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# Realistic Self-Deterrence: An Alternative View of Nuclear Dynamics

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Donald M. Snow

Since the dawn of the nuclear age, and especially since nuclear weaponry was wedded to ballistic means of delivery across intercontinental ranges, a major (some would agree *the* major) goal has been the avoidance of strategic nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The effort to attain this goal has spawned the quasi-academic study of nuclear deterrence and the more practical policy debate over how best to guard against the nuclear threat to national existence.

In the United States, the result has been a multilevel strategic debate over declaratory, developmental and deployment, and employment strategies<sup>1</sup> to maintain the deterrent condition. This debate has centered on the questions of what threats dissuade our opponents from initiating nuclear hostilities, what weapons and arsenal characteristics are necessary to make those threats lively and credible, and how we should be prepared to fight and terminate hostilities to our maximum advantage or minimum disadvantage (which, if convincing, should contribute to the desired deterrence).

The most basic underlying assumption of this entire debate, especially but not exclusively at the level of declaratory strategy, is the need for threats to the adversary in the absence of which he would or at least might start nuclear war, the condition to be deterred. In other words, the major object of deterrence is the presumed hostile *intention* of the adversary, and the dynamic is to dissuade the opponent from activating that hostile intention.

One can see this in the entire debate over deterrence strategies. In the American debate, the basic question has been what kinds of threats are most dissuasive to the Soviets: retaliatory threats to wreak maximum death, destruction, and havoc (assured destruction) or threats to cancel out any projected Soviet gains through measured and proportional responses across

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the spectrum of possible provocation (limited nuclear options or countervailance). From the Soviet side, they maintain that "imperialism will unleash a world nuclear war against the Soviet Union unless prevented by the might of the Soviet Armed Forces"<sup>2</sup> and that it is Western knowledge of certain defeat at the hands of these forces that provides the motor of deterrence.

What if these formulations are simply wrong or, more precisely, irrelevant? The Soviets, after all, have been consistently derisive of both assured destruction and limited options, describing MAD as second-rate doctrine and expressing the opinion that nuclear war once started was highly unlikely to remain limited.<sup>3</sup> If these representations reflect real Soviet thinking on American strategy, can one convincingly argue that the threats flowing from those strategies convincingly will deter the Soviets? Similarly, Americans dismiss the Soviet strategy as little more than an excuse to continue procurement processes, since the United States harbors no aggressive intentions that require deterring.

If American threats do not deter the Soviets and Soviet threats do not alter American intentions, then who is deterring whom? The question must be raised, because important decisions about policies, weapons decisions and even the fate of mankind rest on the answer. Beclouded by the frenzy and occasional hysteria of the debate in which it occurs, the answer may be simpler and more straightforward than is generally advertised: Rather than the United States deterring the Soviet Union from crossing the nuclear threshold or vice versa, *it may be instead that the United States and the U.S.S.R. are deterring themselves.* The principal dynamic of nuclear war avoidance may be calculated and realistic self-deterrence (hereafter realistic self-deterrence or RSD) by the superpowers.

This formulation should not be surprising. Particularly as nuclear arsenals have grown, it has become increasingly evident that, as one observer puts it, "One of the few common goals the West and the Soviets share is the avoidance of a nuclear war."<sup>4</sup> The glue that bonds is the possession of nuclear capability, because "nuclear weapons create an uncommon interest between the two adversaries. Their fates are linked together—or the fate of each is in the hands of the other—in a way that was never true in the past."<sup>5</sup> Caught in the nuclear embrace, the two sides have developed such a strong mutual interest in nuclear war avoidance that they both seek to avoid and defuse situations that could lead to nuclear war. The result, especially evident in the past decade or so—remarkably given the occupancy both of the White House and the Kremlin by four different men and cool relations between the two capitals during most of the period—has been a gradual stabilization of relations to lessen the prospects of "a sociopolitical disaster of immense proportions."<sup>6</sup> This perceived need to avoid nuclear war has in turn made the likelihood of that war "extremely

