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The Nuclear Game - An Essay on Nuclear Policy Making

When a country first acquires nuclear weapons it does so out of a very accurate perception that possession of nukes fundamentally changes its relationships with other powers. What nuclear weapons buy for a New Nuclear Power (NNP) is the fact that once the country in question has nuclear weapons, it cannot be beaten. It can be defeated, that is it can be prevented from achieving certain goals or stopped from following certain courses of action, but it cannot be beaten. It will never have enemy tanks moving down the streets of its capital, it will never have its national treasures looted and its citizens forced into servitude. The enemy will be destroyed by nuclear attack first. A potential enemy knows that so will not push the situation to the point where our NNP is on the verge of being beaten. In effect, the effect of acquiring nuclear weapons is that the owning country has set limits on any conflict in which it is involved. This is such an immensely attractive option that states find it irresistible.

Only later do they realize the problem. Nuclear weapons are so immensely destructive that they mean a country can be totally destroyed by their use. Although our NNP cannot be beaten by an enemy it can be destroyed by that enemy. Although a beaten country can pick itself up and recover, the chances of a country devastated by nuclear strikes doing the same are virtually non-existent. [This needs some elaboration. Given the likely scale and effects of a nuclear attack, it's most unlikely that everybody will be killed. There will be survivors and they will rebuild a society but it will have nothing in common with what was there before. So, to all intents and purposes, once a society initiates a nuclear exchange it's gone forever]. Once this basic factor has been absorbed, the NNP makes a fundamental realization that will influence every move it makes from this point onwards. If it does nothing, it's effectively invincible. If, however, it does something, there is a serious risk that it will initiate a chain of events that will eventually lead to a nuclear holocaust. The result of that terrifying realization is strategic paralysis.

With that appreciation of strategic paralysis comes an even worse problem. A non-nuclear country has a wide range of options for its forces. Although its actions may incur a risk of being beaten they do not court destruction. Thus, a non-nuclear nation can afford to take risks of a calculated nature. However, a nuclear-equipped nation has to consider the risk that actions by its conventional forces will lead to a situation where it may have to use its nuclear forces with the resulting holocaust. Therefore, not only are its strategic nuclear options restricted by its possession of nuclear weapons, so are its tactical and operational options. So we add tactical and operational paralysis to the strategic variety. This is why we see such a tremendous emphasis on the mechanics of decision making in nuclear powers. Every decision has to be thought through, not for one step or the step after but for six, seven or eight steps down the line.

We can see this in the events of the 1960s and 1970s, especially surrounding the Vietnam War. Every so often, the question gets asked "How could the US have won in Vietnam?" with a series of replies that include invading the North, extending the bombing to China and other dramatic escalations of the conflict. Now, it should be obvious why such suggestions could not, in the real world, be contemplated. The risk of ending up in a nuclear war was too great. For another example, note how the presence of nuclear weapons restricted and limited the tactical and operational options available to both sides in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. In effect neither side could push the war to a final conclusion because to do so would bring down nuclear attack on the heads of the "winners". Here, Israel's nuclear arsenal was limiting the conflict before it even started. Egypt and Syria couldn't destroy the country - all they could do was to chew up enough of the Israeli armed forces and put themselves in the correct strategic position to dictate a peace agreement on much more favorable terms than would be the case. But, the Israeli nuclear arsenal also limited the conflict in another way. Because they were a nuclear power they were fair game; if they pushed the Egyptians too hard, they would demand Soviet assistance and who knew where that would lead?

So, the direct effects of nuclear weapons in a nation's hands is to make that nation extremely cautious. They spend much time studying situations, working out the implications of such situations, what the likely results of certain policy options are. One of the immense advantages the US had in the Cold War was that they had a network of Research Institutes and Associations and consulting companies who spent their time doing exactly this sort of work. (Ahh the dear dead days of planning nuclear wars. The glow of satisfaction as piecutters are placed over cities; the warm feeling of fulfillment as the death toll passed the billion mark; the sick feeling of disappointment as the casualties from a given strategy only amounted to some 40 million when preliminary

studies had shown a much more productive result. But I digress). This meant that a much wider range of policy options could be studied than was possible if the ideas were left in military hands. These organizations, the famous think tanks had no inhibitions about asking very awkward questions that would end the career of a military officer doing the same. This network became known as The Business. We're still out here.

