Extended Deterrence with Nuclear Weapons: How Necessary, How Acceptable?

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Most policy and normative problems with nuclear weaponry arise in the context of extended deterrence; that is, deterrence of attacks on friends or allies of a nuclear power. This article reviews the history and contradictions of post-World War II Western extended deterrent strategy, considers the sources of differences and similarities in the perspectives of the American and West German Catholic bishops on these matters, presents a logical schema of types of deterrent situations, discusses some systematic historical evidence that suggests the utility of nuclear weapons for many of these situations is often exaggerated, and, after reviewing alternative strategies, suggests a role for a very limited “countercombatant” nuclear strategy.

The Evolution of Deterrence Policy

Extended deterrence, also known as third-party deterrence, continues to pose some of the most vexing problems of modern strategic policy. Deterrence in general means dissuading someone, by means of a threat, from taking an action one deems undesirable. The general concept raises many questions: When is it needed, what makes a deterrent threat credible, under what conditions are such threats instead likely to provoke an adversary, how might deterrence be transcended so that threats of punishment become unnecessary?

Most of these questions seem even more difficult when applied to situations of extended deterrence to protect allies than to situations merely of deterring a direct attack on oneself. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the central problem of NATO security—how, with the assistance of American military capabilities, to deter Soviet attack on the states of Western Europe—has been so contentious and evasive of satisfactory resolution. In this article I shall: (1) briefly review the history and emerging contradictions of Western deterrent strategy, (2) point up the political and especially normative conflicts over strategy epitomized by recent German and American Catholic bishops’ statements, (3) attempt to clarify, by historical study and logical analysis, reasoning on just what restricted role nuclear weapons need play, and (4) review the possible means of deterring conventional attack and from them propose a solution of sorts.

The Western response to the problem of extended deterrence has basically been to rely on nuclear weapons. The chief and perhaps
sole purpose of American atomic weapons in the first years of the nuclear era was to coerce or deter Soviet actions around the periphery, not to deter immediate attack on the United States itself. The number of atomic bombs in the American arsenal reached 300 by the end of 1950, yet only in 1952 did Soviet military forces first receive operational atomic weapons. While Americans might well have worried about future Soviet intentions and capabilities, in the first years of the cold war the American nuclear arsenal was not needed to deter the Soviet leadership from unleashing nuclear weapons against American soil. Nor, realistically, could it have been needed to deter Soviet conventional invasion of the United States. The prospect is logistically absurd, fully as fanciful as the idea of American invasion and occupation of the Soviet Union. Rather, nuclear weapons were seen as instrumental in the global diplomatic competition, and as a means to protect and further American interests abroad. The atom bomb was to be, as one excellent history of the era characterizes it, "the winning weapon."  

To identify the early purpose of American nuclear weapons this way implies no normative judgment on that purpose. It seemed an attractive, feasible, and relatively cheap instrument. Nuclear weapons represented the embodiment of American technological superiority, and offered plausible compensation for Soviet advantages in geopolitical location (Europe was adjacent, on land, to the USSR, and far across the ocean from America) and population (especially if one thought, as most did then, of the hordes of the "Sino-Soviet bloc"). Furthermore, strategic nuclear systems were relatively cheap, never accounting for more than fifteen to twenty per cent of the American military budget. And in the early years at least their use could be threatened without fear of effective Soviet retaliation against the United States.

The initial onesidedness of this equation shifted as time passed. By the mid-1950's the Soviet Union had its own atomic and hydrogen bombs, and a bomber force of sorts. A Soviet nuclear attack on the United States became at least feasible and needed to be deterred, though it has never been very plausible so long as the United States retains its assured second-strike capability. More importantly for our purposes here, the American threat to respond to a Soviet conventional attack on Europe with a deliberate use of nuclear weapons came to seem hardly more plausible. As Soviet nuclear retaliation against the United States became a possibility to reckon with, American strategy entered other phases.
First came an emphasis on using tactical nuclear weapons to contain an anticipated massive Soviet conventional attack; later, as Soviet forces also acquired large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons Defense Secretary McNamara and others in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations urged greater reliance on building up conventional deterrence, with the use of nuclear weapons only as a last resort. As is well known, the European allies vigorously resisted that shift in emphasis, preferring the deterrent effect of reliance on nuclear weapons to the risk that non-nuclear deterrence would fail and result in the massive destruction of another conventional war on European soil.