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Realization of the need for realistic self-deterrence is recognized publicly by leaders in both countries. President Reagan, in a 16 January 1984 address, said "we should always remember that we do have common interests. And the foremost among them is to avoid war and reduce the level of arms."<sup>8</sup> Reflecting the same sentiments and using some of the same words, Secretary of State George Shultz has stated that "we have a fundamental common interest in the avoidance of war. This common interest impels us to work toward a relationship between our nations that can lead to a safer world for all mankind."<sup>9</sup>

Although originating in Nikita S. Khrushchev's famous 1956 "peaceful coexistence" speech to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, official Soviet emphasis on the need to avoid nuclear war gained special momentum during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev. He argued the cataclysmic affects of nuclear war repeatedly, in statements such as, "only he who has decided to commit suicide can start a nuclear war in the hope of emerging victorious from it"<sup>10</sup> and ascribing to nuclear arsenals the ability to "destroy every living thing on earth several times."<sup>11</sup> Another group of Soviet commentators intone the official public position in Clausewitzian language: "As regards the socialist community countries they unconditionally reject all variants of a nuclear war as a means of attaining socialism's political aims. *Nuclear war is not a continuation of socialist policy . . . Nuclear war cannot be permitted.*"<sup>12</sup> Before his banishment (and subsequent reinstatement to favor), no less a hard-line military figure than Marshall Ogarkov stated the official line that the Soviets have no intention of initiating nuclear war: "Soviet military strategy views a future world war, *if the imperialists manage to unleash it*, as a decisive clash . . ." (Emphasis added.)<sup>13</sup>

One may initially be tempted to dismiss the statements of Soviet (or for that matter American) leaders as propagandistic and politically motivated. The notion of nuclear war avoidance as a central tenet of Soviet policy does not comport neatly with the vaunted Soviet nuclear "war-winning" strategy.<sup>14</sup> The main argument being made here is that the major reason realistic self-deterrence operates to create a stable nuclear relationship is that the first foreign policy priority of *both* the United States and the Soviet Union is the avoidance of nuclear war with the other. Whether one calls the policy Leninist peaceful coexistence, détente or whatever, it is the premier policy goal to which all other aims are subservient.

With regard to the Soviet Union, this assertion flies in the face of conventional deterrence wisdom because it denies a Soviet intention to commit nuclear aggression that needs deterring. At first blush, the suggestion may indeed seem radical and even disingenuous if taken out of context. Yet, there are at least three sorts of evidence that can be used to support the contention.

The first is that this interpretation has substantial support within the expert community that analyzes Soviet policy. The consensus of that opinion is that:

“The Soviets assign the highest priority to the deterrence of nuclear war.”<sup>15</sup> This assertion arises not from any naive sense of Soviet benevolence, but rather their assessment of the consequences of “that very devastating exchange which both they and the United States seek to avoid.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, adoption of RSD does not represent any particular moderation of Soviet goals, which remain constant: “The Kremlin leaders do not want war; they want the world. They believe it unlikely, however, that the West will let them have the world without a fight.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the abandonment of nuclear war as a policy alternative neither argues that the Soviets “reject the notion of nuclear superiority, or at least the appearance of superiority . . . [as yielding] tangible political benefits”<sup>18</sup> nor that they “regard nuclear war as impossible.”<sup>19</sup> Nuclear war, not nuclear weapons possession per se, may have lost its utility, but the Soviet-American relationship remains competitive and conflictual within those bounds.

The second basis for the assertion is a reading of Soviet-American relations and particularly the pattern of conflict and confrontations between them. Viewing the broad sweep of the postwar period, it is possible to discern two fairly distinct phases. The first spanned roughly the quarter century after 1945 and was marked by fairly frequent confrontations with escalatory potential over such problems and places as Berlin, Cuba and the Middle East. In the last 15 years or so, and especially since the Yom Kippur War of 1973, these confrontations have essentially ceased occurring, even though the opportunities to confront one another have certainly not disappeared (e.g. Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf). It is not coincidental that this period has coincided with the Soviet achievement of nuclear equality with the United States and also apparently reflects a reevaluation of that balance as well: “In the fifth phases (1971-1984), the Soviets recognized that assured destruction of Soviet society would result from fighting an all-out nuclear war.”<sup>20</sup> That these changes have occurred is all the more remarkable in a period when Soviet-American relations generally deteriorated (under Carter, culminating with the various sanctions imposed after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) to the point that exchange between top leaders underwent a four-year suspension (the first Reagan term).