So. What were nuclear weapons good for? It seems they are more of a liability than an asset. To some extent that's true but the important fact remains, they do limit conflict. As long as they are in place and functional they are an insurance policy against a nation getting beaten. That means that if that country is going to get beaten, its nuclear weapons have to be taken out first. It also means that if it ever uses its nuclear weapons, once they are gone, its invulnerability vanishes with it. Thus, the threat posed by nuclear weapons is a lot more effective and valuable than the likely results of using those weapons. Of course, this concern becomes moot if it appears likely that the NNP is about to lose its nuclear weapons to a pre-emptive strike. Under these circumstances, the country may decide that its in a use-it-or-lose-it situation. The more vulnerable to pre-emption those weapons are the stronger that imperative becomes.

This is why ICBMs are such an attractive option. They are faster-reacting than bombers, they are easier to protect on the ground and they are much more likely to get through to their targets. This is why modern, advanced devices are much more desirable than the older versions. In the 1950s the Soviet Union had a nuclear attack reaction time of six weeks (don't laugh, that of the US was 30 days). The reason was simple, device design in those days meant that the device, once assembled, deteriorated very quickly and, once degraded, had to be sent back to the plant for remanufacture. Device assembly needed specialized teams and took time. This made a first strike very, very attractive - as long as the attacker could be sure of getting all the enemy force. It was this long delay to get forces available that made air defense and ABM such an attractive option. In effect, it could blunt an enemy attack while the assembly crews frantically put their own devices together and got them ready for launch. As advancing device design made it possible to reduce assembly time, this aspect of ABM became less important.

What this also suggests is that large, secure nuclear arsenals are inherently safer than small, vulnerable ones. A large arsenal means that the owner can do appalling damage to an enemy, a secure arsenal means that no matter how the enemy attacks, enough weapons will survive to allow that destruction to take place. Here we have the genesis of the most misunderstood term in modern warfare - MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction. (Another point of elaboration here - MAD is not a policy and has never been instituted as a policy option. It's the effect of policies that have been promulgated. This is a very useful touchstone - if people mention the US Policy of MAD, they don't know what they are talking about). Its widely believed that this suggests that both sides are wide open to unrestricted destruction by the other. This is a gross over-simplification. What the term actually means is that both sides have enough nuclear firepower to destroy the other and that the firepower in question is configured in such ways that no pre-emptive strike can destroy enough of it to take away the fact that the other country will be destroyed. MAD did not preclude the use of defensive systems - in fact it was originally formulated to show how important they are - but its misunderstood version was held to do so - with catastrophic results for us all. One implication of this by the way is that in spite of all the fuss over the Chinese stealing the W88 warhead design, the net beneficiary of that is the United States; it allows the Chinese to build a much more secure deterrent and thus a more stable one. Also, looking at things purely ruthlessly, its better for one's enemy to make small clean bombs than big dirty ones.

Aha, I hear you say what about the mad dictator? Its interesting to note that mad, homicidal aggressive dictators tend to get very tame sane cautious ones as soon as they split atoms. Whatever their motivations and intents, the mechanics of how nuclear weapons work dictate that mad dictators become sane dictators very quickly. After all its not much fun dictating if one's country is a radioactive trash pile and you're one of the ashes. China, India and Pakistan are good examples. One of the best examples of this process at work is Mao Tse Tung. Throughout the 1950s he was extraordinarily bellicose and repeatedly tried to bully, cajole or trick Khrushchev and his successors into initiating a nuclear exchange with the US on the grounds that world communism would rise from the ashes. Thats what Quemoy and Matsu were all about in the late 1950s. Then China got nuclear weapons. Have you noticed how reticent they are with them? Its sunk in. They can be totally destroyed; will be totally destroyed; in the event of an exchange. A Chinese Officer here once on exchange (billed as a "look what we can do" session it was really a "look what we can do to you" exercise) produced the standard line about how the Chinese could lose 500 million people in a nuclear war and keep going with the survivors. So his hosts got out a demographic map (one that shows population densities rather than topographical data) and got to work with pie-cutters using a few classified tricks - and got virtually the entire population of China using only a small proportion of the US arsenal. The guest stared at the map for a couple of minutes then went and tossed his

cookies into the toilet bowl. The only people who mouth off about using nuclear weapons and threaten others with them are those that do not have keys hanging around their necks. The moment they get keys and realize what they've let themselves in for, they get to be very quiet and very cautious indeed. Another great - and very recent example - look how circumspect the Indians and Pakistani Governments were in the recent confrontation - lots of words but little or no action to back them and both sides worked very hard not to do anything that could be misunderstood. (When the Pakistani's did a missile test they actually invited the Indians over to watch in order to ensure there was no ground for misunderstanding. The test itself was another message from both countries to the rest of the world - basically it read "Don't sweat it, we know the rules")

One analyst from The Business was asked what Saddam Hussein would have done if Iraq had possessed nuclear weapons in 1990. He replied that he didn't know what he would have done but he did know what he would not have done - he would not have invaded Kuwait.