatory actions that are taken to manipulate risk involve the chance that they will get out of control. If they could not, there would be no risk, escalation could be controlled, and escalation to manipulate risk would turn into escalation dominance. In competitions in risk taking, the effectiveness of escalatory threats lies precisely in the fact that they can get out of control. Because that is the case, one must worry about how to walk the fine line, how to signal the adversary politically, how to get him to stop, and how to avoid provoking him into his own escalation.

There can be no definitive answers to the questions asked above. But surely common sense dictates that soft counterforce targets—divisions, transportation nodes, and the like—make more sense to threaten initially than countervalue ones if one is trying both to signal resolve and yet not overly to provoke one's adversary. And if that be the case, escalatory threats designed to signal politically must have some military effect if they are to have a chance of succeeding. Hence, hitting military targets can make great political sense. Thus, a second underpinning of finite deterrence, an exclusive reliance on countervalue targeting, no longer holds.

Third, finally, surely some war-waging capability is desirable for rapid war termination. Finite deterurers provide a partial answer when they argue that the best way to limit damage in any nuclear war that begins small is to stop it as quickly as possible. But, again, it is not sufficient to leave matters there. We must ask what is required of one's forces and command and control facilities for this to happen. In order to limit damage, two requirements have to be met: first, someone must be in command who has the will and desire to terminate the war; second, he must have control over his forces to limit their use. If a nuclear war begins (and ends) as an all-out spasm response by both sides, the matter of control is academic. But if it begins with a severely limited use of nuclear weapons, we must take some precautions to do what we can to maintain control in order to keep use severely limited. This requires soft counterforce targeting and sufficient investment in command, control, and intelligence capabilities such that we can have reasonable confidence that the national command authority can survive for a few limited exchanges of blows.

What is required for damage limitation in the event a limited nuclear war begins, therefore, is some prudent investment in controllability. What is not required, however, is an investment to endure a protracted and extensive nuclear war. That is beyond the pale of feasibility. Nor is it desirable to engage in extensive counterforce exchanges against hardened targets—the adversary's command and control centers and his nuclear forces—for the reasons outlined earlier. What we should procure are war-waging capabilities that are designed to end the war quickly with severely limited nuclear use. What we must avoid are war-waging capabilities that are designed for long endurance and extensive use. If this be so, that some very limited war-waging flexibility is desired, then the
third tenet of the assured destruction school—an opposition to flexibility—also is no longer tenable.

There is a final point that needs to be made. In the mid-eighties, we may be on the verge of a race to build effective population defenses. The MAD-plus position clearly does not call for this type of insurance and in fact finds it dangerous. Is a world in which both superpowers have an assured defense of populations preferable to the one in which they do not? Is the BAD world (Both Assured of Defense) better than the MAD-plus world?

There can be no definitive answer to this question, but informed speculation is in order.23 A MAD-plus world is one in which the leaders of both superpowers know that, if they do not calculate correctly and tread carefully, events could get out of control. In a MAD world, escalation and loss of control are ever-present contingencies, even if they are almost never ever-present occurrences. As argued above, it is this knowledge that makes MAD nuclear statesmen cautious, restrained, and careful calculators. In a BAD world, however, these restraints would be relaxed. If their populations were thought defendable or invulnerable to retaliatory strikes, BAD statesmen would be more likely to take greater risks. As then Secretary of Defense Harold Brown put it in 1979: “I have always been concerned about massive ABM systems because I have always felt there was some possibility that some clever briefer could delude a political decision maker into thinking that they were going to work.”24 The costs of guessing wrong would presumably be less than in a MAD world if the safety net of population defense worked. A MAD world discourages unwarranted risk taking; a BAD world would not. A MAD world balances terror; a BAD world does not. A MAD world has little or no safety net for bad judgment; a BAD world presumably does.

If, however, a BAD world turns out to be one in which a credible population defense is not really feasible and one in which risk taking is not restrained, then the costs would be horrendous. Historically, for every offensive innovation, there developed a defensive response. But in the past, no weapon possessed the speed and destructive power of nuclear weapons. Population defenses require a degree of perfection to be effective that offensive forces do not. They must be held to a higher standard of workability. There is therefore a gross asymmetry between how well nuclear offenses and defenses have to work in order to be effective that tips the balance toward the offense. Even if the population defense is nearly perfect, it is still not perfect and enough missiles will get through to assure population devastation. For the foreseeable future, therefore,


the offense will always get through, either ballistically or in some other fashion.\textsuperscript{25}

A 100 percent population defense would be nice to have but so, too, would immortality. If a credible population defense is not presently and foreseeably feasible and if neither superpower would, anyway, sit still and permit its offensive forces to be so stymied, is it not better to live in a world in which the risks of using nuclear weapons are thought to be great, not small? Is the best restraint on nuclear weapons use not fear of the uncertainties surrounding their use? And in this "MAD" world of ours, is it not better to purchase a little bit of extra insurance along the lines of the MAD-plus posture described above?