11-17-2000

Trends. Head Count and Nuclear War: What To Believe

Editor

Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Sometimes one might forget the ongoing threat of nuclear war, what with all the daily political crises that pop up on the world stage. Yet, there appear to be at least three significant conundrums in planning to deter nuclear war.

First, is decapitation a sought for goal or one to be avoided? In other words, should one advocate for efficient and robust command, control, communications, and intelligence systems for all the world's political actors so that no one is strategically blind and so that everyone can flexibly adapt to changing situations--even if one is also making potential adversaries more formidable? Or should one seek to blind and deter adaptation so that potential adversaries are less formidable--even if they then become less responsive to situational changes and cannot stop falling into war even if this were desired?

Second, denotations of some nuclear weapons-related language seem to lack clear ontological validity. For example, the denotations of tactical versus strategic, theatre versus national missile defense, and even offensive versus defensive weapons defy consensual explication and exemplification. Yet such language appears in nuclear weapons-related treaties.

Third, the very notion of nuclear deterrence is muddied in that much that is posited to be deterrent also can be posited to be provocative. Such is the case in analyzing the putative consequences of national missile defense, increases and decreases in nuclear warheads and delivery systems, and so on.

The exacting and highly specialized world of nuclear weapons strategy masks huge divergences of opinion about fundamentals, while assertions of certainty mask conceptual anarchism and chaos. Regardless of change in the post-Cold War and post-postmodern world, the sword of Damocles remains. (See Douglas, N.L. (2000). Enemies of critical thinking: Lessons from social psychology research. Reading Psychology, 21, 129-144; Forden, G. (September 6, 2000). World War III? Now? The New York Times, p. A31; Glanz, J. (September 4, 2000). Other systems might provide a U.S. missile shield. The New York Times, p. A1, A6; Smythe, W. E., & Chow, S. L. (1998). The formal and mental structures of semiotic processes. Theory and Psychology, 8, 783-803; Williams, R.L. (1999). Operational definitions and assessment of higher-order cognitive constructs. Educational Psychology Review, 11, 411-427; Winn, W., Hoffman, H., & Osberg, K. (1999). Semiotics, cognitive theory and the design of objects, actions and interactions in virtual environments. Journal of Structural Learning and Intelligent Systems, 14, 29-49.) (Keywords: Deterrence, Nuclear War.)

1