Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn’t Matter

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Recent debates on the role of nuclear weapons in American defense policy have not clarified the important issues or dealt with the underlying assumptions that are involved. While some of the specifics of the arguments are new, the basic questions are as old as the nuclear era and can be referred to as the dispute between those who advocate a policy of Assured Destruction (AD) and those who call for Flexible Response (FR). Proponents of AD believe that any nuclear war will be all-out war and therefore that the United States need only have an assured capacity to destroy an enemy’s cities even if forced to absorb a first strike. Proponents of FR hold that there is a range of military contingencies for which the United States must be prepared and that nuclear weapons can be used in a variety of such contingencies in a more flexible, limited way. The main arguments against AD, now as in the past, are that it is not credible and would lead to disaster if deterrence failed; the central argument against FR is that it is costly, ineffective, and dangerous. This article generally defends the AD position and argues that FR misunderstands the nature of nuclear deterrence.

Assured Destruction and Flexible Response

Proponents of AD argue that the vulnerability of population centers in both the United States and the Soviet Union that comes with mutual second-strike capability has transformed strategy. Because a military advantage no longer assures a decisive victory, old ways of thinking are no longer appropriate. The
healthy fear of devastation, which cannot be exorcised short of the attainment of a first-strike capability, makes deterrence relatively easy. Furthermore, because cities cannot be taken out of hostage, the perceived danger of total destruction is crucial at all points in the threat, display, or use of force.

Four implications follow. First, because gaining the upper hand in purely military terms cannot protect one’s country, various moves in a limited war—such as using large armies, employing tactical nuclear weapons, or even engaging in limited strategic strikes—are less important for influencing the course of the battle than for showing the other side that a continuation of the conflict raises an unacceptable danger that things will get out of hand. New weapons are introduced not to gain a few miles of territory, but to engage in what Schelling has called competition in risk taking. Escalation dominance—the ability to prevail at every level of military conflict below that of all-out war—is thus neither necessary nor sufficient to reach one’s goals, be they to preserve the status quo or to change it. Being able to win on the battlefield does not guarantee winning one’s objectives, since the risk of escalation may be too great to justify the expected benefits.

Second, it does not matter which side has more nuclear weapons. In the past, having a larger army than one’s neighbor allowed one to conquer it and protect one’s own population. Having a larger nuclear stockpile yields no such gains. Deterrence comes from having enough weapons to destroy the other’s cities; this capability is an absolute, not a relative, one.

Third, if national security is provided by one’s capability to destroy the opponent, not by the possession of a more effective military machine than the other side, then the force that drives the security dilemma is sapped. The security dilemma is created by the fact that in the prenuclear era weapons and policies that made one country secure made others insecure. An army large enough to protect the state was usually large enough to threaten a neighbor with invasion, even if the state did not intend such a threat. But when security comes from the absolute capability to annihilate one’s enemy, then each side can gain it simultaneously. Neither side need acquire more than a second-strike capability and, if either does, the other need not respond since its security is not threatened.

A fourth aspect of the AD position is that nuclear war is very unlikely because to initiate it a statesman would have to be willing to run the risk that his country’s population centers would be destroyed. Not only is “the balance of terror...decidedly not delicate,” but, because statesmen know that imprudent

1 The phrase is attributed to Thomas Schelling in Herman Kahn, On Escalation (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin, 1968), p. 3. The topic is discussed in Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 92–125.

2 Thus there is a second meaning in the title of the book of brilliant essays written in 1946 by Bernard Brodie, Arnold Wolfers et al., The Absolute Weapon (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946).

3 Many proponents of AD also argue that the Soviet Union would feel threatened by increases in American strategic forces, however, and this fear is in some tension with the belief described here.

action could lead to all-out war, the resulting deterrence covers a lot more than attacks on one's homeland. To take any major offensive action is to run an intolerably high risk of escalation. The United States and the Soviet Union may engage in fierce rhetorical battles and even use force in such peripheral areas as Africa and Asia, but there are sharp limits to how far they can push each other. The chance that such attempts would lead to total destruction is simply too great. (And it can be too great even though it is very low. That is, even a very small probability of escalation is sufficient to deter serious encroachments.)

The Flexible Response position is different on all counts. Its logic is best seen in terms of what Glenn Snyder has called the stability-instability paradox. Because the balance is so stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, each side is relatively free to engage in provocations and military actions at lower levels of violence. The most obvious application of this argument is that if NATO lacks the ability to defend Europe with conventional weapons, it faces the danger of having to fight such a war: thus the Soviet second-strike capability would "deter our deterrent" (to paraphrase the title from an article by Paul Nitze). The same argument can be applied to more bizarre situations. To secure some highly valued goal the Russians might destroy most of the American Minuteman force. Since its cities were still in hostage, the United States would be deterred from striking back at Soviet cities.

