NUCLEAR
DETERRENCE
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Nuclear deterrence evolved as an intellectual construct in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The purpose of deterrence is to deter a nuclear and a conventional attack on the territory of a state, of allies, client states and friendly neutrals. Credibility is the additive of effective deterrence. The problem arises when there is search for absolute means to provide foolproof deterrence.

The crucial point is what the aggressor believes and implements. As Henry Kissinger rightly points out that "deterrence occurs above all in the minds of men".1 The psychological framework of deterrence determines the behaviour of the deterrer and the deterred.2

Deterrence has been referred to as a policy and as a situation. It cannot only prevent war but also limit it to certain areas while using the threat to avoid it in other areas. A deterrent situation is one where conflict is contained within the boundary of threats which are neither executed nor tested.3

There is a distinction between deterrence and defense. Deterrence denotes a policy of dissuasion based on threatening results that would outweigh benefits hoped for. Defense is a policy of dissuasion based on counterposing forces so that an attack would fail. Defense is put into operation once a war begins while deterrence is to prevent a war from breaking out. Once an offensive move is made, defense tactics take over and deterrence fails.4 States normally attempt to deter by defensive methods and a perfect defense is an excellent deterrent.5 When defense is weak, offensive technology becomes a tempting alternative. Any improvement in defense reduces the incentive to attack but forces the adversary to improve their own defense, prompting an arms race and development of nuclear weapons in particular. An effective nuclear deterrence obviously requires sufficient nuclear capability. Planning to prevail in a nuclear war is the aim of deterrence as the potential adversary has to be convinced of the retaliatory capacity of the deterrer.

In the conventional sphere, the superiority of the defensive over the offensive capabilities promoted stability. This is the essence of dissuasion through defense. Thus deterrence and


defense though analytically different, are interrelated.

Nuclear weapons can deter but cannot defend. Thus the central problem of deterrence is that no offensive deterrent, no matter how fearsome, is likely to work forever and the consequences of its failure for civilization would be intolerable. Effective nuclear deterrence obviously requires sufficient nuclear capability. Planning to 'prevail' is the aim of deterrence as the potential adversary has to be convinced of the retaliatory capacity of the deterrer.

One needs also to note the distinction between deterrence and "compellence", the latter being the threat of force to make a state do something or undo something already done. Compellence may not be sought for aggressive purposes. As Thomas Schelling points out, compellence is much harder to achieve, is more complex and certainly most dangerous when it involves the threat to use nuclear weapons. It could be attempted in unusual and extreme circumstances and it carries a high probability of failure unless the conditions are right.

Bernard Brodie was the first American scholar to understand the strategic implications of the advent of the nuclear weapons. In 1946 he formulated the first framework of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. He observed,

"Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose is must be to avert them. It can have no other useful purpose." 

Deterrence is based on four conditions:
1. Capability: the state engaged in deterrence must have the capability to ensure that the political adversaries will profit less by going to war than by refraining from war. In order to preserve deterrent capability the state must be able to deliver nuclear capability under all possible circumstances. There is then a general agreement on invulnerability. A second-strike capability underpins a deterrent posture.

2. Will: the deterrent state must have the will to use the capability, if necessary. This necessitates a secure command and control systems and a general state of readiness of the nuclear stockpile. These arrangements also require targeting policies and deployment of nuclear warheads and delivery systems in a mode which will deliver the warheads of the target at the appointed time. Flexible response, counterforce and countervalue strategies are part of this effort.


Credibility: the political adversary must be convinced of the capabilities and the will of the deterring state. A convincing readiness to fight the nuclear war at any level is necessary to ensure credibility. Civil defense measures and the complete integration of the nuclear forces into the battle plans are supposed to make deterrence posture more credible. Not only must nuclear forces be vulnerable but the potential adversary must believe that they are. Sheer overkill capability and redundant delivery system enhance the posture of deterrence. Deterrence cannot be too timid to lose credibility or too vigorous to promote war.