The third and final basis is Soviet profession. Recognizing the rejoinder stated above that leadership statements may have many purposes, including deception and manipulation, the Soviets have been quite consistent in stating their position on nuclear war. “Soviet political and military commentators have repeatedly acknowledged the catastrophic consequences of general nuclear war and are certain to support its avoidance.”<sup>21</sup> Consistency and honesty are not the same thing, of course, so that one can place varying amounts of weight on Soviet pronouncement. Nonetheless, the Soviets’ very consistency cannot be dismissed entirely out of hand.

If the absence of intention to initiate nuclear war lies at the heart of U.S. and Soviet foreign policies and acts to create RSD as a principal consequence, the question is why is this the case? This situation and the consequent stability that it has produced in U.S.-Soviet relations, after all, flies in the face of early (and even contemporary) warnings about the inherent instability and delicacy of the balance of terror. As one observer puts it, "The superpower leaders and their allies in Europe have been more cautious than early theories of nuclear behavior predicted."<sup>22</sup>

**T**here is remarkable agreement within the recent literature about the absence of American or (particularly) Soviet intent to start nuclear war and why this is the case, even though the analysis is not carried through to its realistic self-deterrence conclusion. The basic dynamic that creates the situation is the recognition of "the objective reality of assured destruction in an all-out nuclear war," which has "led to important modifications in Soviet military and diplomatic strategy."<sup>23</sup> As a result of this realization, "the Soviets are likely to be self-deterred," because they realize fighting a nuclear war will bring "the destruction of both societies," meaning that "the chances of war between the United States and the U.S.S.R. are very slight."<sup>24</sup>

Different analysts label this cause of RSD differently. McGeorge Bundy, for instance, has called it "existential deterrence."<sup>25</sup> Allison, Carnesale, and Nye, in a recent book, refer to the crystal ball effect, by which they mean that "the unprecedented damage nuclear weapons can do has produced an unprecedented prudence."<sup>26</sup>

Analysts who make this point are very quick to make a distinction between assured destruction as the likely outcome of nuclear war and as a consciously followed strategy. As Jervis puts it, "MAD as a fact is more important than MAD as a policy. The latter is in the realm of choice, the former is not."<sup>27</sup> Stating this a slightly different way, Knorr maintains, "Even though the superpowers do not follow deterrent strategies of Mutual Assured Destruction, mutual destruction is very likely to describe the consequences of substantial nuclear hostilities between them."<sup>28</sup>

In the case of most observers, there is a conscious desire to point out that, although assured destruction may be the factual outcome of an exchange, it is not a desirable strategic policy alternative. One group of analysts says that MAD "represents a condition, not an objective . . . . This condition exists today and is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. But MAD is not an objective of American policy. Its 'mutuality' is unattractive to most American policymakers (and presumably to Soviets as well)."<sup>29</sup> The assured destruction outcome is not only a likelihood, it is a regrettable if determined likely outcome of nuclear exchange that should not be confused as policy advocacy. Rather, the danger is in equating the condition and the policy advocacy, which has the effect of creating a "mountain of confusion . . . . The

mountain is the conclusion that this is the way we *should* design and plan the use of nuclear weapons."<sup>30</sup>

What this suggests is that the motive force underlying Soviet and American determination to avoid nuclear war is a fear of its probable consequences. These consequences include the very real likelihood that any nuclear conflict, once initiated, would escalate to a general level with results as unacceptable as those associated with assured destruction, or worse yet, the nuclear winter. Moreover, this possibility is the result of a technologically, and not politically or strategically, driven condition of mutual societal vulnerability to attack against which there is no effective defensive means of mitigating the disaster once it begins to unfold. The only way to avoid the disaster is to avoid letting the process begin, in other words, deterrence.