For the advocates of FR, the United States must be prepared to fight a war—or rather a variety of wars—in order to gain a better chance of deterring the Soviets from making any military moves, to deter them from escalating if they do move, and to secure as favorable an outcome as possible at any level of violence. In contrast to the AD view, FR argues that in the nuclear era, as in earlier times, the absolute amount of armaments on each side is less important than the relative amounts because each nation's military forces as well as its population centers are potential targets. As decision makers stop thinking that any war must be total and realize that the stability-instability paradox allows a wider range of contingencies of controlled and less self-defeating strikes, the importance of the details of the strategic balance becomes clear.

Proponents of FR thus disagree with the AD position that the inherent riskiness of any major provocation in the nuclear era means that a second-strike capability protects against much more than an unrestrained assault on the country's homeland. Secretary of Defense Brown argues that "we now recognize that the strategic nuclear forces can deter only a relatively narrow range of con-

5 Glenn Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in The Balance of Power, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco, Calif.: Chandler, 1965). This paradox was seen by Snyder as explaining why mutual second-strike capability could lead to conventional wars; the proponents of FR take this one step further by arguing that the overall strategic stability also allows for limited nuclear wars.


tingencies, much smaller in range than was foreseen only 20 or 30 years ago." Similarly, Brown, like Schlesinger before him, claims that "only if we have the capability to respond realistically and effectively to an attack at a variety of levels can we . . . have the confidence necessary to a credible deterrent." But, the proponents of AD would reply, this argument advocating something approximating escalation dominance misses the point. No state can respond "effectively" in the sense of being able to take its population centers out of hostage; thus, it is the willingness to run risks and the perceptions of this willingness that will determine whether a response is "realistic" and a threat is credible.

Stability, Predictability, and Soviet Intentions

Much of the difference between the two schools of thought turns on differing ideas about stability. Both groups agree on the overwhelming importance of preserving one's cities. But for the proponents of FR, the common interest in avoiding a mutually disastrous outcome can be used as a lever to extract competitive concessions. Either side can take provocative actions because the other cannot credibly threaten to respond by all-out war. Proponents of AD, on the other hand, see stability as broader, and deterrence as covering a wider set of interests, since it follows from the reasonable fear that any challenge to an opponent's vital interest could escalate. Paradoxically, stability is in part the product of the belief that the world is not entirely stable, that things could somehow get out of control.

There are two elements that influence beliefs about the extent to which the risks of escalation could be kept limited and controlled, and it is not surprising that advocates of AD and FR disagree about both. The first element is the American reaction and the Soviet anticipation of it. Advocates of FR fear that the Russians might be certain enough that the United States would not use nuclear weapons in response to a major provocation to make such a provocation worth taking. Those who support a policy of AD deny this, noting that the United States has behaved too unpredictably for any state to be sure what it will do. Part of the reason for the disagreement on this point is that proponents of both AD and FR project their views onto the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union. The latter believe, and the former deny, that a large Russian arms build-up would intimidate the United States.

The other element in the belief about whether the risks would seem controllable is a judgment about the inherent limits of manipulation and prediction in human affairs. While these factors are rarely discussed explicitly, the tone of much of the FR writings implies that men can make fine, complex, and accurate

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calculations. Friction, uncertainty, failures of implementation, and the fog of battle do not play a major role. Men see clearly, their subordinates are able to carry out intricate instructions, and the other side gets the desired message. Thus, Secretary Brown recently argued that "if we try bluffing [the Russians with a threat of massive retaliation], ways can be found by others to test our bluffs without undue risk to them." Such attempts would involve reasonable risks only if the situation were under complete control and seen by the Soviets as relatively safe, and then only if they believed this to be the case. (But many proponents of FR also believe that the United States cannot rely on tactical nuclear weapons to defend Europe because their use could too easily lead to all-out war. This fits oddly with the belief that the superpowers could fight a limited strategic war.)

For the advocates of AD, this is a dream world. War plans can be drawn up on this basis, but reality will not conform. Furthermore, decision makers, having experienced the multiple ways in which predictions prove incorrect and situations get out of control, do not commit the fallacy of believing that escalation could be carefully manipulated and thus would not place any faith in the precise options of limited nuclear warfare. FR advocates see the need for a policy they consider to be prudential in the sense of being able to cope with unlikely but dangerous contingencies because they do not think decision makers can be counted on to avoid terrible risks; proponents of AD do not think American policy has to cover such remote possibilities because they are confident that statesmen are at least minimally prudent.