- Rationality: the centrepiece of US policy of deterrence is the rationality of the leaders of the nuclear weapon states. They are supposed to make a rational calculus of costs and benefits of their policies. Steinbrunner rightly points out the irrationality of carrying out the threat on which the policy of deterrence is based, should deterrence fail and war begin. It is assumed that no rational decision-maker would provoke a nuclear war because there do not seem to be any conceivable objectives of a state which can be achieved by the use of nuclear weapons. The first World War is a classic example of how a war can start irrationally. It was a war that no one wanted 14 and a


war which was initiated by circumstances that were trivial and yet out of control. Stress and time pressure too take their toll. The Cuban crisis would have shown entirely different results but for the fact that the Kennedy administration had both these vital aspects to their benefit. Morgan says that the absence of a rational basis for retaliation, if deterrence fails, would guarantee no disincentive to the opponent who consider attacking. Further what may seem rational to some may seem irrational to others. Hence for deterrence to be successful, a certain level of rationality is presumed in the decision-making process of the state which is to be deterred. The penalties of nuclear retaliation are expected to impose caution on the behaviour of the states locked in nuclear deterrence. When mutual deterrence is in operation, similar assumption about the rationality of decision-makers are implicit in the working of this posture.

But there is a paradox in the assumption of this rationality. Once deterrence has failed it is most irrational to carry out the retaliatory second-strike because the retaliator will also suffer incalculable losses. If the carrying out of the threat is irrational and there is an assumption of rationality, then the threat will not deter, and deterrence will fail. Morgan has


17. Garden, n.11.
summarized this problem:

The ultimate problem in devising a theory of deterrence is to simultaneously postulate that officials in government are sometimes in some ways conscience and rational, yet take into account that certain forces work to make their behaviour unconscious and irrational."18

Deterrence thus operates because of the entirely rational fear that the adversary will act less than rationally, once it has suffered severe losses. The enormity of stakes involved in a nuclear war for our society ensure that the process by which it might come to be used, stimulate vast and varied debates of concern for the consequences in the event of such an outcome. The question of how, when and why to use nuclear weapons remains a matter of conjecture. Henry Stimson, Secretary of War from 1940-1945 made it clear that the common objective throughout the war was to first produce an atomic weapon and use it. On no other ground could so much time and expenditure be justified.19

The problem of nuclear strategy has become an inherent part of our lives. Worse still, much of what is said today as a new insight has been said already - maybe in a more sincere and effective manner. Hence most of the material is derivative.

18. Morgan, n.6, p.102.
Basil Liddell Hart has rightly said that strategy is "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil ends of policy" stressing the role of political sphere as the source of strategic objectives.20

II

1. Security of the United States and the Two World Wars

The dilemma in the U.S national security is that it is less secure today than it was before - a situation created by the technological advances, Soviet decisions and American choices of strategy and policy. Until the coming of the Twentieth Century, war had its own place, significant yet secondary but never a threat that was sought or felt.

The gradual emergence of a system of politics of any one nation or group of nations balanced against each other, in Europe, reached its zenith in the Nineteenth Century when the Congress of Vienna redrew the map of Europe to avoid concentration of power in any one place, once Napoleon was vanquished. This resulted in the creation of the "Concert of Europe" - a general agreement among great powers to seek national interest within the realms of

20. Hart, Basil Liddell, Strategy: The Indirect Approach (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p.334. Strategy is from the Greek word 'Strategos', i.e. the art of the General. General Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) defined it as the use of battle to forward the aim of war.
interest of the system as a whole and hold international congresses rather than go to war.

The phase of industrialization however changed the technology of war in a world that had completely outrun areas that could be colonised, culminating in a race among few powers to outrun the already 'owned' areas. Both World War I and II were a result of imbalance in this power relationship in Europe.

It is near impossible to fathom that people were confident of the expansion of wealth, science, culture and that consequent improvement in rational thinking would never be interrupted by another war which would destroy even the difference between combatants and non-combatants. In the words of Raymond Aron, with World War I began the century of total war, a century when even in peacetime, preparations for war (in the near future!) and national security claimed "priority in resource utilization over social and economic development. This is a century when the world is balanced between war and peace - we win if we don't fight and if we lose we are not there to be perturbed by our conscience' 21

U.S potential to be a power to be reckoned with was tested for the first time in 1917, as she sent a modest force to

France to help the exhausted European nations to reach a victorious outcome in World War I., in a short duration. The first World War witnessed the most terrible slaughter as rivals tried to penetrate the defences of the other involving the whole society - in victory and destruction. Success depended on the numerical and industrial strength of nations and the two sides engaged in a process of exhausting each other's prime resources and human lives. The results were slow and demanded great patience and level headedness, resulting in search for new ways to achieve a decisive victory quickly. A solution was soon found in the need for mobility of weapons - which were yet untapped for full utilization - the use of tanks and aircraft. The doctrine of strategic bombardment provided for the most effective use of aircraft to attack the social and industrial bases of the enemy by preemptive strike on air bases, without formal declaration of war to bring a moral and material collapse. This belief in the effectiveness of the first blow is due to the identification of the morale as the critical determinant in warfare. Clausewitz described the physical force as the wooden hilt of the sword while moral force was the shining blade. The United States has enjoyed this unique position of

superiority at hardly any cost to itself — situated away from all problem states and protected by the ocean on both sides. This power position reached its pinnacle in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

