

Nuclear Reality: Resistance and Adaptation

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Whenever there is a significant change in environmental conditions, humans respond in an ambivalent manner. On one hand, they have an interest in comprehending this new condition so as to adapt to it more effectively. On the other, they feel an inertia and resistance that lead them to suppress awareness of the change and to resist facing the implications that flow from it. Both these tendencies can be seen in American and Soviet responses to the relatively new condition engendered by nuclear weapons. The condition of mutual vulnerability has prevailed in the Soviet-American relationship ever since both sides gained secure second-strike capabilities. This means that both sides have the capability to inflict an annihilating attack on the other even after absorbing a surprise all-out attack. The consequence of this new condition is that neither side can reasonably hope to achieve a meaningful advantage in a military conflict. Even in a limited conflict in which one side is doing relatively better, the other would still have the option of escalating to the next higher level of conflict, until both sides would be effectively destroyed.

At first glance, it may seem that the obvious adaptive response to this new condition is to simply eliminate military force as an option for state behavior. Such ideas were discussed in the years just after the first atomic weapons were built. However, as people began to think more about the

implications of such a policy, it became clear that eliminating military force would not be so simple. Military force is intrinsically bound up with the very concept of a state. The boundaries of a state and its ability to exert its will in the international arena have rested on its military power. In trying to eliminate the option of military force many questions arise, such as: "How do states protect their boundaries or resolve conflicts if they do not have military force as the ultimate arbiter?" While some have suggested the complete elimination of the state system, there is a growing consensus that this is not feasible.

Faced with these difficult questions, there have been two major responses. One has been a tendency to suppress the awareness of the fundamental change engendered by the condition of nuclear vulnerability and to continue to approach problems of security in ways that may have been appropriate in a prenuclear context, but are no longer applicable. On the other hand, there have also been attempts to adapt to this new reality in ways that recognize the implications of nuclear weapons and evolve naturally from present conditions. This paper will examine examples of each of these responses.

Resistance

Conventionalization. Several writers have described the tendency to resist nuclear reality by approaching nuclear weapons and nuclear war as if they are fundamentally no different than conventional weapons or conventional war. Hans Morgenthau, the realist political theorist, wrote in an article titled, "The Fallacy of Thinking Conventionally about Nuclear Weapons":

... From the beginning of history to 1945, when mankind thought naturally in prenuclear terms, it developed certain conceptions about weapons and war, which have not yielded in the minds of certain theoreticians, or even in the minds of practitioners, when they have time to think in theoretical terms, to the impact of an entirely novel phenomenon, the availability of nuclear weapons and of what we call euphemistically a nuclear war.

So we have a disjunction between the conventional ways we think and act about nuclear weapons and the objective conditions, under which the availability of nuclear weapons forces us to live... We have tried, then, instead of adapting our modes of thought and action to the objective conditions of the nuclear age, to conventionalize nuclear war... (1)

Robert Jervis also writes about this tendency to "conventionalize" nuclear weapons:

The changes brought about by nuclear weapons are so painful and difficult that it is not surprising that people react not by making the best of new realities, but by seeking alluring, if ultimately misleading, paths which they think will lead back to traditional security. (2)

Maintaining a Balance. One of the most common manifestations of this tendency to conventionalize nuclear weapons is the intense concern about maintaining a balance of forces in the superpowers' strategic arsenals. In a prenuclear context the relative distribution of military forces on each side was of significant concern and could reflect the potential outcome of a battle. However, in a nuclear context in which both sides have a secure and flexible capability to inflict an annihilating attack, relative capabilities are largely irrelevant. Nevertheless, there is an intense concern about "who's ahead" in the superpower competition, a desire to "catch-up" or to acquire a "margin of safety."