This admittedly sounds a great deal like assured destruction (AD) thought, but here the distinction between AD as condition and as policy becomes critical. The basic contention here is that it is the assessment of AD as the likely outcome of any nuclear engagement, *regardless of the deterrence strategies either side articulates in advance of that engagement*, that dissuades both sides from nuclear fantasies and which forces them to adopt nuclear war avoidance as their first foreign policy priority. Neither the MAD threat nor the countervailing strategy deter Soviet aggression against the United States any more than Soviet threats to prevail in nuclear war deter a U.S. aggression. What deters nuclear war is the mutual (or for that matter independently arrived at) conclusion by the superpowers that the result of such a conflict would be devastating beyond any sensible conceivable purpose or gain. Because of that realistic assessment, each superpower deters itself from initiating nuclear war. The result is a system of mutual deterrence which has evolved.

This matter may be put a slightly different way. One of the earlier observations was that the stability of the system, at least as measured in terms of dangerous (i.e., likely to escalate) confrontations, has become tranquil since the early 1970s, when arsenals reached something resembling their deadly equivalence. Mutual vulnerability exists within a rough symmetry of deadly consequences, but the realization has redoubled the determination that war's consequences are unacceptable and that war's deadliness means it must be avoided. As the nuclear balance has become more deadly, both sides have worked to make it less dangerous. Realistic self-deterrence has been the tool to reduce that danger.

If this assessment of the dynamics of deterrence is accepted, it has some strong implications for the nuclear debate. The entire debate over what kinds of threats best deter—that long debate over assured destruction and limited options, countervalue and counterforce targeting begun nearly 40 years ago in Brodie's famous<sup>31</sup> and Borden's obscure<sup>32</sup> treatises published in 1946—takes on a different and more academic quality. The questions about Soviet and

American motivations and things such as weapons procurements, employment strategies and the like are altered as well.

What is remarkable about the system of war avoidance created by realistic self-deterrence is how well it is working and has worked. Some gloomy prognostications and fears from the political left notwithstanding, the current system exhibits considerable stability. The important question thus becomes how does one work to reinforce the set of perceptions on which realistic self-deterrence rests and to avoid its failure. Put negatively, what could cause the resulting system of stable deterrence to fail, and what can be done to avoid that happening?

***The Conditions for RSD.*** The entire postwar U.S.-U.S.S.R. relationship has, in geopolitical terms, always had at least a slightly surreal image about it. Certainly, what have emerged as the dominant military powers on the globe differ in terms of political ideology and their views of a favorable world order, neither of which are inconsequential. At the same time, the two are not historic enemies with long traditions of animosity. The two clashed briefly during the Russian Civil War immediately after World War I, but otherwise relations have been cordial or at worst neutral. The result is the absence of deep cultural animosities between the American and Russian people that could fuel the righteous fires of genocide. The passions that could inspire mutual annihilation are simply not there as might be the case in Soviet relations with some of her neighbors with whom there is a shared hatred. Rather, "it is perhaps fortunate that the U.S. and the Soviet Union are the ones to lay down precedents for dealing with the nuclear dilemma. It would be difficult to think of two great powers with less to fight about."<sup>33</sup>

This observation, if accepted, means one can include the absence of atavistic passion to the list of disincentives for initiating superpower nuclear hostilities (a qualification one might not make so readily if, say, Germany and the Soviet Union were the principal nuclear antagonists). Rather, the keys to maintaining nuclear war avoidance under the current regime of RSD appear to be more mechanical, dispassionate and geopolitical.

If fear of the consequences of nuclear war triggers inhibitions and removes calculated intention from the realm of factors that could cause deterrence to fail, then one is left with two categories of factors that could lead to nuclear war. The first of these is nuclear war through inadvertence, where hostilities began without or even despite either side intending them to commence. The second category would be through the determination by one or both sides that the consequences of nuclear exchange were no longer unacceptable, such that there was not continuing need to feel self-deterred.