This difference in beliefs—or perhaps I should say in intuitions—goes far to explain why some of the proponents of FR see a much greater danger of a Russian first strike than do advocates of AD. One would not expect any difference of opinion here since the question seems entirely technical. But it is not. To launch a first strike in the belief that one could destroy most of an opponent's strategic forces is to accept a set of complex and uncertain calculations: the weapons have never been tested under fully operational conditions; accuracies are estimated from performances over test ranges, which may be different when the missiles are fired over different parts of the earth; the vulnerability of the other side's silos (and one's own) can never be known with certainty before the war; and the effects on the environment of huge nuclear explosions can only be guessed at. The same orientation that leads one to believe that statesmen could be sufficiently confident of their ability to prevent escalation to allow them to engage in major provocations also fits with the conclusion that statesmen might place sufficient confidence in their estimates to launch a disarming strike.

If differences in beliefs about the risks inherent in major provocations are one source of the dispute between AD and FR, another is a difference in perceptions of the risks that the Russians are willing to run. Most proponents of AD argue that while the desire to expand is not completely absent, the Russians are not so

strongly motivated in this regard as to be willing to endanger what they have already gained. Proponents of FR argue not that the Russians want war, but that they care enough about increasing their influence to run significant risks to reach that goal. And by acquiring massive military might, the Russians could hope to be better able to expand without courting dangerous confrontations. The proponents of AD would reply that almost no decision maker in the world’s history would embark on a course of expansion while his cities were held hostage. The sort of leaders the proponents of FR posit are very rare—even Hitler probably was not an example, since he knew that if he could militarily defeat the Allies he could protect his own country.

Because the advocates of AD believe the Russians to be less strongly motivated than do those who call for FR, they believe that much less deterrence, both in terms of the damage that the United States needs to inflict and the probability that it will be inflicted, will be sufficient. Thus there is a disagreement over “how much credibility is enough”: two policy analysts therefore might agree on how likely the Russians thought it was that a limited war would escalate and disagree over whether they would be deterred.\(^\text{11}\)

**Situations Calling for Flexible Response**

The basic concern of the proponents of FR is that the threat to attack Soviet population centers is not credible when the Russians can respond in kind. In a crisis the United States must “have a wider choice than humiliation or all-out nuclear action,” to use President Kennedy’s terms.\(^\text{12}\) The danger that the proponents of FR see was expressed well by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger in 1975: “If one side should remove the other’s capability for flexible and controlled responses, he might find ways of exercising coercion and extracting concessions without triggering the final holocaust. . . . No opponent should think that he could fire at some of our Minuteman or SAC [Strategic Air Command] bases without being subjected to, at the very least, a response in kind. No opponent should believe that he could attack other U.S. targets of military or economic value without finding similar or other appropriate targets in his own homeland under attack. . . . Above all, no opponent should entertain the thought that we will permit him to remove our capability for flexible strategic responses.”\(^\text{13}\)

We can examine the problem more clearly by seeing that Schlesinger and other proponents of FR blur the distinction between two kinds of wars. The first

\(^{11}\) This also partially explains why many of the proponents of FR think that the threat to destroy Russian cities would be an insufficient deterrent and that the United States should develop a targeting policy aimed at convincing the Soviet leaders that their regime would not be able to maintain control of the country after a war.


involves demonstration attacks. Since they do not require large numbers of missiles, neither the size of each side's force nor its vulnerability is important. The second is a counterforce war of attrition in which the Russians would launch the first nuclear strike, trying to destroy as much of the American strategic force as possible, either in one blow or by moving more slowly and taking out the opposing forces in a series of strikes. Although the United States would still be able to attack the Soviet Union's cities, the only result of such a strike would be to have U.S. cities blown up thirty minutes later. If the U.S. strategic force is vulnerable, the Russians can destroy much of it without using a similar proportion of their force; if the U.S. force cannot hit protected targets, it will not be able to reduce the Russian force. But, and this is crucial, it is only in counterforce wars of attrition that the comparison of each side's counterforce capabilities matters.

Examining a number of contexts in which defense problems arise, one can see that the distinction between attacks that have an effect by demonstrating resolve and those that aim at reducing an opponent's capability recurs and is closely tied to the basic difference between the AD and FR positions. If the AD position is correct and counterforce wars of attrition are not a real possibility in the nuclear era, then the United States does not have to worry that its Minuteman force is vulnerable or that the Russians have a greater ability to destroy hard targets than the United States does. To evaluate the arguments, it is useful to examine the potentially critical situations.