From 1940-1945 the US underwent a profound change. It created a large armed force, mobilised its human and material resources for the prosecution of war, and even harnessed the energy trapped in the atom for military purposes. They exercised great restraint at the start of World War II due to uncertainty and fear of devastation resulting from the bombardment of each other’s cities. Interestingly, Hitler himself had laid down a “guiding action on the part of Germany. The erosion of this restraint took place after the fall of France. The failure to utilise air power as a military and discriminatory instrument was due to the technological inaccuracies and proximities of the civilian areas to military targets with no rigid boundaries specifying a combat zone.

The very first year of the war demonstrated the limitations in the effectiveness of air power. While the Luftwaffe destroyed the air bases of the British Air Force and struck the civilian population there was an underestimation of civilian morale and an overestimation of air defence.

The introduction of nuclear weapons created a wholly unprecedented situation, rendering all previous strategic theories and concepts immediately obsolete. Ironically these weapons were created by a fear of consequences of a unilateral German success in the military exploitation of the atomic energy. 24 The strategic use of the bomb was determined by the conditions then prevailing. By mid 1945 Japan was a spent force and the problem for America was to get Japan to surrender unconditionally and end the war quickly. It was thus necessary to emphasize the uniqueness and awesome destructive power of the bomb and, in the words of General Leslie Groves, "adversely effect the will of the Japanese people to continue the war 25 by a surprise

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24. History would have been different had Germany made the bomb.

attack. The atomic bomb was to be a psychological weapon.

The decisive effect of nuclear weapons was undisputed at this stage. The nuclear bomb did not terminate the war absolutely but accelerated the speed of termination of war. It restrengthened the argument in favour of effective strategic bombardment.

2. The Policy of Containment

With the onset of the Cold War, the United States evolved a policy of containment of the Soviet Union. Though it had military implications, it was not clear what military resources might be needed to sustain containment, what military threats might be encountered and how they might be met. For Kennan, who propounded the concept, containment was not just the prevention of Soviet expansion but a way to create awareness of the benefits of long term peace. Once this awareness was


27. Stimson & Bundy, n 19, p. 36, 370, 373.


imbibed by Soviet leaders the utility of containment would end. Kennan opposed the harsher features that containment developed with the deepening crisis of the Cold War. This military containment was extended to the Far East—where the circumstances were far removed from those in Europe.

3. Nuclear Deterrence

While containment became the central theme of US foreign policy, the Western powers had little conventional military power in comparison to the vast Soviet Red Army but the US was the only nation that had atomic bombs. American strategy at this point was to deter the outbreak of a new war by threatening destruction of the Soviet homeland if the Soviets were to seize Western Europe. The strategy played to America's strength and Russia's weakness. The Soviet leadership would not attack Western Europe due to fear of a retaliatory strike. The nuclear threat need never be carried out. As a strategy,

31. For a critical appraisal of military containment, see Kennan, George F., The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet and American Relations in the Atomic Age (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

32. Smoke, n., p. 52. Later Kennan specified that he meant political and not military containment of Soviet power.

deterrence seemed straightforward and simple. Nobody knew whether
it would work or not.

Containment and deterrence reigned supreme in their own spheres. The former was pursued by political and economic means and the latter by the US Strategic Air Command (SAC). However the strength of Soviet conventional forces in Central Europe was exaggerated. The strategy of nuclear deterrence was an "empty threat" in the early post war period for the US did not have sufficient bombs to carry out the threat. In the following years two events shaped American foreign and security policies which determined the contours of international politics and relationships for more than four decades.

a) the Communist takeover of China and
b) the first Soviet atomic test announced by the United States on September 23, 1949.

The Americans took to "Operation Skywatch" to scan the sky for incoming bombers. They hadn't expected Soviet to catch up with US so soon. Not surprisingly the combination of ideology and the atom bomb inculcated a sense of fear in the minds of the Americans as to what would be the next step of the Communists?