The first category, war by inadvertence, would most likely occur as the result of political causes. RSD posits that nuclear war would not occur unexpectedly as the result of either side planning or executing something such



as a surprise attack. Instead, such an outbreak would likely be the result of events getting out of hand, a crisis degenerating because of either third party (e.g., Middle Eastern-inspired) or direct superpower confrontation (e.g., a renewed Berlin crisis).

The solution, or at least a way of dealing with this sort of problem, is the creation of a political climate minimizing the prospects that a political crisis could inadvertently degenerate out of control, "a structure of political understanding and formalized restraint."<sup>34</sup> The purpose of this structure is dual: *crisis prevention* in the sense of defusing international differences and conflicts short of the level of confrontation and crisis; and *crisis management*<sup>35</sup> through a "structure [of] greater crisis stability with the goal of preventing war in crisis situations."<sup>36</sup> Crisis prevention, in other words, seeks to keep crises from occurring in the first place; crisis management seeks to defuse those crises that cannot be avoided altogether at the lowest and least dangerous levels of confrontation and escalatory potential.

The second category, *perceptual changes*, is more weapons balance and technological in character. The reasons for the inhibitions against nuclear usage are inbedded, at worst, in hard-headed assessments and comparisons of arsenal characteristics. The conclusions of such calculations are that the outcome of initiating nuclear attack under any circumstances would be unacceptable for the initiator in the final outcome, or at least that there is sufficiently great uncertainty about avoiding an unsuccessful outcome as to make the risk too great.

The problem here is to avoid either side from changing its perceptions. The key element is to maintain the perception either of the certainty of ultimate failure or dissuading uncertainty of probable success, because the "Soviet Union . . . ought to be deterred from attack given the massive penalties for even a slight failure."<sup>37</sup> Maintenance of such perceptions requires avoiding a change in either the quantitative or qualitative weapons balance such that one or both sides could conclude it possessed such advantages that it could avoid the unacceptable consequences of nuclear exchange.

These requirements for maintaining RSD are hardly radical. Crisis avoidance and management are similar in concept to the AD requirement for crisis stability (although the latter, since it assumes hostility that needs deterring, is more weapons oriented), and perceptual change avoidance shares conceptual purpose with the AD goal of arms race stability.

Where RSD diverges from more orthodox thought is in the assessment of what brings it about and hence how one maintains it. RSD divorces AD as policy from AD as fact and thus allows freer consideration of system maintenance in two senses. First, it removes the framework of AD vs. LNOs from the discussion, thereby broadening and unstricturing the parameters of discussion. Second, accepting AD simply as a current description of the consequence of nuclear exchange allows discussion of

alternative futures divorced from doctrinal restrictions about the desirability of change.

In this latter sense, the requirements for maintaining RSD can be viewed as an alternative and broader way to think about the future of deterrence less encumbered by orthodox canons. To this end, the discussion moves to a preliminary analysis of each of those requirements.

**Crisis Management.** If somber calculations during periods of "normal" relations (periods when there are no overt, dangerous sources of confrontation) produce the self-detering condition, then one must ask under what circumstances that judgment might be negated. One possible set of circumstances would be in the evolution of a crisis somewhere in the world where superpower vital interests came into direct conflict and where the evolution of the crisis rendered RSD as less vital than a favorable outcome or, in a more extreme fashion, if the crisis altered preceptions of the unacceptability of nuclear weapons usage. More simply put, the danger is in a crisis that escalates out of hand.

Former Secretary of Defense Schlesinger has looked at the problem of where geographically the escalatory potential is greatest. He suggests, "In the 'grey areas' the risks are low; incursions, subversions, and other pressures may occur without any major impact on the overall balance of power . . . . By contrast, a threat to Europe, Japan, or (for different reasons) the Arabian Gulf could start a process without limit."<sup>38</sup> This assessment, of course, is unexceptional; Western Europe and Japan have been considered vital to American security interests since the 1940s and former President Carter conferred the same status on the oil-rich littoral areas of the Persian Gulf in that part of his 1980 State of the Union Address that became known as the Carter Doctrine.