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Sometimes it seems that the notion of maintaining a balance has become fused with the notion of maintaining deterrence. President Reagan has said: "As long as we maintain the strategic balance . . . then we can count on the basic prudence of the Soviet leaders to avoid nuclear war." (3) Secretary of Defense Weinberger has written: "The critical point in deterring and preventing war is maintaining a balance of forces." (4) Defending the deployment of the Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe, Margaret Thatcher told the House of Commons: "The principle is a balance in order to deter . . . we must achieve balanced numbers." (5) Soviet leaders have also stressed the importance of maintaining "parity," warning against grave military consequences from the failure to do so. More recently General Secretary Gorbachev has placed more stress on the notion of "reasonable adequacy" than that of "parity." However, in arms control negotiations both sides continue to stress the need for equality.

This concern for equality, parity, or balance pervades the entire defense discourse. It has become a major stumbling block in arms control negotiations because each side has taken a different position on how to measure the relative equality of the arsenals. As each side ignores the areas in which it is ahead, and focuses on those areas in which it is behind, the concern for equality has become a driving force in the arms race.

From a psychological perspective, it is not difficult to understand why this concern for the balance is attractive. Faced with the unnerving condition of absolute vulnerability, the defense establishments in both countries are charged with the task to "do something" to enhance the security of their countries. Being behind in the competition becomes associated with danger. (President Reagan has said: ". . . it is dangerous, if

not fatal, to be second best.” (6) Restoring the balance, or gaining a “margin of safety” is an activity that creates the satisfying sense of having eradicated the danger. However, the entire drama is based on illusion. The condition of mutual vulnerability is so robust that whether one side is marginally behind, ahead, or equal, it is still profoundly vulnerable.

Pursuing Victory. A second and perhaps even more important area, in which conventionalized thinking appears, has to do with concepts of winning a war between the two nuclear-armed powers. As discussed, it is no longer viable to have such goals in the event of a war because both sides have unlimited capabilities for escalation. Nevertheless, the notion of achieving such an advantageous termination perseveres in defense thinking. Pentagon officials have spoken about the goal of “prevailing” or “terminating on terms favorable to the United States.” In 1982, Marshall Nikolai Ogarkov recognized that “the character and features of today’s nuclear war impose heightened demands”; nevertheless he stressed the need “to retain the will to achieve victory over the enemy in any and all conditions.” (7)

It should be noted that recently Soviet defense writers have sharply moved away from using such terms as “victory.” However this change has not been reflected in a change in force structure of either side. Therefore, some Western observers view this change with a jaundiced eye.

Here again, it is not difficult to understand the psychological attractiveness of the idea of victory. The dramatic imagery of achieving advantage over and subduing would-be aggressors is intrinsically satisfying. And, again, it creates the illusory sense that either side can eradicate the persistent condition of vulnerability.

Higher Order Conventionalization. Although the concept of conventionalization seems to explain much current thinking, on closer analysis the phenomenon is more complex. Many of the same policymakers who at times conventionalize by stressing marginal asymmetries and describing advantageous war outcomes at other times contradict themselves by recognizing the military irrelevance of such asymmetries and the impossibility of winning a nuclear war.

Encountering these inconsistencies, I wondered if there was a way that policymakers resolved such inconsistencies in their own mind. Therefore, I undertook a study in which I reviewed the defense literature and interviewed American defense policymakers and nuclear strategists in the Pentagon, the National Security Council, Congress, and the Rand Corporation. I also interviewed Soviet diplomats, arms control negotiators, academicians, and journalists. In the interviews, when people expressed such inconsistent positions, I would point them out and ask them for an

explanation. There were several explanations that recurred frequently.

Accounting for their concern for the balance, many Americans and Soviets used an argument that could be paraphrased as follows: “Well, I know the balance doesn’t matter from a military point of view, but other people don’t know this. Other people think the nuclear weapons are pretty much the same as conventional weapons. Therefore, it is essential that we have as many nuclear weapons as the other side so that we are not perceived as weaker.”

People had different ideas about whose perception is the most critical. In some cases people stressed the importance of appearing strong to Third World countries or allies. Others emphasized the perceptions of domestic audiences. The most frequently cited audience, though, was the other superpower. Both Americans and Soviets expressed concern that key people on the other side believed that an asymmetrical advantage would give them a militarily decisive edge. (“Why else are they spending so much money trying to get it?”) To deter such illusions, then, people on both sides argued, it is necessary to maintain equality in our forces. (For a more extensive analysis of how this argument appears in official American defense policy, see my article, “Nuclear Nonsense,” *Foreign Policy*, Spring 1985.)