Conflicting Perspectives

As extended nuclear deterrence has declined in credibility with the rise of Soviet retaliatory capabilities, contradictions within strategic doctrines, and between different perspectives, have become salient. Most notably, perspectives of self-interest on the two sides of the Atlantic have become irreconcilable at a fundamental level. Most Europeans, in their exposed position, prefer a strategy of deterrence by a credible threat of intercontinental punishment (retaliation); Americans, knowing that now any use of nuclear weapons in retaliation would likely bring Soviet counter-retaliation with nuclear weapons against the American homeland, often prefer deterrence by a capacity for denial (defense) in Europe.²

Both parties of course hope, intently and perhaps confidently, to prevent war. But bluntly, if war should come each prefers that it be fought largely on the other's territory. These preferences are humanly understandable, and again I do not subject them to any normative judgment. But they illustrate the fundamental differences that underlie continuing debate, from flexible response to the French force de frappe to no-first-use to deployments for securely coupling American and European fates. Given each others' understanding of their interests and capabilities, the differences in policy preference can never be fully resolved. The differences continue to be the subject of anguish in the differing conclusions of the 1983 pastoral letters of the West German and American Catholic bishops. The Americans urge adopting a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons; the Germans place their emphasis on ensuring that nuclear deterrence does not fail.³

The differences between the American and German bishops' letters A no-first-use policy would presumably undermine extended nuclear deterrence.
do not stem fundamentally from differences in basic normative criteria, though there are such differences. The Americans flatly affirm the principle of discrimination (no deliberate, direct killing of civilians), but the Germans do not. Both sides give heavy emphasis to the principle of proportionality, and German analysts admit that in practice, given the horrific potentials of nuclear weapons, the effect is the same: any significant use of nuclear weapons in an undiscriminating fashion would surely violate the principle of proportionality, and so be equally unacceptable.

Any assessment of whether an act will be proportional to the good one hopes to achieve, or the evil one hopes to avoid, is necessarily an assessment of the probability and the utility of various outcomes, and also of the certainty with which one makes such assessments. How likely is it that the Soviet Union will win a war and impose its political will upon our peoples? How likely is it that a given deterrent threat will actually prevent, and not provoke, that war? How harmful would a Soviet victory be, and how does one weigh loss of liberties and freedoms? How destructive would a nuclear war be? What are the chances that casualties could be held to some proportionate, and therefore acceptable level? How confident are we in our uncertain judgment, given the speculative nature of deterrence theory and the lack of any experience with nuclear war, of those probabilities and utilities? The search for a morally acceptable deterrent requires judgments about these matters, judgments about which conscientious individuals will unavoidably differ. Both the American and the German letter agree, in practice, on extreme skepticism that any significant use of nuclear weapons could be proportionate and/or discriminating.4

As is generally acknowledged, the American bishops did not definitively rule out the use of any nuclear weapon under any circumstances, though they went through periods of different emphases in various drafts of their letter and left some degree of deliberate ambiguity even in the final version.5 Ambiguity was virtually unavoidable, given the various constraints under which they worked. On the one hand, they could not reject nuclear deterrence entirely, because of the famous statement by Pope John Paul II that deterrence in some form "can be judged morally acceptable." On the other, they felt bound to the principle of discrimination, and so could not acquiesce in any counter-population strategy, and had to avoid the consequentialist trap of tolerating, for a good purpose, an evil which they might themselves perpetrate. Thus the logical space within which
they could maneuver was narrow indeed. Finally, for reasons identified nicely by Bryan Hehir, they also could not accept the idea of a "bluff" deterrent where one threatened to use nuclear weapons but had no intention actually of carrying out the threat. They thus were constrained to leave open the possibility, however remote, that some very limited use of nuclear weapons, to avert a grave evil, could be morally acceptable. Perhaps an individual could licitly make a threat without the intent to carry it out; a modern national security bureaucracy, especially one in a democratic state, cannot. It may be, however, that some fundamental assumptions on each side of the debate are more subject to challenge than has customarily been thought. If so, the Gordian knot of apparently irreconcilable interests and norms might be cut. Specifically, the necessity for nuclear deterrence may be exaggerated on the German side (and of course by many Americans as well), and even assuming the necessity for some nuclear deterrent, both sides may be exaggerating the difficulties of retreating from a deterrent threat that would almost inevitably result in the death of many millions of innocent civilians. In this article I will explore some reasons why both assumptions are exaggerated. First, however, we need to explicate the possible roles of nuclear weapons in different forms of deterrence.

**The Various Purposes of Nuclear Deterrence**

As indicated above, American nuclear weapons may be intended to deter an attack on the United States itself, or on its allies, and either kind of attack could be carried out with either nuclear or conventional weapons. The following fourfold table identifies the logical contingencies, and makes some comments on the apparent necessity and possible utility of nuclear weapons in each contingency.

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<tr>
<th>Mode of attack</th>
<th>To deter attack against</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>Probably necessary, and useful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventional</td>
<td>Irrelevant—not a plausible threat</td>
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The judgments in the lower right-hand box, about the role of nuclear weapons in deterring a conventional attack on allies, need to be explained in some detail. First, however, let us dispose of the others.

"Probably necessary" in the two boxes for deterring nuclear attack of course assumes not only that the Soviet adversary has substantial nuclear forces, but some incentive to use them offensively. Some Western observers would say that was obviously true. Soviet participants by contrast would doubtless contend that Soviet motives are entirely defensive, and that Western states without nuclear forces would have nothing to fear. Western advocates of unilateral nuclear disarmament at least hope that is the case. But while observers like myself consider Soviet motives mixed and far from self-evident, few of us are prepared to subject the matter to empirical test. For us, prudence dictates reliance on some kind of nuclear deterrent so long as the Soviet Union seems likely to have any significant number of such weapons. Just what form that deterrence can and should take is a more difficult question.