If nuclear weapons have produced RSD and general restraint in U.S.-Soviet relations, then the crisis-escalatory prospects are not equally likely in the three regions. Both sides have long understood the escalatory potential in Europe and Japan; and East-West relations have been structured virtually to preclude interbloc actions not authorized by one superpower or the other. West Germany is hardly likely to attack Czechoslovakia or vice versa without superpower agreement, including an assessment that the escalatory risks are somehow acceptable. In the absence of major changes in perceptions about the acceptability of nuclear war, such as assessment is very unlikely.

The real danger lies in situations where the superpowers do not entirely control events. In those circumstances, crises can arise and expand without the superpowers, who normally are supporting contending factions, being able to act decisively to defuse the crisis. The volatile Persian Gulf is such an area, leading Schlesinger to conclude, "only the Middle East region provides the potential for an uncontrolled clash between the Soviet Union and the

United States."<sup>39</sup> Some observers would add the Korean peninsula to regions with this potential, and the resurgence of nuclear proliferation adds to the horror of the scenario. "Any use of nuclear weapons by small nations is likely to involve the superpowers and any use of nuclear weapons by the superpowers almost certainly would escalate to all-out exchange."<sup>40</sup>

The danger in a spiraling crisis is that the dynamics of the ongoing situation would alter perceptions of the acceptability of nuclear weapons and reverse judgments fashioned in a less hectic, more analytical environment. The problem is that crises can occur rapidly, condensing decision time and both restricting and distorting information, so that perceptions about what is and is not sensible behavior changes. As Allison, Carnesale and Nye describe this process, "What starts out as rational is likely to become less so over time. And accidents that would not matter much in normal times or early in a crisis may create 'crazy' situations in which choice is so constrained that 'rational' decisions about the least bad alternatives lead to outcomes that would appear insane under normal circumstances."<sup>41</sup> Speaking directly to the distortion of perspective that can occur, Robert S. McNamara suggests "What may look like a reckless gamble in more tranquil times might then be seen merely as a reasonable risk."<sup>42</sup> The psychological dynamic activating this distortion creation is stress, leading to the most demanding requirement for the system: "deterrence must work under terrible stress as well as in ordinary circumstances . . . [D]eterrence is harder in a crisis."<sup>43</sup>

The problem with crises is that they contain the potential to loosen the inhibitions and distort the perceptions on which RSD rests. If maintaining RSD is the principal goal that eventuates in the absence of nuclear war, then dealing with superpower crisis situations is priority business. As one looks at the problem more closely, it appears to have two basic imperatives: crisis avoidance where possible, and crisis termination at the earliest and lowest level possible where avoidance proves unattainable. The evidence suggests that superpower relations, implicitly if not always explicitly and often obscured in a fog of hostile and confrontational rhetoric, have been moving in the direction of both these goals.

Crisis avoidance is the process of one or both parties staying out of situations that could lead to crises. The best evidence of this is the movement of negative interactions away from such potentially explosive places as Europe (and especially flashpoints such as Berlin) where mutually vital interests and deep historical animosities are involved to the Third and Fourth Worlds, where interests are more peripheral and where consequently either or both can withdraw before differences can become crises. Bracken concurs, arguing "it may be best to concentrate our energy on *preventing* confrontations, by diplomacy, wise foreign policy, and fostering of a cooperative relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union."<sup>44</sup> The other problem is crisis termination at the lowest possible level, before a crisis can

develop the intensity to trigger the dynamics by which crises get out of hand. Mechanisms such as the Hot Line are attempts to promote the communications that facilitate crisis termination. The vitality of the entire crisis management mission is underscored by Jervis, who says that "we must pay more attention to convincing the Soviets that, even in an extreme crisis, war is not inevitable."<sup>45</sup>

**Changed Perceptions.** RSD posits that the perception of unacceptable outcomes after a nuclear exchange is the major reason that neither side contemplates the intentional initiation of nuclear war. Since the result is the desired state of the absence of nuclear war, this is a condition and set of perceptions to be maintained and nurtured. The questions to be asked are: what is there about the current balance that creates the perception? And what could make that perception change to a belief that a nuclear war's consequences would be tolerable?