Together, they ruled one fourth of world population & controlled


most of the earth's landmass. Truman ordered a complete review and reanalysis of US national security policies which produced a landmark in US national security affairs and he ordered US Defence Department to further the development of a more terrible nuclear weapons that was now possible (code named "Super") which led to the explosion of a hydrogen device in the Pacific Islands in 1952.

4. National Security Council (N.S.C)-68

The National Security Council analysed the challenge posed to American security and submitted four options in April 1950. A comprehensive national security policy and a general strategy, proposed by Paul Nitze, the four options were:

a) To continue policies then being pursued.
b) Revert to isolationism and defend just the West.


c) To launch a "preventive war".

d) To build up American power.

The last point gained currency - a build up was necessary to deter Soviet or Soviet directed actions. The need was also felt for developing an adequate defense against air attack on the US along with a defense against air and surface attack on the UK, and Western Europe. NSC - 68 set out explicitly the relations of power and the will to use force. Without a superior military strength, politics of containment - based on gradual coercion - would be no more than a policy of bluff. The document called for the need to erode legitimacy of nuclear role of Soviet Union over Eastern Europe and in areas under its control. In the period of Dulles, this policy was termed "rollback" replacing containment. It recommended defense against air attack towards which no efforts had been made until then. This was one specific recommendation of NSC - 68 which was carried out. However a Soviet invasion of Western Europe meant an all out war - with Soviets in a position to counter attack. The nuclear forces were


44. Smoke, n. 24, p. 59.
now beginning to be seen as mutually deterring pushing them towards a nuclear stalemate. The search for an alternative required to protect their European allies, cleared the way for a US conventional build up. The idea was that US forces would serve as a 'tripwire' - not a force providing man for man against the Red Army but large enough to prove the determination to defend Europe and make an invasion costly for the Soviets to contemplate. For this NATO would also have to contribute forces. (However NATO allies could not shoulder this burden by 1954 - as it meant a large US armed forces and air force commitment in Europe along with adequate naval protection of its supply line to and from Europe.)

With the Soviet Union catching up with its nuclear test the assumption that deterrence was automatically ended. Deterrence now became an analytical problem and a vital policy objective - one that could not be abandoned nor pursued with a clear limit of its effective duration.

Before the policy advocated in NSC - 68 could be adopted, the US was involved in the Korean war. The American conventional and nuclear weapons policy followed the outbreak of


43. Kissinger, Henry A. Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy (New York : Harper and Bros., 1957). This book made the first major attempt to rethink American foreign policy on the premise that the Soviet Union had attained the capacity to destroy American cities.
the Korean war and gradually led to the articulation of a strategy of nuclear deterrence.

The chief difficulty one came across while assessing the policy of deterrence was the belief that deterrence itself was a relatively straightforward thing. While the meaning is simple and straightforward the complication involved was finding the right means for implementing it, the best way to threaten it and how to punish the adversary if it failed. 44

3.2 The 'New Look' Policy

The first era of American military superiority lasted through the decade of 1950s. While the US was riding high on a rapidly improving air defense system including radar stations across Canada, jet interceptors, ground launched aircraft missile ('Nike') etc and large quantities of nuclear bombs for strategic delivery the USSR was far behind. The Soviet arsenal grew only later in size. This 'New Look' policy of the Eisenhower administration stressed the importance of technology over manpower. 45

44. Morgan, n.6.

3.3 Massive Retaliation

The Korean war and the technological innovations had a farreaching impact on the evolution of American national security doctrine. It was during this period that the SAC, the Air Defense-Command, and the nuclear weapon's program received top priority. At this time, the Soviets had in the meantime demonstrated their non-nuclear capability.

This was the period of American military superiority and, as a cheap alternative to conventional weapons, it provided "more bang for the buck". A direct product of the Korean war it remained the official U.S strategy till 1961. The objective of Massive Retaliation policy was to instantly strike back where it hurt most by means and places of American choosing. It is not clear how large a conflict would have been before it could be countered by a massive retaliation. This uncertainty kept the rival wondering.

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46. Partly influenced by the H-Bomb tested on 8th August, 1953, Kaplan writes on the relief that the Americans felt because the Soviet H-Bomb was less powerful. However while the US bomb was a 'device' regarding refrigeration, which meant that the bomb could not be sent up on a rocket or a bomber, the Soviet fallout samples had lithium. This implied a quicker pace at which the Soviet ICBM was developing with the H-Bomb. Consequently the US Atlas Project had to be pushed at a faster pace. See, Kaplan, Fred, The Wizards of Armageddon (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), pp. 112-113.


wondering that response would result from a particular kind of attack. There are three occasions when the Eisenhower administration had to use the policy of massive retaliation to deal with Cold War challenges:

1. In 1953 Eisenhower sent a message of threat to Communist China that unless the stalled Korean truce negotiations bore fruit soon the US would use nuclear strikes on China. The Chinese accepted the U.N armistice in a slightly modified form.

