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THE MORAL DILEMMA OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

by

STEPHEN M. MILLETT

Reviewing the highlights of past American foreign policy, former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger observed in an address in London on 25 June 1976:

We must therefore conduct a diplomacy that deters challenges if possible and that contains them at tolerable levels if they prove unavoidable—a diplomacy that resolves issues, nurtures restraint, and builds cooperation based on mutual interest.¹

Kissinger may have been referring just to the policy of Soviet-American detente that he had championed since 1969, but his comments generally hold true for the goal of American relations toward Moscow since 1945.

The two principal concepts of American policy toward the Soviet Union have been deterrence and containment. The first seeks to avoid a military confrontation with the Soviets by threatening the use of nuclear retaliation in response to grievous Soviet provocations. The logic of deterrence (a theoretical logic without conclusive empirical verification) has been that if the possible retaliatory strength is great enough and the fear of such retaliation is repugnant enough, the potential aggressor will refrain from a direct challenge. Since nuclear arms are indeed of great destructiveness and repugnance, the US can keep the Soviets at bay, so the logic goes.

The concept of deterrence went hand-in-glove with that of containment, which sought to girdle Soviet territory and geopolitical power within the postwar status quo of 1945. As originally expounded by George F. Kennan in 1947, containment asserted that

the paradoxes of the Soviet system could not be solved without continued attempts on the part of the Soviets to expand their system. Therefore, the US had to meet and repel Soviet aggrandizement, especially in the critically important industrial regions of Western Europe and Japan.²

Kennan later argued that he perceived Soviet political threats as more serious to the security of the West than military ones.³ However, regardless of the evolution of his thinking, certain influential American policymakers (Clark Clifford, Paul Nitze, and John Foster Dulles, to name just three) came to identify containment with military deterrence to prevent Soviet expansion. Indeed, after the Korean War erupted in 1950, American authorities increasingly assumed that the most serious communist threat to the West was military aggression, often drawing a historical analogy between Sino-Soviet provocations and the aggressions of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during the 1930's.⁴

The objective of both deterrence and containment was Western security with peace—the avoidance of a catastrophic World War III, which was popularly feared as the war that would end all civilization, East and West, socialist and capitalist. Along with peace, the objective was the preservation of the Western democratic social and political way of life; war was tolerable only as the last desperate defense of the West against Soviet military and ideological power. Of course, war itself, regardless of the cause, was expected to be devastating to the West, if not absolutely fatal. American foreign policy worldwide also sought to prevent drastic

internal political changes in individual countries as effected by military coercion from without. Deterrence and containment, therefore, were perfectly consistent with American ideology as expressed in the Atlantic Charter (1941), the United Nations Declaration (1942), the Declaration of Liberated Europe (1945), the Truman Plan (1947), and the Marshall Plan (1947).

However, the doctrine of deterrence, especially as applied in its broadest context with containment, posed a disturbing dilemma for the US. The principal instruments of deterrence were nuclear weapons, which could inflict far-reaching damage to the Soviet Union. Americans hoped that the spectre of nuclear retaliation alone would frustrate Soviet challenges to Western interests. Yet, the same nuclear weapons, if used (the ultimate credibility for deterrence), would cause the very World War III, with all its horrendous consequences, that the US was trying to prevent. Deterrence was thus a two-edged sword: it had to deter both the deterred and the deterrer from embarking into confrontations that would lead to total war.

The extensive literature on deterrence has tended to concentrate on how the American nuclear arsenal should affect Soviet behavior. It has also emphasized the technical and operational aspects of nuclear strategy. This literature, however, has neglected to give due attention to the self-restraints associated with the use of nuclear weapons. A common assumption has been that the nation that possessed nuclear weapons is free to use them whenever it so chooses. The thesis of this paper, however, is that the possession and deployment of operational nuclear weapons place significant restraints on the nation possessing and deploying them. And of these restraints, moral inhibitions play a significant role.

The fundamental American moral dilemma of nuclear deterrence is how the US can prevent one evil (communist expansion of power at the expense of Western interests) by threatening to unleash another

evil (nuclear destruction and radioactive contamination). Likewise, the logic of deterrence may require ever more weapon systems, warheads, and megatonnage to preserve its doctrinal integrity. That is, nuclear deterrence by one country leads to nuclear deterrence by two, in turn creating an arms competition which in itself raises the fear of war by accident, miscalculation, or insanity. The question thus becomes: Can a nation preserve peace by amassing huge nuclear forces and threatening a war which it so desperately seeks to avoid?

Some students of international relations will immediately reject the moral dilemma of deterrence by asserting that concepts of morality and evil are irrelevant in modern, secular macropolitics. The so-called "realists" will argue that national interests and power rather than idealism motivate political behavior in the world. They will point out that there have been few examples of explicitly moral behavior among Western nations since the erosion of Judeo-Christian religious standards of conduct among sovereigns. But beyond that, some would argue that the US cannot afford the luxury of a moral foreign policy in relations with the atheist Marxist-Leninist countries that embrace an ideology so radically different from and inimical to American ideology.