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From my perspective, the most critical element in this kind of thinking is not the argument that there is such a widespread misperception about the relevance of the nuclear balance. Whether or not there is such a misperception, the most critical element is the decision to play along with the misperception as if it were correct. Even though the proponents of this line of thinking do not conventionalize in the sense of misunderstanding the robust nature of mutual vulnerability, they effectively behave as if they do. This can be described as higher order conventionalization. The net effect of such an approach is to confirm the general tendency to conventionalize.

In other cases I asked people to account for the apparent inconsistency between their articulation of the goal of winning a superpower war and their recognition that it was impossible to win such a war. Americans spoke in terms of creating a desired perceptual impact. There was a feeling that the Soviets had gained an edge in the 1960s and 1970s because they were perceived as believing in the possibility of winning a nuclear war. Therefore, so as not to appear lacking “resolve and determination,” it is important for the United States to make certain statements and deploy

certain capabilities that suggest that the American leadership has such beliefs as well. Here again, the net effect is that policymakers end up acting in a conventionalized fashion.

Both Americans and Soviets interviewed felt it was important for the military to have war-winning goals so as to maintain morale. As one Soviet said: "It is part of their being 'good soldiers.'" An American military officer said that war-winning objectives are psychologically necessary for the military because "that's what the military is for." Other Americans also stressed the need to counteract "defeatism" in the public through "cheerleading."

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All of these rationales for maintaining conventionalized policies do have a certain logic to them. And there may in fact be some risks involved in firmly recognizing the condition of mutual vulnerability, eschewing efforts to match the other side's arsenal, and unambiguously affirming the impossibility of achieving an advantageous outcome in a war (expressed in force posture as well as rhetoric). There is a viable argument that the other side might interpret such steps as a sign of weakness. If one side comes across as more unambiguously cognizant of the implications of nuclear reality, that side may appear less resolved to retaliate in the event of aggression and therefore deterrence might be weakened. Military morale may suffer.

On the other hand, there are also arguments to be made against such perceptual manipulations. For example, by acting consistently with conventionalized conceptions of military force, each side actually lends credibility to those elements on the other side that conventionalize - elements that one may actually prefer not to strengthen. Both sides naturally take cues from each other as they grope for a meaningful way to respond. There is also the danger that when policymakers strategically express certain beliefs and attitudes they originally did not believe, it may lead them to take on such beliefs or at least to become confused about what they believe. A considerable body of psychological research indicates that just such a phenomenon is likely to occur.

Ultimately, though, I do not think this effort to accommodate misperception and even actively suppress correct perception can be evaluated by speculating about potential costs and benefits. There may indeed be short-

term benefits in such manipulations. But considering a more expanded time frame, one is called on to make a more intuitive judgment. In this context, it seems to me, the ultimate need for a more adaptive response becomes particularly compelling.

Adaptation

In contrast to the patterns described above, there are also trends in the Soviet-American relationship that are derived from a conscious recognition and acceptance of the condition of mutual vulnerability. Political leaders on both sides have publicly recognized the annihilating potential of nuclear war and the impossibility of winning one. More importantly, there may be forming what can be described as a security regime in the Soviet-American relationship. A security regime is a set of norms and patterns of state behavior by which states constrain their behavior in a reciprocal fashion. As the regime grows in strength, it gains increasing legitimacy and logically leads to a restructuring of military potential into configurations that are less provocative and threatening. Although it is certainly still in a nascent form, there are indications that such a security regime may be emerging in the Soviet-American relationship.

On several occasions, Soviet and American leaders have made joint statements that explicitly recognize that nuclear weapons have undermined the utility of military force and that call for a cooperative approach to the problem of security. The most outstanding of these is "The Basic Principles of Relations" agreement signed by President Richard Nixon and Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in 1972. It reads that the US and the USSR:

...will proceed from the common determination that in the nuclear age there is no alternative to conducting their mutual relations on the basis of peaceful coexistence... They will always exercise restraint in their mutual relations, and will be prepared to negotiate and settle differences by peaceful means. Discussions and negotiations on outstanding issues will be conducted in a spirit of reciprocity, mutual accommodation, and mutual benefit.