Protecting Europe

One major fear is that the Soviets could launch a large-scale conventional attack that would conquer Europe unless the United States escalated. If the United States tried to stave off defeat by employing tactical nuclear weapons, the Soviets could reply in kind, nullifying any advantage the West may have gained. One FR remedy would be to develop the means to defend against an attack at any level of violence. Thus the West would deploy conventional forces to contain a conventional attack and tactical nuclear weapons to cope with a like attack. This alluring argument is not correct. An aggressor could attack in the face of escalation dominance if he believed that the defender would not pay the price of resisting, a price that includes a probability that the fighting will spread to each side's population centers. The other side of this coin is that a state that could be confident of winning a military victory in Europe could be deterred from attacking or deterred from defending against an attack by the fear that the war might spread to its homeland. Only if the risk of such escalation could be reduced to zero would this element disappear and purely military considerations be determinative. The advocates of FR thus overstate the efficacy of their policy.

Of course if the United States lacks escalation dominance it would have to take the initiative of increasing the level of violence and risk in the event of a Soviet attack on Europe. But the onus of undertaking the original move would still remain with the aggressor. And since the level of risk is shared equally by
both sides, what is likely to be more important than the inhibition against having to take the initiative is the willingness or unwillingness to approach the brink rather than concede defeat, a factor not linked to escalation dominance. Furthermore, some practical considerations reinforce this conclusion. As Bernard Brodie argued, it is hard to imagine that the Soviets would launch a conventional attack in the face of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons. Such an attack would require massed troops that would be an inviting target for NATO's tactical nuclear weapons. The Soviets could not be sufficiently confident that their strategic or tactical nuclear forces would deter such a NATO response to leave their armies so vulnerable.14 And for the Russians to initiate a tactical nuclear war would raise two difficulties. First, the uncertainties about how such a war would be fought are so great that it would be hard for any country to be confident that it would win. Second, a war of this level of violence would be especially likely to trigger the American strategic force.

An alternative FR policy is for the United States to develop large enough strategic forces to threaten, and carry out if need be, a counterforce strike with some of its forces, even though doing so would not leave the Soviet Union totally disarmed. While the Soviet Union could retaliate against American population centers, it would not do so because its own cities were still in hostage. Thus the United States could launch its strike "secure in the knowledge that the United States had a residual ICBM force that could deter attack upon itself."15 This notion of security is an odd one, resting as it does on the confident prediction that the Russians would calmly absorb a counterforce first strike. This is especially odd because while the proponents of FR tell us that we should pay close attention to Soviet military doctrine, on this point they blithely disregard these texts which stress preemption and deny that limited nuclear wars are possible.

A similar error is embodied in Secretary of Defense Schlesinger's defense of limited nuclear options on the grounds that because the United States has commitments to allies, "we require a nuclear capability that has an implementable threat and which is perceived to have an implementable threat. Unless, in the event of certain hostile acts, we have a threat that we can implement, the existence of the American force structure does not contribute logically to deterrence." If, on the other hand, the United States has the ability to launch limited nuclear strikes, he continues, it "will not be self-deterrred from responding to ... an act of aggression."16 But the concept of "self-deterrence" is not useful and the argument cannot be sustained. The United States is being deterred by the fear of Soviet retaliation. This danger is present as long as the Soviets have second-strike capability; thus, it is a consequence not of Soviet "superiority" but of

parity. Even if the United States reached Schlesinger's goal of preserving "an essential strategic equilibrium with the USSR both in capabilities and in targeting options,"17 the costs and risks of employing the options would remain.

The argument that the side that had better counterforce capability could safely launch such an attack even though the other side would not be disarmed pertains only in wars of attrition in which each side tries to reduce the other's strategic capability and spares the other's cities. The claim that the United States can employ this option to protect Europe is the opposite side of the coin of the claim that if the Soviet Union had a large margin of counterforce superiority, it could use it to coerce the West. The validity of this claim turns on whether a war of attrition is a serious possibility or whether the danger that such a conflict would escalate to attacks on population centers would dominate decision makers' calculations.