Assuming that nuclear weapons are needed in principle to deter nuclear attack, they require certain conditions to be effective or useful. Currently those conditions seem to apply to the threat of Soviet attack on the United States: there would be some "significant" probability, not certainty, that nuclear weapons would be used in retaliation for a nuclear attack. Anger, vengeance, denial of gains, etc., could provide motive enough. So long as nuclear retaliatory forces can survive attack, their subsequent use is plausible. The American National Command Authority might decide to withhold any response to a nuclear attack on the United States, but most observers agree the Soviets could hardly count on that.

There remains greater concern about whether the nuclear deterrent is useful for the right-hand side; that is, whether the American leadership can be relied upon to reply with nuclear weapons to a nuclear attack on its European allies. But again the consensus is that confidence is basically high enough. Given the close economic, cultural, and political ties between the United States and Western Europe, and the tight integration of their military deployments, an American nuclear response to nuclear attack, whether a deliberate response or one embodying some sort of near-automaticity, seems plausible enough. Whether the use of nuclear weapons even in retaliation would be morally acceptable by some version of just war criteria
is, however, not yet self-evident. We shall return to this problem below.

By contrast with the two boxes in the first row, the most plausible assumption about the need for nuclear weapons in the lower left-hand box is that they are not necessary. Despite Amerika, Red Dawn, and other paranoid or pandering fancies, the combination of American potential or actual conventional forces, and America's geographical location, seems more than sufficient to deter Soviet conventional attack. The interesting questions concern the lower right-hand box. What really is the role of nuclear weapons in deterring conventional attack against allies? First, the question of necessity. If some military deterrent is necessary, need it be nuclear?

This question can never be settled so long as deterrence has not yet failed in any specific instance. If deterrence fails, we know that some necessary condition was absent; if deterrence succeeds, we can never be certain that any military means of deterrence were actually necessary (again, really what the adversary's true motives and incentives were), or for that matter which specific military capabilities made the difference. Lacking information on the deliberations in the adversary's councils, we can only reason from logic and experience, perhaps allowing a substantial margin for error on the grounds that when a catastrophic failure is possible it may be better to have too much of a deterrent than too little. Nevertheless, there may be something to be learned or surmised from a systematic examination of international history.

Some Lessons from History about Deterring Conventional Attack

To try to throw some light on this a colleague and I undertook a large-scale investigation of previous instances of extended deterrence. We identified what we believe to be the universe of 58 cases, over the past century, of "immediate" extended deterrence. By immediate we mean situations of overt threat and counterthreat in crisis, not longer-term conditions of implicit threat where reasonable observers might fairly argue over whether anyone really had a serious intention of attacking. For these 58 cases we asked whether deterrence succeeded or failed, and what military and political conditions and behaviors were associated with success or failure. By a combination of intensive analysis of the diplomatic record on par-
For our purposes here, the key dimension concerns different elements of military capability. We looked at three aspects of the military balance between the attacker's side and the defender's, characterized as the immediate, short-term, and long-term military balances. The immediate balance consists of forces present in the immediate area of the conflict, typically the vicinity of the state being threatened and any border area shared by the major adversaries; at issue here is the attacker's ability to achieve a quick *fait accompli*, requiring the defender to undertake a difficult and costly effort to reverse the situation. If the attacker can do this, it may be able to dissuade the major defender from resisting at all. The short-term military balance consists of all active-duty forces and readily mobilizable reserves. This balance largely determines whether, if the defender should choose to fight, the attacker can nevertheless win the war in a reasonably short time without having to engage in a protracted war of attrition. If the balance favors the attacker, at worst it can expect to win a relatively low-cost war, and at best it can, as with a favorable immediate balance, deter the defender from entering the fray at all. The third dimension is the long-term military balance, defined as all existing military forces and national mobilization capabilities (economic, industrial, demographic) for fighting a protracted war—an eventuality which the attacker presumably wants to avoid anyhow, except possibly for the most extreme prospects of gain or loss.

Our results strongly supported arguments that defenders should maintain a favorable, or at least not too unfavorable, military balance in the local area of potential conflict and of readily mobilizable reserves. Long-term capabilities did not significantly improve the chances of achieving successful deterrence. The implications for maintaining strong forces in Western Europe are clear, if not always welcome.