2. A veiled threat was communicated for a formal armistice day statement by Washington warning the Chinese not to resume the war.49

3. Within a few months the Chinese were threatened again of an attack if they intervened in the Vietnam war.

It is still unclear whether the Chinese needed to be deterred and it must also be noted that the Chinese were then a non-nuclear weapon state. As the Soviet nuclear arsenal grew, the American tendency to use nuclear threats declined but the Eisenhower administration did not give up the policy of massive retaliation.

It was as critics of the policy of massive retaliation that several civilian strategists published books and articles. This was the beginning of a new field of national security studies. Roots of the criticism lay in the potential for excessive violence and an attempt to find less dangerous ways to live with nuclear weapons. In the face of growing strategic power of the Soviet Union, there was less possibility of the US using the policy of massive retaliation.

This disbelief in the efficacy of the policy of massive retaliation was what really counted. The American commitment to NATO implied US acceptance to go for a nuclear war to defend Europe but the Europeans especially the French, doubted this commitment. Secondly, massive retaliation was not a rational response to a minor conflict. Thirdly, it was feared that the policy made nuclear war more likely as the SAC bombers were concentrated in limited areas and even one Soviet bomber with nuclear bombs could destroy a whole base. This could create fear through uncertainty of a possible ground strike during a crisis and might preempt a nuclear first strike. By 1973 Kissinger asserted that once nuclear parity was achieved, massive retaliation was nothing but "mutual suicide".

Limited War

The Korean war furthered the strategic thinking on the concept of "Limited War". The war had been fought within a narrow area although neither side was constrained by military, economic or technical reasons. This system of "Graduated Deterrence" was debated heatedly in the 1950's as an alternative to an all out war. As the information on the growth of destructive capabilities and the after effects of the fall out became available, the awareness about the gravity of the situation heightened. What mattered at the time were the variations in attitudes over the use of nuclear weapons as instruments of international politics with the common consequence of destruction of the entire civilization.

Moreover there was no effective defense against the use of nuclear weapons. The imminence of a strategic stalemate was taken to be the best premise on which to base international relations. Bernard Brodie related the cause of military restraint to the universal fear of nuclear warfare. This, he hoped, would keep


future wars between nuclear weapon states, or allied with those that have nuclear weapons non nuclear. He also assumed that limiting war in this way would become a general pattern. Analysts believed that nuclear weapon states would not resort to a nuclear attack as long as their objectives remained limited.

But there was anxiety about the ability to keep a conflict limited because of the possibilities of escalation. Thomas Schelling gives the most lucid exposition of the concept of limited war as a mode of tacit bargaining through escalation or limitation of conflict. After all diplomatic and political judgements must transcend military factors. The threshold between nuclear and conventional weapons must never be crossed as there was no guarantee that escalation could be avoided or even contained. General Maxwell Taylor maintains that in order to avoid defeat in a limited war without resort to nuclear weapons, the US must opt for a sizeable conventional force. But he is doubtful whether a war could be limited if nuclear weapons are used.

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3.5 Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Thus to counter the limited war option and the option of having to maintain a large conventional army at all times, the Eisenhower administration came up with the idea of superiority and effectiveness of "tactical nuclear weapons" against enemy troops and another Korea-sized attack in the local war zone without having to expand the war geographically.61 This theme of the British School of Graduated deterrence, was debated heatedly as an alternative to the threat of launching an all-out nuclear war. In response to the superiority of Soviet nuclear weapons, early limited war doctrine predicted the use of tactical nuclear weapons and the full use of strategic hydrogen bombs as a last resort. Proponents of graduated deterrence believed that such limited use of nuclear weapons could take place without triggering a full-scale strategic nuclear war between the contestants.62 (The other option at that time was massive retaliation to handle limited wars that were expected to occur especially in the light of the Korean war experience.)