Preemption

Some proponents of FR think it most unlikely that the Russians would launch an attack on Europe, but fear that if the Soviet strategic force was much more effective than the American one and if a significant proportion of the American strategic force were vulnerable, the Russians might make a preemptive strike in a grave crisis, perhaps one they had not sought, if they thought that war was very likely. The ability to hit missile silos and command and control facilities that the proponents of FR call for, however, increases this danger, since it enables the United States to destroy a large proportion of USSR's land-based missiles (and most of the Soviet strategic force is land based) if the United States were to strike first. It is a bit disingenuous to argue that the United States needs a new type of missile to decrease the chance that the Soviet Union would attack without also acknowledging that some of the incentive the Russians would have to attack those missiles comes from the very accuracy that is supposedly needed in order to fight a counterforce war.18

More importantly, preemption makes sense only if being struck first is much worse than getting the first blow in. A state whose leaders believe that war will lead to total devastation will have no incentive to preempt even if many of their missiles are vulnerable. Here, as at other points, the proponents of FR make the crucial mistake of concentrating on purely military factors—the numbers and characteristics of weapons on both sides—and ignoring the role of military moves as generators of risk. The FR argument is that deterrence requires a sufficient number and kind of forces so that if the other side struck first, it would be militarily worse off than if it had not. Thus it would be dangerous if the Rus-

17 Ibid., p. 29.
18 The United States might get around this dilemma by building missiles that were invulnerable, but that lacked accurate MIRVs. It is interesting to note that the U.S. Air Force has done a much better job of developing a powerful and accurate missile than it has in making that missile able to survive a Russian attack.
sians were able to use, for example, 200 missiles with 2,000 warheads and knock out most of the American ICBMs. As Secretary of Defense Brown has put it: “we must ensure that no adversary could see himself better off after a limited ex-
change than before it. We cannot permit an enemy to believe that he could create any kind of military or psychological asymmetry that he could then exploit to his advantage.”19 But the fact that the Russians would have gained a more favorable ratio of missiles does not mean that they would be closer to any meaningful goal or even that they would be closer to it than they would have been if the United States struck first and the ratio of missiles available was less favorable to them. The only meaningful goals would be to preserve their cities and, if possible, prevail in the dispute. But gains in purely military terms do not accomplish these objectives in wartime any more than they do in peacetime. As long as each side retains the ability to destroy the other’s society, having more warheads than an opponent is an advantage only if it makes the opponent back down, and the proponents of FR have not shown how it will make such a contribution. The military advantages of striking first can only be translated into political gains if the war remains counterforce and the state with the most missiles left after a series of exchanges prevails without losing its population centers.20 The FR fallacy here is parallel to that involved in the claim that escalation dominance is necessary or sufficient for deterring or prevailing in a conflict in Europe. Competition in risk taking, rather than competition in military capability, dominates.

Counterforce Wars of Attrition and the Balance of Resolve

In a counterforce war of attrition the numbers and characteristics of the weapons would matter a great deal. As in the prenuclear era, what would be crucial would not be absolute capability, but the relative strengths of the opponents. The basic argument of the AD school is undercut because the primary targets of the warheads are not population centers but other weapons. Is the likelihood of counterforce wars of attrition sufficient to warrant the necessary preparations? Could there be a nuclear war in which population centers were spared and the outcome determined by which state is able to do the better job of reducing the other’s military forces? Even if the Russians had the ability to win such a war, they would have to be desperate or willing to run terribly high risks to place sufficient faith in American self-restraint to order an attack. Even if the United States could win such a war, its threat to initiate it would not be credible (for example, in response to a Soviet attack on Europe) unless the Russians believed that the United States thought that control would be maintained throughout its course.

This control would have to be maintained, furthermore, although un-

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preceded numbers of civilians would be killed; a large Russian counterforce strike could not be limited to destroying only military targets. Although it would be obvious to the president that most American population centers were still held hostage, sufficient damage would have been done to raise sharply the danger of an all-out response. The chance of such a reaction—which would be present even if the United States said it would not react in this way—would have to weigh very heavily on the Soviet decision makers.

But the existence of tight control would not ensure the success of a strategy of attrition. If the Russians launched a counterforce strike and the United States did not retaliate against Soviet cities, it might nullify a Russian war-fighting strategy by not responding at all. This may seem as bizarre as a counterattack on population centers, but on closer examination it makes some sense. Why should the United States retaliate? What would the Russians have gained by destroying a significant portion of the U.S. strategic force? Why would they be in a better position to work their will after a strike than before it? If the United States acts as though it is weakened, it will be in a worse bargaining position, but this is within American control. To withhold a response, while maintaining the ability to destroy Russian cities later, could as easily be taken as a sign of high resolve as of low. The United States would forego hitting many Russian military targets, but this would not sacrifice much of value since attacking them would not limit the Soviet ability to destroy the United States. Only if a war in Europe were being fought at the same time, and thus a failure to respond created or magnified an imbalance of land forces, would withholding a return counterforce strike give up something of value. But for the Soviets to attack American strategic forces (and NATO tactical nuclear forces) in conjunction with fighting a war in Europe would be to run a very high risk of an American counterattack on Soviet population centers.