The key factor is the deadly balance, defined loosely as some form of equilibrium, and there is agreement on this factor on both sides of the Iron Curtain. A quasi-official Soviet pronouncement, for instance, intones, "Where there is a military strategic equilibrium, nuclear weapons will give neither side an advantage: their utilization only threatens to bring about a global catastrophe."<sup>46</sup> Secretary of State George Shultz agrees with this assessment, stating succinctly, "The nuclear equilibrium has successfully deterred World War III."<sup>47</sup>

The size and lethal characteristics of the two arsenals create this equilibrium of deadly effects such that, for instance, "The most obvious requirement for American nuclear forces is that they provide the unquestioned ability to destroy the Soviet Union even if the Soviets stage a skillful first strike."<sup>48</sup> Traditionally, the high level of mutually possessed force creates the inhibition. On the one hand, "U.S. and Soviet strategic forces are not in delicate balance over a sharp fulcrum. Instead, they are counterpoised on a broad base of uncertainties that will permit a number of force alternatives on either side without cataclysmic results."<sup>49</sup> Peripheral changes in the equilibrium, in other words, will not alter perceptions about gain. On the other hand, "an *attacker* will want high confidence of achieving decisive results before deciding on so dangerous a course as the use of nuclear weapons,"<sup>50</sup> and huge arsenal sizes make such calculations difficult if not impossible.

Large, complex arsenals also enter considerable operational uncertainties into any contemplations of initiating nuclear attack, because such calculations can only be answered positively if one is reasonably certain the consequences will be tolerable. As John Weinstein puts this effect, "the vulnerabilities and uncertainties confronting Soviet leaders and military planners will continue to provide powerful incentives to avoid war with the West."<sup>51</sup> The

philosopher Leon Wieseltier turns this factor around, arguing that it is the absence of certainty that one can succeed that deters: "In fact, deterrence does not require your enemy to believe that you will strike back; it requires only that he not believe you will not. Deterrence, in other words, does not require certainty. Doubt is quite enough."<sup>52</sup>

The large size of nuclear arsenals, the consequences of their use even after a victim has absorbed an initial attack, and operational uncertainties that frustrate plans to use nuclear weapons profitably have created the basis for RSD. Were the balance of forces between the superpowers stagnant, one could consequently reduce the vigil with which that balance is eyed. The strategic balance, however, is anything but stagnant, and its dynamism requires careful attention to ensure that the balance is not upset intolerably. This creates a particular imperative which Hoffman states specifically in the context of the SDI: "The point of departure ought to be reflection on the motives that might induce Soviet leaders and military planners to contemplate actually using nuclear weapons."<sup>53</sup> Guaranteeing that changes in the balance do not encourage altered perceptions about the utility of nuclear weapons employment is a major concern for maintaining RSD.

**Conclusion.** The central assertion of this paper has been that the avoidance of nuclear war does not derive from the power of declaratory threats that the Soviet Union and the United States make against one another. Rather, it has been asserted that any nuclear aggressive intentions either or both harbor against the other are deactivated by their individual and collective unwillingness to endure their projected estimates of the effects of nuclear war. These somber calculations, which have the effect of inhibiting nuclear war, have been called realistic self-deterrence (RSD).

RSD is simultaneously an orthodox and radical notion. Its orthodoxy derives from a growing consensus among students of superpower relations that each share the avoidance of nuclear war as their first foreign policy priority. Policymaker and analyst alike agree that nuclear war would be unacceptable to both, something akin (at least implicitly) to accepting assured destruction as factual consequence if not as policy preference.