One final aspect of military capability involves nuclear weapons. There is of course a vast, and largely abstract or speculative, literature on whether nuclear weapons have enhanced or diminished extended deterrence in the contemporary world. To gain some empirical evidence on the matter we included a variable as to whether the defender possessed nuclear weapons, and another for whether the defender made an overt threat to use those weapons in the particular confrontation.
Somewhat to our surprise, both possession and threat to use nuclear weapons proved, over all our cases, to be irrelevant to deterrence outcomes. Once a deterrence crisis has erupted, the presence of nuclear weapons seems not to tip the balance; existing and local conventional forces are much more important. In this sense, the success of the massive retaliation doctrine of the 1950's—replaced by flexible response in the early 1960's—was probably exaggerated. Our result is in contrast to much of the conventional wisdom about the utility of nuclear weapons for extended deterrence, and instead generalizes the view that in the Cuban missile crisis American decision-makers were not reassured by their overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority. They instead relied on careful diplomacy and their local conventional superiority for success. Other systematic research generally supports our conclusion—the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence is commonly overrated.9

How can the conventional wisdom be wrong? Remember that we have not questioned the view that nuclear weapons can prevent direct attack, nuclear or otherwise, on one's home territory, nor even nuclear attack on a protegé state; the problem here is deterrence of nonnuclear attack on a protegé. In a majority of the cases we investigated, the destruction that would be engendered by nuclear weapons was far out of proportion to the military threat posed by the potential attacker or the immediate issues at stake in the crisis. This is especially so when a nuclear defender confronts a nonnuclear attacker. In such confrontations the risk that nuclear weapons will be used is heavily discounted, and implicit or explicit nuclear threats are largely inhibited by the disproportionate destructive capability of nuclear weapons. That is, the threat to oneself that could legitimate the use of nuclear weapons to repel a direct attack simply is not present in an extended deterrence crisis with a nonnuclear power. Hence a normative restraint applies, particularly if the defender also possesses immediate or short-term military superiority. Whereas some nuclear threats were made against nonnuclear powers in the first decade or so of the nuclear era, nuclear weapons are now seen as "overkill." These inhibitions made it absurd to consider nuclear use a real possibility in, for example, the Indonesian confrontation with Britain in 1964, Britain's conflicts with Guatemala over Belize in the 1970's, or the French-Libyan confrontation of 1983.

Furthermore, in a majority of cases the nuclear power also possessed sufficiently strong conventional forces to impose high costs on the potential attacker in the event of an armed conflict; where
the immediate balance did not favor the defender (e.g., the British-Indonesian confrontation in 1963–64) deterrence failed. The use of nuclear weapons is now rarely contemplated even against non-nuclear states,\textsuperscript{10} and primarily the conventional-force balances are considered.

In the middle of the spectrum, in crises between two nuclear powers, the result is likely to be the same but for somewhat different reasons. If both sides possess nuclear weapons, and especially if each has a credible second-strike capability, the defender will want to avoid the kind of war that would require escalation to nuclear weapons. The immediate and short-term balance of forces, with their implications for a quick end to the war, will matter much more. Soviet doctrine and deployments in Eastern Europe are designed for just such a "blitzkrieg" conventional thrust.\textsuperscript{11}

Two cautions about these interpretations are necessary. First, the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis of 1954 may be an exception to the principle that nuclear threats do not work against nonnuclear powers. The immediate balance of forces probably favored the United States, though marginally; the United States not only possessed nuclear weapons but it made overt nuclear threats; and deterrence worked. We do not know enough about Chinese decision-making to know precisely why. Second, we are generalizing from a fairly small number of cases involving nuclear-capable defenders (16). Of these only two were marked by overt nuclear threats (the first Berlin and Quemoy-Matsu crises; the second Berlin and Quemoy-Matsu crises are more ambiguous cases where it can plausibly be argued that the "attacker" had no real intention or expectation of actually occupying territory), and in only one did both major adversaries possess nuclear weapons (the Soviet failure to deter China's attack on Vietnam 1979). We have limited confidence in the statistical analysis of only 16 cases, which with only two exceptions apply only to nonnuclear attackers (China, 1979, and Chinese deterrence of an American strike into North Vietnam in 1964–65). Our results cannot say anything definitive about conflicts between two nuclear-capable states operating with very large numbers of weapons. We would especially hesitate to declare that the possibility of nuclear war is irrelevant to deterrence under those conditions. But we do suggest that the utility of the nuclear threat is sharply circumscribed. Thus a search for effective means to prevent conventional attack must be intensified.
Means of Deterrence

Assuming some sort of deterrent is necessary to prevent conventional attack, what are the options? Five, with some significant variation possible within one of the five categories, seem possible. As general categories they are, I believe, exhaustive, but not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some version of at least one of them, and possibly more than one, must be chosen. Most allow for varying degrees of United States participation, withdrawal, or exclusion.

The first is some variant of conventional defense, the importance of which was stressed by our 58-case analysis. The literature on conventional defense possibilities in Europe is immense, and includes a wide range of possibilities from territorial defense by small, mobile, lightly equipped units for defense-in-depth through heavily fortified defenses on the East-West frontier to deep-strike conventional counterattacks against Eastern Europe, in the form recently christened “Air-Land Battle 2000.” All share a commitment to avoiding the first use of nuclear weapons, or at least to postponing any use of nuclear weapons until the conflict has become protracted and no alternative means of holding vital territory seems available. No-first-use in some form has been vigorously endorsed by the American “gang of four” and especially by Robert McNamara. In principle it is preferable to many Americans, including me, but we must recognize the difference of European perspectives as noted earlier, and the difficulty of achieving a satisfactory level of conventional capability given current Soviet advantages and Western reluctance to pay the price. It is not yet fully convincing as a practical policy, but neither is it silly.