The prospect of total victory was replaced by reprieve from possible defeat. To stop when ahead but not victorious, or


62. This term originated with Hart and was prompted most vigorously by Rear Admiral Sir Anthony Buzzard, former Chief of British Naval Intelligence.
when behind but not defeated, was the political basis of the theory of limited war. The hope was that once it was recognised that wars could be fought for limited ends, the problem of controlling a conflict would be more manageable. The policy depended on the superiority of U.S tactical nuclear weapons and once the USSR had an equally large number of weapons this policy became ineffective. Moreover according to this policy the US would have converted a conventional war into a nuclear war through the first use of tactical nuclear weapons. This however did not bother those who favoured Schelling’s idea of viewing limited war as a tacit bargaining where each side bargained with the other about the ground rules, by deliberately escalating the conflict a bit but no more. 63

There were many who doubted whether a limited war could remain limited once a tactical nuclear weapon were used. Thus the efforts to reduce the destructive effects of a nuclear war through limitations on targets—counterforce rather than countervalue were of not much use. Still, in principle, limited war sought either on moral grounds or in terms of effective deterrence preferred to an ‘unlimited’ war.

The advocate of this logical control of war, Liddell Hart, sought to create awareness among people of the uselessness of war which ruined relations among nations. Air power was seen as a

source of escalation of conflicts through the bombing of civilians, thus making a rational conduct of war more difficult. He further argued that with the advent of nuclear weapons future warfare would be subject to mutual restraints and certain agreed rules.* Limited war also necessitated limited objectives.64 But it was easier to limit wars in the past due to limitations of military technology than in the nuclear age.

It was suggested that the concept of limited nuclear war did not require large conventional forces.65 The use of tactical nuclear weapons would strengthen both deterrence through denial and deterrence through punishment.66 Denial capabilities, Snyder said, worked by influencing the aggressor's estimate of his probability of gaining his objective, while punishment decided the estimate of possible costs and might have little effect on his chances for territorial gains.67 Thus the Russian advance would be blocked and the process of blocking would be painful. The Russians would be 'punished'.

The main proposition was that punishment should fit the crime and the need to concentrate on the military rather than the civilian targets. The counter-argument was that if the aim was to


punish, then the threat ought to be fearsome and certain to be implemented in case of aggression. According to Peter Paret, "violence is the hallmark of any war, be it limited or extended. The only difference is that in a limited war, it does not require its fullest expression." 68

However, there was an air of unreality about the whole effort to limit nuclear war. The very intention to go to war is not to set limits but to achieve the objectives at whatever cost. The best way to limit a modern war would be to avoid the use of nuclear weapons. Gradually Brodie, Blackett and Hart saw the idea of limited war as complicating the already confused situation without solving anything. The more the pressures built up against any use of nuclear weapons, the greater the gap between deterrence policy, the military capability and psychological readiness. 69

The confusion arose due to airmen's usage of the term 'strategic' to distinguish independent attacks on enemy's heartland in anticipation of decisive results from mere 'tactical' support of surface forces in the battle - which was considered a waste of airpower. However, this differentiation between strategic and the


tactical was merely a semantic distinction. Ultimately the use of weapons requires decisions on targeting, avoidance of countermeasures and concentration on immediate objectives - tactics. There could never be a non-strategic or a non-tactical war.

Tactical counterforce warfare was viewed to be within the limits set by the just war principle of jus in bello. But this does not necessarily make moral sense. Limitations were sought either on moral grounds or in terms of effective deterrence. By using the adjective 'tactical' it was hoped to link nuclear weapons to the traditional land warfare. This link is illusory. Nuclear weapons cannot be considered just another weapon. It was realized by the critics of this policy that delimiting weapons in advance would be of no advantage to the West and that a distinction between various types of weapons was not possible. Kissinger criticizes the American way of thinking in terms of absolute values or objectives of total war, total victory. The gradual loss of technological superiority weakened the exploitation of this policy.

70. Freedman, n 22, p. 119.
The prominent theorist Robert Osgood on the other hand has contended that "The detailed elaboration of strategic doctrine of limited war, the formulations, plans for carrying out this doctrine and the combined efforts of government the military establishment, private analysts and publicists to translate the doctrine into particular weapons and forces are developed peculiar to the nuclear age". R. Osgood justifies limited war as it maximises opportunity for effective use of military force as a rational instrument of policy. If deterrence strategy was to be credible the means of deterrence ought to be proportionate to the objective at stake. This was the essential principle of the limited war theorists.

The concept of limited nuclear war has been rejected by the American Catholic Bishops as it might encourage the notion that nuclear war can be fought and won without transgressing moral limits. Limits could be discarded once a war is underway.