The possibility of not responding to a Soviet counterforce strike points to the odd nature of a nuclear war of attrition. The benefit of the efforts to reduce an opponent’s strategic forces comes only near the end, when the state is able to take its society out of hostage. Unless and until that point is reached, the side that is “losing” the counterforce war of attrition can do nearly as much damage to the side that is “winning” as it could before the war started. Military efforts can succeed only if the “loser” allows them to by sparing the “winner’s” cities. Of course it will be costly for the “loser” to initiate counterstrikes against population centers, since the “winner” will presumably retaliate. But this is true regardless of the details of the strategic balance.

If the ultimate threat, even during a war of attrition, is that of destroying cities, it is clear that such wars are more competition in risk taking than they are attempts to gain an advantage on the battlefield. To concentrate on the military advantages that accrue to one side or the other by counterforce attacks is to ignore the fact that in any nuclear war the element of threat of escalation will loom very large. This general point is missed by Secretary of Defense Brown

\[^{21}\text{Indeed the incentives for the state that is behind in a counterforce war to escalate increase as its...} \]
when he says that the ability to hit a wide range of military targets "permits us to respond credibly to threats or actions by a nuclear opponent." But what is crucial is less the capability than the willingness to use it. Even if the United States had the ability to match the Soviets round for round, target for target, it might not do so—and the Russians might move in the belief that the United States would not respond—because the costs and risks were felt to be too great. And even if the United States lacked such a capability, the Soviet fear of an all-out response could lead it to expect that any provocation would be prohibitively costly. Since what matters in limited strategic wars, even if they involve targets that are predominantly military, is each side's willingness to run high risks, it is the "balance of resolve" rather than the "balance of military power" that will most strongly influence their outcomes. Extra ammunition cannot compensate for weakness in will or a refusal—perhaps a sensible refusal—to run the risk of destruction.

The importance of competition in risk taking implies that demonstration attacks would be more useful than attempts to reduce an opponent's military capabilities. Such attacks could be aimed at a military installation, an isolated element of an opponent's strategic forces, a command and control facility, or a city. The purpose of such an action would be to inflict pain, show resolve, and raise the risks of all-out war to a level that an opponent would find intolerable. Such risks, of course, weigh on both sides, but only by willingly accepting high risks can a state prevail. In addition to high resolve, in order to engage in nuclear demonstrations a state needs to be able to carry out a certain number of limited options. But the ammunition requirements are nowhere near as high as they are for a counterforce war of attrition (and both sides can simultaneously have the capability for demonstrations).

Demonstration strikes would exert pressure in three ways. First, they would exact some degree of punishment on the other side. But the immediate pain inflicted would probably be less important than the underlying motivation of these strikes—the implied threat to do more harm unless the opponent complies with the attacking state's demands. This threat gains its credibility because the attacking state has shown that it is willing to engage in very risky actions that have increased the chance that targets in its own country would be struck. When both sides have second-strike capability, one side prevails in a crisis, not by showing that it can inflict pain on the other (for this is obvious and true for the both sides), but by demonstrating that it feels so strongly about the issue at stake that it is willing to be hurt in return rather than suffer a defeat. Third, any nuclear attack increases the chance that uncontrolled escalation will occur. It is

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military situation worsens. If it fears it may soon lose its second-strike capability, the losing state may will feel greater pressure to up the ante while it still can.


23 For further discussion of this point see Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," World Politics 31 (January 1979): 314-22. The Soviet stress on the importance of the "correlation of forces" is not inconsistent with this notion.
this specter that exerts so much pressure on statesmen not to use nuclear weapons in the first place or to make concessions in any conflict in which they are used. Even if one side launched a counterforce strike, the war would almost surely end before either had run out of ammunition. Resolve, not capability, would be the limiting factor. When Secretary Brown claims that “fully effective deterrence requires forces of sufficient size and flexibility to attack selectively a range of military and other targets”\(^{24}\) and argues that to do this the United States needs an invulnerable ICBM, he is either thinking in terms of a war of attrition or overstating the number of warheads the United States needs.