Territorial defense is associated with some German strategists such as Horst Afeldt; a deep-strike strategy against Eastern Europe is associated strongly with Samuel Huntington; fortification of the border has been advocated especially by some Americans. Territorial defense is widely regarded as surrendering too much of West Germany’s territory and population to constitute either a politically tolerable situation or a sufficiently extensive form of defense by denial. Deep-strike embodies major elements of defense by punishment, in putting at immediate risk the Soviet Union’s control of its East European empire; that very potential, however, might serve as a provocation to the Soviets, and under some imaginable conditions not deter but make a Soviet preventive or preemptive strike more likely. Most West German commentators find heavy fortification
of the border politically unacceptable, as it would affirm the permanent division of Germany. Possibly it might become acceptable in a generation or two, if all-German nationalism continues to fade.

No early first-use has been endorsed by many NATO strategists, including General Bernard Rogers. It has perhaps been made slightly more feasible by the recent East-West agreements on monitoring troop maneuvers to prevent surprise attack, since first-use would be most necessary against an unreinforced surprise attack, mounted by WTO (Warsaw Treaty Organization) forces already in position. NATO has in some ways seemed to move toward no-early-first-use, with modest improvements in conventional capabilities, the unilateral withdrawal of over two thousand nuclear weapons from Europe in the past few years, and now by the INF (intermediate-range nuclear force) agreement. But this posture, by allowing nuclear first-use if conditions require it and retaining substantial nuclear capabilities, preserves some nuclear deterrent, at least against deep and massive Soviet attack. The American bishops strongly disapproved of first-use but did not categorically condemn it; they urged rapid efforts to move away from reliance on nuclear weapons in Europe. Their position may be compatible with a strong and well-controlled posture of no-early-first-use, though it would be a difficult reconciliation. The West German bishops avoided any kind of endorsement of no-first-use, in accord with their greater sense of the danger of invasion and their consistent acceptance of nuclear deterrent threats in the strong hope, and expectation, that the threats would never have to be executed in practice—that deterrence essentially can be relied upon.

A second possible defensive strategy is known as nonviolent or civilian-based defense. It is associated in the United States with the work of Gene Sharp, and in Europe particularly with some Scandinavian scholars. It is not to be equated with either simple surrender or passive defense; at its best it is active, complex, and requires both substantial preparation and a cohesive, determined population. Most strategic analysts reject it as not sufficiently deterring; it nevertheless remains the only option for one determined to resist yet committed to nonviolence. The American bishops commended it as a possibility, but fell far short of endorsing it as a truly feasible alternative.

A third option involves steps to improve East-West relations to the point where substantial military deterrence is no longer needed. Long-term hopes for an evolution of both Soviet and Western atti-
tudes are not necessarily naive; other intense rivalries have softened over the centuries, and really nothing is permanent. Both bishops’ letters urge such efforts, the Germans’ especially eloquently. Some such efforts are essential to any positive vision of peace, and are compatible with at least some other options that rely on forms of military deterrence. Yet rhetoric about the pursuit of such efforts while relying on deterrence merely “as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament” carries an aura of pious wishful thinking that is not easily dispelled. Few would anticipate the realization of such hopes in the next few decades.

In this survey of options, the nuclear varieties remain for consideration. A fourth option is the likelihood of an “inadvertent” nuclear response, modeled on Thomas Schelling’s “threat that leaves something to chance.”13 This is in fact what the NATO nuclear deterrent has become, partly by design and partly without intent or general awareness. Since the deliberate use of nuclear weapons, ordered by the National Command Authority or SACEUR, has become dubious (see below), current deployments and dual purpose systems have produced a “tight coupling” from conventional war to tactical nuclear war to central strategic nuclear war. Short-range weapons in Western Europe invoke the real possibility of quick “use them or lose them” decisions. Tactical nuclear weapons might have to be deployed rapidly out of their storage “igloos,” shortcircuiting the normal peacetime permissive action link (PAL) codes and procedures. Decisions to use such weapons might devolve to low-level military officers, highly decentralized and subjected to immediate threats of being overrun by hostile forces. Even if someone on “our” side did not initiate the use of nuclear weapons and subsequent “progress” up the escalation ladder, the threat of such decentralized and largely inadvertent escalation might well produce a supposedly preemptive strike by the Soviet side.14

Very plausibly this risk—that we would go to nuclear war even though we did not intend to do so—poses the currently most credible threat as a deterrent to Soviet conventional attack in Western Europe. For those who perceive that the greatest risk of war stems from a deliberate Soviet decision to launch an aggressive attack (on the analogy to Hitler in 1939) it may seem an acceptable deterrent. But for those who perceive that the greatest risk of war stems from an inadvertent escalation of an unintended political conflict (on the analogy of 1914, perhaps beginning with a popular revolt somewhere in Eastern Europe), the risk of losing military control over such an
initially uncontrollable incident is not acceptable. Nor does a strategy of threat by leaving something to chance deal effectively with the normative concerns about proportionate or discriminating nuclear deterrence that are so heavily emphasized in both bishops' letters. It implies that we will deliberately accept the risk that we will inadvertently do something that is morally unacceptable (use nuclear weapons in an undiscriminating and disproportionate manner). And the more implausible any deliberate use of nuclear weapons becomes, the more in the future NATO will be forced to rely on a strategy that leaves it subject to the whims of chance.