On the other hand, arguments can be made that morality does indeed play an important role in international relations even today and even among nations with variant religious and political faiths (after all, Marxism is a product of Western culture). Some of the arguments appear esoteric and theoretical, but others, especially those that emphasize the political consequences of alienating world public opinion, seem pragmatic and relevant to present circumstances.⁵ This article, however, will not explore this line of thinking. Rather, the contention here is that the American people, decisionmakers, and opinion-makers hold certain beliefs deeply rooted in American political ideology and historical experience that do indeed place moral restraints on American deterrence.

For example, one hears the question, Why did the US not hit the Soviets with nuclear

weapons in the 1940's before the Soviets had them? Certainly the Soviets provoked the US sorely with the Berlin blockade, the communist coup in Prague, the communization of Eastern European countries, encroachments upon Iran, and support for the Communists in the Chinese civil war. Even if the US had the operational abilities and the political impulse to devastate the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons, morality prevented it from doing so. President Harry S. Truman, the only man ever to have authorized the dropping of atomic bombs on enemy targets, felt deeply that nuclear armaments were too brutal and too indiscriminately destructive to use in less than the most extreme situation. "The destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was lesson enough to me," he recorded in his memoirs; "The world could not afford to risk war with atomic weapons."⁶

Indeed, Truman's aversion to nuclear weapons caused Secretary of Defense James Forrestal to wonder during the Berlin blockade of 1948 whether the US would even use them in an actual war with the Soviets. The President assured Forrestal that he would use them if it were absolutely necessary. Forrestal next questioned whether the American people would support the President in the use of nuclear weapons. A gathering of 20 newspaper publishers unanimously agreed that the public would *expect* the President to employ atomic bombs in a war with Soviet Russia.⁷ The Secretary, however, did not pursue the next logical question: Would the people support the use of atomic bombs in a situation short of full-scale, declared war? Former Secretary of State James Byrnes asserted in 1947 that they would not: "No President in the absence of a declaration of war by Congress could authorize an atom bomb [to be dropped on an enemy target] without running the risk of impeachment."⁸

The argument for a "preventive" nuclear war has never been seriously argued by a responsible decisionmaker; after all, it advocates the very war that the US is trying to avoid. As Bernard Brodie observed in 1959:

Only by adopting a rigid dictatorship within

could American leaders shut out reports from abroad of the unimaginable horror of their own creation [nuclear war]. It argues some want of imagination to assume . . . that the American people could acquiesce in such a deed and then go about their usual business of pursuing happiness, free of guilt as well as fear.⁹

If one can dismiss preventive war as morally outrageous, one has more difficulty dismissing massive retaliation. John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959, advocated the threat of large-scale nuclear retaliation against Soviet or communist Chinese threats to the interests of the Western World, even in situations not of first importance to the security of the US. What Dulles wanted was a deterrent that discouraged the entire spectrum of Soviet mischief, not merely overt Soviet attacks. The problem was that massive retaliation never enjoyed sufficient credibility to work successfully. It was unlikely, then as now, that the American people would tolerate "nuclear blackmail" in ambiguous or even marginally important circumstances deemed unworthy of risking war. As Professor Henry Kissinger of Harvard observed in 1957:

The notion of a nuclear stalemate under present conditions is more a testimony to the fears and conscience of the non-Soviet world than to actual Soviet power. In the short

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term the stalemate, if it exists, will be a balance between our unwillingness to use all-out war to achieve our goals and the Soviet inability to do so.¹⁰

From the moral perspective, perhaps the most troublesome issue is the preemptive nuclear strategy: striking an enemy just before he himself is expected to strike you. Self-defense certainly has moral justification. A nation has the political duty as well as the abstract right to prevent harm to itself, even if it requires inflicting harm upon others. In the 16th and 17th centuries, jurists Francis de Victoria and Hugo Grotius, who were deeply rooted in humanist and Christian values, espoused the concept of just cause for war, including self-defense, avenging harm, and recovery of property.¹¹ By crippling the enemy forces poised to attack, the preemptive strike may limit the anticipated damage he can inflict. The moral justification, however, must be in the supreme confidence that the enemy does indeed intend to strike and is not merely posturing. There is always uncertainty in the preemptive strategy. The anticipatory first strike will surely lead to war, whereas waiting for the enemy to attack first, even when the consequences might be devastating, may result in avoiding the conflagration altogether. There is thus a fine distinction, not easily discernible morally, between the preemptive strike in self-defense and vicious aggression.

To avoid the dilemmas of the preemptive strategy, the Kennedy Administration in the early 1960's adopted the nuclear strategy of the second-strike deterrent. After fortifying ("hardening") and diversifying its nuclear forces, the US could absorb an all-out first strike by the Soviet Union and still have enough surviving weapons to destroy the enemy. The logic was that if the Soviets knew that the US could indeed endure an all-out attack and still provide a cataclysmic response, then the Soviets would have no incentive to attack in the first place.