**Possible Objections**

Before drawing the conclusions that are implicit in the previous analysis, I should note three obvious objections. First, it can be argued that if I am right, and the strategic balance is quite stable, an increase in American arms will not have dire consequences.\(^{25}\) Since all the United States can lose by additional deployment is money, argue the critics, it is better to play it safe and buy the extra systems. Moreover, how can anyone be sure that a war of attrition will not occur? But surely there must be some judgments about plausibility, some concern for costs, and some consideration of the chance that the United States might teach others lessons that are both incorrect and dangerous. The new weapons cost a lot of money and avoiding waste is not a goal to be scorned lightly.\(^{26}\) Furthermore, although there are no strong and direct links between the adversaries’ defense budgets or between the budgets and the degree of superpower conflict, it is hard to keep the military and political tracks entirely separate. A final line of rebuttal is the most important: to develop a posture based on the assumption that limited nuclear wars are possible is to increase the chance that they will occur. If the Russians already believe in the possibility that such wars could be kept limited, U.S. acceptance of this position would increase the likelihood of their occurrence. On the other hand, if the Russians now find these kinds of war incomprehensible, they might learn to accept them if the United States talked about them long and persuasively enough. This could decrease the chance that a nuclear war would immediately involve the mass destruction of population centers, but at the cost of increasing the chance of more limited nuclear wars—which then could escalate. Such a trade-off is

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\(^{25}\) There is a similar contradiction in McGeorge Bundy’s claim that although nuclear superiority is meaningless, we need arms control agreements “To Cap the Volcano” (*Foreign Affairs* 48 [October 1969]: 1–20).

\(^{26}\) Bernard Brodie argues that the strategic balance is so stable that saving money should be the main goal of arms control (“On the Objectives of Nuclear Arms Control,” *International Security* 1 [Summer 1976]: 17–36). His position is further developed in “The Development of Nuclear Strategy,” *ibid.* 2 (Spring 1978): 65–83. I am greatly indebted to these articles.
highly likely, and even Schlesinger acknowledged that adoption of his doctrine might increase the chance of limited nuclear strikes.\(^{27}\)

The second objection is that my analysis ignores the fact that the Russians do not accept the notion that mutual assured destruction creates stability. Soviet military doctrine is an arcane field that cannot be treated in detail here, although the bulk of the evidence indicates that the Soviet view of strategy is very different from the American.\(^{28}\) They appear to take war more seriously. Indeed, much of Soviet military doctrine is pure military doctrine—that is, the ideas are not particularly Russian or particularly Marxist but simply those one would expect from people charged with protecting society and winning wars. Many statements by Soviet generals are similar to statements by American generals when the latter are not influenced by the ideas or constrained by the power of the civilian leadership; many American military officials seek the same program that the Russians are following. Thus one cannot draw from the fact that Russians probably buy more than is needed for deterrence the inference that they are willing to run high risks to try to expand. The American generals who call for higher spending are not necessarily more bellicose than those who disagree with them.\(^{29}\) Both the Russian and the U.S. generals may want to prepare for the worst and get ready to fight if a war is forced on them. The Russians may be buying what they think is insurance, and we do not ordinarily think that someone who buys a lot of insurance for his car is planning to drive recklessly.

While there is considerable evidence that the Russians want military forces that would provide as good an outcome as possible should war be forced on them, there is very little evidence that they think that such forces could be used to coerce the West. It has yet to be shown that they think that a superior ability to destroy military targets provides a shield behind which they can make political advances or that Soviet military doctrine measures American deterrence in terms of the United States’ ability to match their posture. The Russians may not accept the idea that mutual vulnerability is a desirable state of affairs, but they seem to understand very well the potency of the American threat to destroy their society. Indeed their outlook is uncongenial to a counterforce war of attrition. While the Russians probably would attack U.S. strategic forces in the event of war, they have not talked about sparing the opponent’s cities. Instead, they seem to be planning to hit as many targets as they can if war breaks out.

Even if the Russians were to say that they believed a war of attrition was possible, the United States would not have to adopt such a view. While it takes the agreement of both sides to fight a counterforce war, this is not true for AD.

\(^{27}\) House Armed Services Committee, Hearings on Military Posture, p. 50.


If one side denies that counterforce wars could be kept limited and convinces the other side that it believes this, the other cannot safely act on its doctrine. The Russians understood this in the periods when McNamara and Schlesinger were enunciating their doctrines, and American statesmen took their professions of disbelief seriously. Even if the Russians were to reverse their position, they would have to take American denials seriously also.

A third objection is that although the Soviet superior ability to destroy strategic forces and the related existence of Minuteman vulnerability is not a strategic problem, it is a political problem. Accordingly, because other nations are influenced by indicators of nuclear superiority, the United States must engage in this competition. (This argument loses some credibility since most people who make it also claim that superiority is meaningful apart from these perceptions.) There are several lines of rebuttal. First, there is little evidence that European or Third World leaders pay much attention to the details of the strategic balance. Second, the United States provides most of the information and conceptual framework that underpins third-party discussions of the balance. The United States might be able to persuade others that it would behave differently because the Russians could wipe out much of the American capability to destroy Soviet missiles. But it would probably be easier to convince them that this was not true. Few world leaders expect the United States and the Soviet Union to fight a war of attrition. Moreover, if the Russians believe that superiority matters and thus may be somewhat emboldened, the bargaining advantages they will gain will be slight if the United States holds to the position that this is nonsense. If the United States convinces the Soviet Union that it does not see a meaningful difference in strength, the USSR cannot safely stand firm in crisis bargaining because it will not have any reason to think that the United States is more likely to retreat.