We turn then to the fifth option, which involves some form of deliberate nuclear response to conventional attack. Plans for using strategic or other weapons against Soviet territory require plausible means of limiting the damage the Soviet Union could or would inflict on the United States or its allies in return. It has often been assumed that no rational American president would deliberately take a course of action, in response to an invasion of Europe, if it would result in the destruction of American cities. The argument for the French force de frappe is premised on this assumption. We should acknowledge the force of the argument, despite the close affinity of the United States and Western Europe. It is imaginable that an American president, out of fear, anger, or some other "irrational" impulse, would order such acts, and that residual possibility does retain some deterrent capacity. That chance might conceivably be enough to satisfy some analysts, but most would regard it as unacceptably risky. Any strategy for a "rational" nuclear response by the United States would require some form of damage-limiting capability (to deny the Soviets' the ability to destroy American cities) and/or some form of limited, controllable response and expectation that the Soviets could and would restrain their own military response.

Damage-limiting nuclear forces typically entail prompt hard-target-kill weapons. They must be able to destroy the adversary's strategic delivery vehicles, and/or the adversary's command and control centers, so as to prevent substantial retaliation. Great accuracy alone does not suffice; they must be able to hit with rapidity as well. Only certain kinds of weapons have such a capability. They include land-based ICBM's, the soon-to-be-eliminated intermediate-range ballistic missiles like the Pershing II and SS-20, and sea-launched ballistic missiles, especially those fired in low trajectory from offshore locations only five to ten minutes away from their targets. To the degree they are MIRVed (increasing the ratio of warheads to targets),
their capabilities are increased. These weapons put the adversary's retaliatory capability at risk, thus endangering crisis stability by encouraging launch under (apparent) attack, launch on warning, or even preemption. A strategy of extended deterrence that depends on such capabilities will always carry serious risks in times of crisis.

Arms control advocates typically object most vigorously to these weapons, and some therefore supported President Reagan's abortive effort at Reykjavik to abolish ICBM's. The Federation of American Scientists endorsed the idea, as did former CIA director Stansfield Turner. Manned bombers and cruise missiles would not be affected. Other kinds of weapons become marginal cases, depending partly on modes of testing and deployment. Relatively invulnerable delivery vehicles like mobile land-based missiles or the new generation of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's) such as the Trident D-5 have prompt hard-target-kill capabilities, but are less destabilizing because they need not be fired on ambiguous warning in a "use it or lose it" situation. Submarine-launched missiles at "normal" long-range distances and high trajectories at least take about thirty minutes from launch to impact. International agreements not to station ballistic missile submarines off each others' shores, or not to test the missiles in low-trajectory modes, would help to reduce the risks. So too would placing an electronic twenty-four hour delay on SLBM launchings (not now inhibited by PALS).

A different kind of damage-limiting capability is represented by "passive" civil defense (fallout or blast shelters), and the expansive active defense envisaged by advocates of SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative). In a form equivalent to the penetration-proof bubble, active population defense might not be dangerous. But in that form active defense is even more of a pipe dream than is the notion that passive civil defense can truly protect the majority of a population against an adversary determined to exterminate it. A less-effective SDI would do little good against an adversary's first-strike, but might be useful against the kind of only limited and ragged retaliatory strike that could be mounted by the victim of an attack by good hard-target-kill forces. This would constitute a destabilizing influence in crisis.

Proposals, and plans, have been made to try to be able to wipe out Soviet command and control centers, thus denying them the ability to launch retaliatory forces even though the forces themselves might continue to exist. A fully effective capacity to wipe out Soviet command and control similarly seems beyond attainment; anything
less would produce the same kind of instabilities (encouraging preemption) as would other means of damage-limitation. Moreover, “decapitation” of an adversary’s command and control raises the risk of decentralized and uncontrollable retaliation by a fragmented adversary no longer able to negotiate or effectuate termination of the war. Thus all efforts to achieve damage-limitation by denying an adversary the capability to inflict damage are either undesirable or in practice unattainable.

There remains the possibility of some form of limited, controllable nuclear strike, in response to a Soviet conventional attack on an ally, that depends on invoking the adversary’s willingness to limit the damage that he in return will inflict. Here we are in the realm of theories of limited war and controlled tit-for-tat retaliation, ranging from ideas of tactical nuclear warfare to those of limited strategic warfare waged against counterforce targets. While these ideas have long been embodied in American war plans, both for Europe and in the SIOP (Single Integrated Operational Plan), analysts in the liberal arms control community largely regard them as a fantasy, dangerously removed from the physical and psychological realities of decision-making.¹⁷