Both sides recognize that efforts to obtain unilateral advantage at the expense of the other, directly or indirectly, are inconsistent with these objectives. The prerequisites for maintaining and strengthening peaceful relations between the US and the USSR are the recognition of the security interests of the Parties based on the principle of equality and the renunciation of the use or threat of force.

Similar principles were signed in the Helsinki Accords and at the Geneva Summit in 1985, when President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev released a communiqué saying: ". . . a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought." (8) Both sides feel compelled to always explain their use of military force in defensive terms.

Such statements have become so common that they tend now to elicit an almost cynical response. Nevertheless, the very fact that such statements have become commonplace, while statements about achieving unilateral advantages are relatively rare, reflects some significant evolution in the normative concepts of state behavior. Such concepts particularly began emerging during World War I as technology greatly extended the destructive effect of war to the general population. The destructive potential of nuclear weapons has further enhanced the emergence of normative concepts that delegitimize the use of military force. Shortly after the development of the first atomic weapons the United States changed the name of the Department of War to the Department of Defense. And in general now, even when states appear to have offensive intentions, they feel compelled to rationalize their behavior in defensive terms.

Furthermore, in the Soviet-American relationship there has, fortunately, been more than the repetition of appealing platitudes. Both sides have also shown significant restraint in their use of force toward the other so that since the end of World War II there have been virtually no shooting confrontations between American and Soviet forces. The unwritten rule that has constrained both sides has been sometimes called the Basic Rule of Prudence. (9) It is widely felt that were it not for this norm of restraint, derived significantly from the recognition of mutual vulnerability, that the US and the USSR would very likely have had some major military conflict by now. Both sides still feel free to compete militarily via proxy forces. But even this form of military competition is suffering from declining legitimacy as evidenced by the fact that both sides continually rationalize such behavior as a response to the other side's aggression.

Finally, there are also some rudimentary efforts to restructure military forces into a less provocative form by means of arms control. The results of such efforts have been, at best, mixed. Nevertheless, the fact that arms control continues to be such a major focus of high-level attention is an indicator of the persevering strength of the forces pressing for a Soviet-American security regime.

Needless to say, these are also many features of the Soviet-American relationship that have not accommodated themselves to the demands of such a security regime. Many aspects of American and Soviet policies and force posture continue to be based on the assumption of the utility of military force, the most obvious being the willingness of both sides to use military force directly against established governments close to their borders when they perceive them to be moving in directions contrary to their interests. Both sides have shown minimal interest in mutually reining in the technological developments that contribute to the instability of nuclear arsenals by increasing the incentives for striking first. And, perhaps

most significantly, neither side has made any serious move toward deploying their conventional forces in a way that precludes certain offensive options (i.e. “defensive” defense).

Conclusion

In summary, there are two conflicting trends in the Soviet-American relationship. One trend is toward new forms of adaptation to the reality of mutual vulnerability. The other resists such changes by maintaining traditional prenuclear approaches to security. Such traditional approaches are sustained by either suppressing awareness of the changes engendered by nuclear weapons or by actively going along with or promoting others’ misperceptions as a means of pursuing political advantage. More adaptive responses involve openly recognizing the reality and significance of nuclear weapons and moving toward the development of a security regime. Such a regime involves reciprocal restraint on the use of force, a gradual delegitimation of the use of force, and corresponding restructuring of arsenals into a less provocative configuration.

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Naturally, it is attractive to assume that there is a way to make a single political decision that would impel the Soviet-American relationship out of the old and into the new. But it is the Soviet-American relationship itself that must evolve toward a more adaptive form. This evolution is inherently difficult and will inevitably involve tentative steps forward and righteously indignant steps back. Certainly there is still a significant danger. But at every juncture driving this process forward is the force of awareness of the nuclear reality – a force that does not preordain any outcome but nevertheless grows more powerful as it becomes less encumbered by the influences of self-deception and obfuscation.

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