"The issue of Limited War is not simply the size of weapons contemplated or the strategies projected. The debate should include the psychological and political significance of


crossing the boundary from the conventional to the nuclear arena in any form. To cross this divide is to enter a world where we have no experience of control, much testimony against its possibility, and therefore no moral justification for submitting the human community to this risk. We therefore express our view that the first imperative is to prevent any use of nuclear weapon and our hope that leaders will resist the notion that nuclear conflict can be limited, contained or won in any traditional sense.

They advocate a no first use policy. It is worthy of notice that they realize the greater expense and delay (natural) in development of an alternative by NATO. Ultimately the Bishops attempt to abolish nuclear war and yet are left with no option but to use nuclear weapons as deterrence with use of nuclear weapons strictly forbidden. This is the same state of mind as existing till this day.


Flexible Response

Determined to make sure of non use of nuclear weapons, the Kennedy-McNamara administration adopted the policy of Flexible Response - the objective of this theory of Maxwell Taylor maintained that nuclear weapons and the means for delivering them must be available at all times both for strategic war and for tactical use in local theaters. The objective was to deter all wars, general or limited, nuclear or conventional to convince all aggressors of the futility of attacking and to insure the adequacy of bargaining power to give credibility to threat and to achieve an end to arms race. The idea was to deter the opponent from using his own nuclear forces of the same kinds and vice versa since the communist power deter their American counterparts.

Flexible response theorists believed a stable deterrent balance was emerging between East and West vis-a-vis nuclear weapons for strategic and tactical use. It called for the US and its NATO allies to maintain sizeable conventional forces in being, at all times, which would make credible a policy decision to postpone early use of nuclear weapons.

75. Catudal, n. , p. 113.
The complexities of deterrence rose when the Soviet Union caught up in the nuclear arms development. Deterrence in a time of growing mutual vulnerability would become an even more "delicate balance of terror". The "controlled" U.S. escalation of the conflict and the communist response raised the disturbing question: How could one indefinitely sustain such a strategy without greatly undermining not only the domestic economy but also the political consensus any government must have in order to function successfully. The advocates of flexible response sought to share the economic burden of Europe with European allies through maintenance of substantial armies in Europe. They maintained that European allies having recovered from the ravages of the Second World War, could share the burden of military expenses. It was soon realised that the potential of the Red Army in Europe had been exaggerated. The divisions of the Soviet armed forces were smaller than their NATO counterparts. The total population of the NATO states was far larger than that of members of the Warsaw Pact. The loyalty of troops contributed by the East European states was also a matter of


speculation. It was speculated that they would not participate wholeheartedly in a war engulfing the whole of Europe. Flexible response advocates believed they would deter a Soviet conventional attack through maintenance of a large conventional force. Technological improvements in transportation and communication meant that the US forces could be deployed and used more flexibly than before. Flexible response became the official NATO strategy in 1967. This was a strategy which gave US the chance to use lower level options. There was no need to act quickly or in desperation. Deterrence threat would now be believed and thus would be effective; being effective, it would preserve the peace.

Critics of Flexible Response maintained that "the proposed buildup of NATO's conventional forces was totally beyond what the alliance would be willing to support". Still others argued that the dangers of limited use of nuclear weapons had been exaggerated. The strategy proposed to deter aggression by maintaining forces adequate to counter aggression at any level. The weakness of the policy was dramatically highlighted by US failure in Vietnam. The strategy "retained the ultimate escalatory threat of a strategic exchange between U.S. and Soviet homelands to make clear the final magnitude of the dangers being contemplated." Albert Wohlstetter rightly placed his hands on the pulse of specialists concern about the vulnerability of

strategic forces — American and Soviet. According to him, stability is the greatest not when either side possessed greater advantage over the other but when both sides have a relatively secure second strike forces. Complete invulnerability to attack (the ideal case) was probably not to be hoped for. A constant and systematic campaign of deception too had to be avoided.

The strategy of Flexible Response encountered a number of problems. The most intractable problem was the fact that the West Europeans were never quite convinced of its utility. Doubts about the effectiveness of the American nuclear umbrella were articulated by West European leaders especially General de Gaulle. They viewed the unwillingness of the Kennedy, and Johnson, Administrations to contemplate use nuclear weapons first, in defense of Europe, as evidence of a lack of a commitment to defend.