To succeed, such efforts would require highly accurate and low-yield weapons capable of limiting collateral damage to civilians, tightly centralized command and control facilities able to restrict weapons use on both sides, excellent information-gathering and processing capacities by the adversary able to ascertain that only such limited usage was occurring, and an adversary’s continued willingness to limit its reply to some form of tit-for-tat. All this has to occur under the pressures of fear and ignorance implied by the term “the fog of war.” These conditions constitute a very tall order indeed, and are not met in contemporary American war plans. Many experts concur with John Steinbruner that:

Once the use of as many as 10 or more nuclear weapons directly against the USSR is seriously contemplated, U.S. strategic commanders will likely insist on attacking the full array of Soviet military targets. . . . The more likely result would be the collapse of U.S. forces into isolated units undertaking retaliation against a wide variety of targets at unpredictable moments.¹⁸

Most notions of limited war probably deserve the bad name they have acquired among arms controllers; they survive only because all the alternatives also seem so implausible.
Countercombatant Deterrence

There may be one form of very limited nuclear retaliation that minimizes the problems just identified. I have over the years continued to try to find some morally and prudentially acceptable version as perhaps the least bad of the above set of alternatives. The label I devised for such a strategy was "countercombatant," to distinguish it from counter-population strategies and also from counterforce strategies as commonly applied to targeting the adversary's nuclear retaliatory forces. Originally I used the term to expand my "acceptable" target-set beyond strategic retaliatory vehicles to include tactical force concentrations and supply depots, command and control centers, and militarily significant industry, transportation, internal security units and their headquarters, communication, and public utility facilities. The aim would be to deny the Soviet leadership the ability to prevent hostile incursions across its borders (especially from China), to retain control over its East European empire, or even reliably to maintain internal security and cohesion of its multinational state.  

It later became clear that such a target-set was much too inclusive for my purposes. On the one hand, it still incorporates the destabilizing effects of including strategic retaliatory forces and command and control centers. On the other it is so expansive as to include, at least in principle, thousands of targets located within or adjacent to civilian population concentrations and essential to operation of any kind of minimal postwar civilian economy. Destruction on such magnitude would be hardly distinguishable from that wrought by targeting population centers per se. It would, in the expansive version, in fact be indistinguishable from current versions of the SIOP.  

It therefore became imperative to delimit a much more restricted target-set, limited essentially to active and readily mobilizable military forces and supply depots. The number of targets should not be large, and need not be if the purpose is to degrade seriously, in the face of undamaged historic adversaries on the border, Soviet capabilities to hold territory and restive populations. The archetypal version of such a countercombatant deterrent would be one directed against Soviet troop concentrations (nearly fifty divisions) along the Chinese border, leaving the Soviet Union vulnerable to a broad military thrust from the People's Republic. Such a deterrent would not be strategically destabilizing by requiring prompt hard-target-kill
capabilities, and would not require high accuracy either for effectiveness or, in the sparsely populated areas under attack, to spare much collateral damage to civilians. Nor would it seem to risk nuclear winter, given the relatively small number of nuclear weapons required and their targeting away from highly combustible cities whose burning would pump great quantities of smoke and soot into the atmosphere. It is technically feasible as a limited, discriminating deterrent, directed against capabilities dear to the Soviet leadership (to contain China), and could be deemed proportionate in the face of extreme Soviet military provocation of the West. It would seem a proportionate response to a Soviet nuclear attack on European NATO allies, or even a big conventional attack, by raising the risk that the Soviet Union would lose the war on a second front. It is not so extreme a threat as is that of massive city destruction, but it should be severe enough to deter any kind of Soviet adventurism.

The most extreme nuclear threats are well above the threshold of threat necessary, and by the nature of their near-suicidal effects simply not very credible anyway. If a countercombatant deterrent did not intrinsically raise a very great likelihood of further escalation to widespread nuclear destruction it might actually be more credible (be perceived as having a higher probability of being carried out) than would a deterrence threat deemed likely to lead to mutual suicide. The combination of damage (disutility) and credibility (probability of execution) from such a threat might actually be optimal, better than that of MAD or of current policy.

I do not believe such a countercombatant deterrent is at the moment politically feasible, given the present levels and types of nuclear weapons. The current arsenal is many times bigger than it needs to be for this rather "minimal" deterrent (one which is not a minimum deterrent in the traditional sense of the minimum necessary for countercity MAD). The bureaucratic and political pressures to enlarge the target-set beyond this minimum, and thus to blur into traditional counterforce and counter-population capabilities, would be very severe. It will be hard to persuade decision makers to forego prompt hard-target-kill weapons. Neither in the popular understanding nor in the American security elite culture is there sufficient appreciation of the possibilities and requirement of a countercombatant strategy. To be workable, it would require some indication of Soviet willingness to respond analogously, and the United States does not face a readily analogous security threat on its own (Mexican and Canadian) borders. The command and control de-
mands on both sides are also formidable, beyond what is currently in place, and one must be fearful about breaching the firebreak to use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances. Such a strategy could not be carried out with the current or projected "tight coupling" of conventional to tactical nuclear to strategic nuclear weapons in Europe.