The moral dilemma of deterrence seemed solved in this second-strike strategy, although

the strategy in fact raised other moral questions. What if the Soviets attacked American troops or allies with conventional forces alone in distant theaters? What if the Soviets maneuvered the US into using nuclear weapons first? At what point in an escalating crisis would the American people support the use of nuclear weapons as morally justifiable? Fortunately, these difficult questions were never put to the test, since the US had sizable conventional forces to supplement its nuclear arsenal. Indeed, General Maxwell Taylor has argued that the diplomatic triumph of the US over the Soviets in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 was due primarily to American superiority of conventional weapons in the area of crisis rather than to superiority of nuclear weapons.¹²

Another moral problem of the second-strike strategy revolved around the concept of "assured destruction." The Kennedy Administration set as a theoretical objective the ability to kill 20 to 25 percent of the Soviet people and destroy 50 percent of Soviet industrial capacity to achieve "assured destruction"—the level of punishment that would be unacceptable, and therefore deterring, to the Soviets. In reality, the US force structure by 1968 could have eliminated at least 50 percent of the Soviet population and 80 percent of its industrial capacity.¹³ The moral question that followed was, Should the US hold half of all Russians hostage when in fact they were not responsible for the actions of their own leaders? The objective of assured destruction required counter-value targeting analogous to strategic bombing of civilians. As one expert remarked:

I cannot see how a city-targeting strategy can possibly be reconciled with principles of the just employment of armed force, even though to threaten destruction of millions of noncombatants is by no means as evil as would be their actual destruction, and though the threat may deter war.¹⁴

The counterforce strategy of targeting military targets alone avoids some of the

moral questions of counter-value, but it raises moral problems of its own. Nuclear weapons often produce lethal fallout that can kill and sicken people and animals far away from the area of blast. The surface burst required to knock out a missile silo or any other hardened target can spew radioactive debris hundreds of miles. Millions of civilians could be killed or incapacitated downwind from a nuclear counterforce attack.¹⁵

It is purely wishful thinking to contemplate a world without nuclear weapons. Perhaps it is an idle dream even to speculate about nuclear strategies that conform ideally to moral standards. Yet morality is a factor that must be considered in nuclear strategy. Even if there were no universal moral standards, American leaders are restrained by the moral sensitivities of the American people. Ultimately, the power of the US rests not upon technology and weapon systems, but upon the resolution and conviction of the American people. Clausewitz argued that public support for the policies of the state are vital for any military success: "One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt [of the sword], while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely honed blade."¹⁶

The anti-war protest movement in the US during the Vietnam War demonstrated that many Americans have deep feelings toward what is "right" and "wrong," what is "just" and "evil," in American foreign policy, though we will not pretend that all protesters acted from moral imperatives. There is every reason to expect a great public outcry if Washington employed nuclear weapons in such a way that alienated its moral sensitivities. Henry Kissinger, who himself was the object of moral protest while he directed American foreign policy, observed in 1977: "Our tradition and the values of our people ensure that a policy that seeks only to manipulate force would lack all conviction, consistency, and public support."¹⁷

The central question is whether nuclear deterrence itself is moral. One might be tempted to argue a priori that deterrence is

moral simply because deterrence has been the proclaimed strategy and there has not been a nuclear war. But such thinking is superficial. One needs to ask whether deterrence has a moral objective and moral means to achieve that objective. In the narrowest of terms, the objectives of deterrence are morally acceptable to the American people. There is little doubt that the American Government would use nuclear weapons, and the people would fully support it, in retaliation for an attack upon the US or its principal allies. Even in the absence of a military attack, nuclear retaliation for grave damage to US interests would be accepted in certain dire situations. But the use of nuclear weapons for convoluted political purposes, especially in politically and morally questionable circumstances, would likely not be acceptable to most Americans. The collateral objective of deterrence is peace; Americans not only approve of peace but crave it.

If the objectives of deterrence are moral, then it is the means of achieving those objectives that are often morally questioned. How can one justify the brutal killing of millions of innocent people and the possible contamination of the earth by nuclear weapons? For obviously the potential *use* of nuclear weapons is the logically derived consequence of deterrence. The only comfortable answer is to accept as an article of faith that nuclear weapons are so horrendous that peace will be preserved by the threat alone that they will be used. Yet the doubts are nagging: Can war be prevented by threatening to wage it? Can the use of force be precluded by the threat of counter-violence? Can a moral objective be morally accomplished by immoral means, or the threat of using immoral means? Does the right justify the might?

Judging from the experience of the last 34 years, we can tentatively say in answer to the group of questions above that deterrence is moral when the deterrer exercises moral restraints. After all, the tools of power are inanimate with no inherent morality. It is man and society that have moral qualities, so it is in human behavior that the moral problem resides. The wise and restrained

employment of force can indeed be moral, even when the force can inflict damage and pain to others. It is imperative, both from the perspective of morality and from that of physical survival, that the nations possessing nuclear weapons practice the utmost caution and self-inhibition. The threat of retaliation in kind, of course, is a powerful inhibitor, but external restraints are not enough to preclude nuclear confrontation. To be moral, and to be effective practically, the country that practices deterrence against other countries must also practice deterrence against itself.

Henry Kissinger rightfully observed:

Morality without security is ineffectual; security without morality is empty. To establish the relationship and proportion between these two goals is perhaps the most profound challenge before our government and our nation.¹⁸

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