"Flexible response" demanded larger and better equipped Allied conventional forces in Europe. As McNamara himself now recalls, its "essential element", the development of "sufficient conventional capabilities to offset those of the Warsaw Pact" — was never achieved. Moreover, the substantial raising of, the 'nuclear threshold', envisioned when flexible response was first conceived, did not become a

reality. Both sides "virtually completely refurbished their inventories, increasing the number of weapons of all three different types - battlefield, intermediate - range and strategic...".

Assured Destruction

The capability of the US and Soviet Union to harm each other in an equally decisive way created the situation of "assured destruction". Advanced by Secretary McNamara, the strategy had several attractive features. First deterring through a secure second strike force, it would save on the expenses because America need not continuously strike for superiority against the Soviet Union. Second, the strategy had the advantage of ruling out the use of nuclear arms as levers for political influence. Third, it would provide incentive to seriously consider arms limitation agreements with Soviet leadership.

Critics maintained the uselessness of this strategy as there was little evidence to show that the Soviet Union subscribed to such a policy. It was militarily unacceptable and morally impossible. Fred Ikle questioned the


83 The term, "mutual assured destruction" was reportedly coined by Donald Brennan at the Hudson Institute. He disliked the idea of preserving peace through mutual vulnerability and coined the acronym MAD. In Catudal, n., p. 144.
morbidity of a strategy which would hold millions of civilians hostage to provocative acts of rivals over whom the Americans had no control. Other critics argued that the best way to deter Russians was to convince them of US capability to win a nuclear war at any level. With the signing of Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty in 1972, the US accepted the 'hostage' policy - a state of mutual vulnerability with the Soviet Union.

Assured destruction replaced the phase, "assured retaliation." To the proponents of this strategy, its postulates were irrefutable. To critics, it was an antithesis of strategy - losing utility precisely where military strategy should come into effect - at the edge of war. Rather than minimizing damage to the US and open avenues for an early settlement through further attacks, it had the sole aim of punishing aggression - which could lead to further counter attacks on the US which a rational strategy would try to avoid.

Falk criticising this policy says that the US nuclear weapon policy has been designed to translate nuclear

84. The master plan for US operations in a general nuclear war is called SIOP. Probably the most secret document in the Pentagon, it assigns nuclear weapons to specific targets under any given set of circumstances. Targeting plans are in the hands of Joint Chiefs of Staff. See Pringle, Peter, et. al., SIOP : The Secret US War Plan for Nuclear War (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

offensive capability into political advantage. "Assured Destruction could determine the size and character of American strategic forces to measure their effectiveness. But the US landed with more weapons than required to carry out the assured destruction task. According to Lynn Davis, the actual war plans included large scale attacks against military targets (nuclear and conventional) and military plus urban industries targets.

Counterforce Strategy

The US forces were assigned on this mission against Soviet counterforce targets. The objective of the strategy was to make American commitment to its allies more credible and keep the US invulnerable.

Secretary McNamara, first announcing this strategy publicly at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1962 argued for a 'no cities' policy, early in the nuclear war.


88. Speed, Roger D., Strategic Deterrence in the 1980's. (Palo Alto, California : Hoover Institution Press, 1979), p. 8. Making counterforce strikes, while holding back assured destruction forces was referred to as a "controlled response".
(while returning the option if necessary) and giving the Soviets a powerful incentive not to attack US cities either. This was a major shift from the 'city busting' emphasis of 1940's and 1950's.

The most complicated aspect of this strategy was that first McNamara introduced the concept of damage limitation which regarded first strike while the concept of "assured destruction" regarded a strong and stable second strike - both leading to promotion of escalation - The former offensive and latter defensive avenues - the former coming handy as US had more strategic power than was regarded for "assured destruction".

Cuban Missile Crisis

The stalemate caused by the mutual need to avoid nuclear destruction was tested during the Cold War by continuing technological competition and by repeated crises of which the most intense was the Cuban missile crisis. The gradual and effective Soviet missile buildup seemed to make the security of the American deterrent more insecure. This crisis brought the world to the brink of a Third World War.


Had the Kennedy administration ordered a strike against missile sites in Cuba, the Russians could have retaliated by a counter strike on the United States or on some vulnerable US missiles located overseas. It could even have defied the US quarantine of Soviet missile carriers en route to Cuba. The Russian decision to respect the blockade (after 13 days of crisis) was later said to be due to Western superiority and the Soviet fear of a nuclear war, not to forget the local and global support for US decisions. The lessons learnt were that such a crisis should not be escalated; and that the two sides should avoid the occurrence of another such situation. The nuclear stalemate became clear politically and technologically.