The radicalism of RSD is to extend, possibly beyond the breaking point, that consensus to the conclusion—it is self-deterrence that powers nuclear war avoidance. If one accepts RSD, moreover, unsettling consequences flow, two of which have been discussed. First, acceptance of RSD transforms the debate over limited options (by whatever name) and assured destruction, rendering much of that debate and the subsidiary questions it spawns of questionable relevance. Second, RSD creates an alternative agenda for deterrence maintenance, notably focusing on *public digital management and perceptual misin*

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The RSD hypothesis and its implementing criteria have implications in other aspects of the nuclear debate as well. How, for instance, does RSD meld with the growing concern over strategic uncertainty as part of nuclear strategy? Does RSD complement or undercut the conceptual attractiveness of missile defenses, and especially the SDI? The answers to these and other questions await a more detailed and critical analysis of the RSD idea.

## Notes

1. For an elaboration, see Donald M. Snow, "Levels of Strategy and American Strategic Nuclear Policy," *Air University Review*, November/December 1983, pp. 63-73.
2. Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, "Conclusions," in Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, eds., *The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), p. 289.
3. For some greater description, see Donald M. Snow, *Nuclear Strategy in a Dynamic World: American Policy in the 1980s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981), pp. 135-136, and 141-142.
4. John G. Kelliher, "Discussion," in Richard F. Staar, ed., *Arms Control: Myth Versus Reality* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 41.
5. Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 30.
6. Fritz Ermath, "Contrasts in American and Soviet Strategic Thought," reprinted in John F. Reichart and Steven R. Sturm, *American Defense Policy*, 5th ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 64.
7. Bernard Brodie, "On the Objectives of Arms Control," *International Security*, Summer 1976, p. 19. A sample of other recent writers making similar observations includes: Steven M. Meyer, "Soviet Perspectives on the Paths to Nuclear War," in Graham T. Allison et al., eds., *Hawks, Doves, and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War* (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 167; Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Foreword," in Robbin E. Laird and Dale R. Herspring, *The Soviet Union and Strategic Arms* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. xi; and Charles Burton Marshall, "Dinner Address," in Staar, ed., p. 183.
8. Ronald Reagan, "The U.S.-Soviet Relationship," *The Atlantic Community Quarterly*, Spring 1984, p. 5.
9. George Shultz, "U.S.-Soviet Relations in the Context of U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Atlantic Community Quarterly*, Fall 1983, p. 202.
10. Dan L. Strode, "The Soviet Union and Modernization of the U.S. ICBM Force," in Barry R. Schneider et al., eds., *Missiles for the Nineties: ICBMs and Strategic Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 146.
11. Laird and Herspring, p. 20.
12. Gancho Ganey et al., "The Nuclear Threat and Politics," *World Marxist Review*, April 1984, p. 46.
13. Nikolay V. Ogarkov, "Military," in Scott and Scott, p. 246.
14. The classic statement of this position remains Richard Pipes, "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Can Fight and Win a Nuclear War," *Commentary*, July 1977, pp. 21-34. Jervis rejoins this position, stating "It is not clear that the Soviet doctrine has any relevance to deterrence at all. Instead, it may only be a discussion of what should be done if deterrence fails." See Jervis, p. 108.
15. Edward L. Warner III, "The Defense Policy of the Soviet Union," in Reichart and Sturm, p. 53.
16. Robert Kennedy, "The Changing Strategic Balance and U.S. Defense Planning," in Robert Kennedy and John M. Weinstein, eds., *The Defense of the West: Strategic and European Issues Reappraised* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1984), p. 11.
17. Paul Nitze, "Strategy in the Decade of the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1980, p. 90.
18. Kennedy, "Changing Strategic Balance," in Kennedy and Weinstein, p. 12.
19. David Holloway, "The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Soviet Union," *Daedalus*, Summer 1985, p. 261.
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40. William T. Lee, "Soviet Perceptions of the Threat and Soviet Military Capabilities," in Graham D. Vernon, ed., *Soviet Perceptions of War and Peace* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1981), p. 73.
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44. Bracken, p. 49. He also argues crisis management as a major concern, p. 52.
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