For deterring nonnuclear attacks many people (I among them) may continue to prefer in principle a policy of only a nonnuclear response, even recognizing the difficulties of making it fully effective in Europe and the often different preferences of Europeans themselves. The concept of a countercombatant deterrent for such purposes nevertheless should not utterly be dismissed. Moreover, for deterring nuclear attacks some form of limited and countercombatant deterrent is all that in my opinion can be morally acceptable by the traditional just war principles of proportionality and discrimination, and for that reason alone it demands continued attention. Even then I cannot remotely imagine it for "war-fighting," but only in conjunction with a negotiating strategy intended to bring all use of nuclear weapons to an immediate halt.

It is conceivable that a countercombatant deterrent could become feasible sometime in the future, given the will by governing authorities to make it so. Understanding of its possibilities seems to be growing in the circles of strategic analysis. It combines some of the virtues of "realist" analysis, emphasizing the need for some deterrent in a world of conflicting nation-states, with some of those of "idealist" analysis emphasizing the need for moral constraints and for a deterrent that does not exacerbate international fears and instabilities. It is, I believe, more feasible than is a "bluff" deterrent for which use is threatened but not intended. A countercombatant deterrent is compatible with a major mutual reduction in strategic arms, and with reduction in East-West tensions, especially as those tensions breed on a denial of the adversary's basic humanity. Such a denial of humanity is inherent in the kind of deterrent that envisages inflicting heavy civilian casualties. Only so long as we can be persuaded of adversary populations' evil, hostility, and subhumanity can such a deterrent be made to seem morally tolerable. Movement toward a very limited countercombatant deterrent, therefore, could be fully compatible with aims, well articulated by the German bishops' statement, to move toward a wider, more comprehensive, and truer peace.
EXTENDED DETERRENCE

NOTES


3. The Germans do not, of course, go nearly so far as do the French bishops in their letter, who treat deterrence as so imperative that they endorse their government’s explicitly counter-city targeting policy. The letters are appropriately titled, The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response (American), Out of Justice, Peace (German), and Winning the Peace (French).

4. They seem to differ in some of their estimates of probabilities; e.g., the Germans may be somewhat more sanguine about the likelihood that deterrence (perhaps even a “bluff” deterrent, see below) will work, and less skeptical than the Americans (and that is very skeptical) that escalation could be controlled if deterrence should fail. I believe their policy recommendations reflect these differences.


6. Hehir’s reasons that a bluff deterrent would not be acceptable were: (a) democratic governments must be candid with their citizens, (b) it would be inconsistent with the promises given in international alliance relationships, (c) expectations and predelegations in the chain of command would be inconsistent with withholding use under an intended mere bluff, (d) if the reasoning supporting “bluff only” were understood by the adversary the threat would have no deterrence credibility. Hence “threat without use” for nuclear deterrence would imply morally questionable behavior (a & b), and either would in execution result in immoral acts (c) or simply would not work (d). Hehir’s comments were made at a conference held in Bonn, Germany, in September 1987. Note that Hehir has shifted from his earlier espousal of a bluff deterrent, as in his contribution to Robert A. Gessert and J. Bryan Hehir, The New Nuclear Debate (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1976).


8. This research is described in much more detail in Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “Deterrence Failure and Crisis Escalation,” International Studies Quarterly 32, no. 14 (March 1988): 29–45.

ferred to the problems with the Weede analysis in an "Editorial Comment" im-
mmediately following his article.
10. For instance, the Argentine government seems never to have considered
that Britain might use its nuclear weapons in the Falkland-Malvinas war. Though
common in the first two decades of the cold war, no overt nuclear threats, for coer-
cion or deterrence, have been made since 1980. See Richard Betts, Nuclear Black-
mail and Nuclear Balance (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987), and Morton Halperin,
Nuclear Fallacy: Dispelling the Myth of Nuclear Strategy (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger,
1987).
11. See Michael MccGwire, Military Objectives in Soviet Foreign Policy (Washington,
12. See paragraph 150, "We do not perceive any situation in which the deliberate
initiation of nuclear warfare... can be morally justified."
13. Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press,
14. See Paul Bracken, The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 1983), chap. 5, and Daniel Charles, Nuclear Planning in NATO
16. I am not referring here to the form of SDI that would provide only a limited
point defense for hardened targets such as nuclear retaliatory forces. If cost-effec-
tive, such a limited capability would be strategically stabilizing. While technically
it could "limit damage" to those retaliatory forces, it would not be damage-limiting
in the more common sense of able to preserve the nation's basic social, economic,
and political structure.
17. For an excellent exposition on notions of targeting elites and protracted
war-fighting see Greg Herken, Counsels of War (New York: Knopf, 1985).
19. Bruce Russett, Power and Community in World Politics (New York: Freeman,
21. See Russett, The Prisoners of Insecurity: Nuclear Deterrence, the Arms Race, and
Arms Control (New York: Freeman, 1983), chap. 6, and "Sensible Deterrence as
22. Soviet troops on the Chinese border—in many cases not morally culpable
for their position, not a direct threat to the United States, and perhaps not yet
engaged in any hostile action toward China—would probably constitute a licit target,
but nonetheless a regrettable one.