Conclusions

We can draw several conclusions. The question of which side has greater ability to destroy the other’s strategic forces matters only in a war of attrition. Such a war seems unlikely enough so that it is not worth spending large sums and running considerable dangers to prepare for it. Because either side can use its nuclear weapons to destroy its opponent’s population centers, the danger of escalation would play a very large role in any war and could not be controlled by having more missiles, more accurate missiles, and more invulnerable missiles than the other side. The nuclear revolution cannot be undone. As we have seen, many of the arguments about the supposed dangers following from Soviet superiority in fact are consequences of parity. The American deterrent is deterred by the fact that its cities are vulnerable, not by the fact that the Russians have some supposed military advantage. Since neither the United States nor the Soviet Union can take its cities out of hostage, the state that is willing to run the greatest risks will prevail. Many of those who call for the United States to match
or surpass the Soviet's nuclear arsenal are trying to have the United States compensate for what they feel is a weakness of resolve by an excess in weaponry. But such a deficiency, if it exists, cannot be compensated. A wider range of options will merely give the Russians more ways, and safer ways, of coercing the West.

If the balance of resolve is so important, is the United States at a disadvantage compared to the Soviet Union? Some would argue that the United States has shown in Vietnam that it will not fight to defend its interests and those of its allies. But few dominoes fell after April 1975; other states may have been less impressed by the final American withdrawal than they were by its willingness to spend so much blood and treasure on an unimportant country. Furthermore, resolve is not so much an overall characteristic of an actor as it is a factor that varies with the situation because it reflects the strength of the state's motivation to prevail on a given issue. The state defending the status quo has the advantage in most conflicts in which the balance of resolve is crucial because it usually values the issue or territory at stake more than its opponent does. It is easier for a state to convince the other side that it will fight to hold what it has than it is to make a credible threat to fight rather than forego expansion. A world in which resolve matters so much may not be so bad for the United States.

Even if both sides recognize the greater determination of the side defending the status quo, accidents and miscalculations are still possible, especially in situations growing out of a crisis in a third area. To rely solely on AD may be too dangerous. Some degree of insurance can be purchased by a continuation of the present American posture, which includes the availability of limited nuclear options. But these should be demonstrations, keyed to competition in risk taking, not attempts to wage a war of attrition; thus, the United States would not have to match the Soviets on any of the standard measures of nuclear power. It does not take a superior or even an equal military force to show by limited use that one is willing to take extreme measures rather than suffer a defeat. Such costs and risks are the trading chips of bargaining in the nuclear era; even if the United States had the weapons and doctrine for an FR policy, it could not avoid relying on them.

Although the United States should be able to conduct limited nuclear demonstrations, it should not stress this part of its policy. At this point there is no reason to think that such fantastic measures will ever be necessary, and they should be looked on as something to be done only in the most dire emergency, not as a tool of statecraft. Too much discussion of the possibility of such strikes might lead either or both sides to believe that the risks of a limited exchange were manageable, that escalation would remain under tight control. At best, the United States would therefore create a world in which limited nuclear wars were more likely to occur. At worst, these beliefs would be tested and proven to be incorrect.

Of course a policy of AD supplemented by the ability to conduct demonstration attacks may not succeed. The specter of all-out war is probably compelling enough to make both sides so cautious as to render forcible changes of the status quo on important issues too dangerous to be attempted. But miscalculations are possible, even in situations that seem very clear in retrospect, and states are sometimes willing to take what others think are exorbitant risks to try to reach highly valued goals. Both a cautionary tale and reminder that superior military capability does not guarantee deterrence is provided by the Japanese decision to go to war in 1941. Japan struck because her leaders saw the alternative not as the foregoing of gains, but as losing “her very existence.” They were thus very highly motivated—much more so than American decision makers thought. Furthermore, they knew perfectly well that they could not win an all-out war. But they were not expecting to have to fight such a war; they thought that the war would be limited as the United States would prefer to concede dominance in East Asia rather than engage in a long and costly struggle. It is always possible that the Russians might similarly believe that a nuclear war could be kept limited because the United States would rather concede than move closer to the abyss. The penalty for miscalculation would be much greater for Russia than it was for Japan, and so their caution should be much greater. The danger remains, however, and it cannot be met by building more weapons.*

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