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# Defense, War-Fighting and Deterrence

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by  
Colin S. Gray

**H**aving been in retreat through most of the 1970s, the advocates of a mutual assured destruction approach to nuclear deterrence and force planning are staging something of a comeback. Many aspects of the real world have altered, but not, seemingly, the arguments of people who believe that deterrence is best secured via the mutual threat to wholly vulnerable civilian populations. Wolfgang Panofsky, for a prominent example, published an article very recently which was a fairly direct restatement of an article that he published back in 1974. He argues as follows:

What is clear above all is that the profusion of proposed NUTS (Nuclear Utilization Target Selection) approaches has not offered an escape from the MAD world, but rather constitutes a major danger in encouraging the illusion that limited or controlled nuclear war can be waged free from the grim realities of a MAD world.<sup>1</sup>

It is my contention that defense planning which provides for the selective and controlled employment of nuclear weapons constitutes no danger to peace, and that there are no good reasons why such planning should encourage any illusions. No one who opposes MAD reasoning is guaranteeing that the firing of nuclear weapons would be controllable, that nuclear weapons can, for certain, be employed to secure political objectives, or that damage to Western homelands can be limited.

If nuclear weapons genuinely are unusable by a democracy, because they are not politically or socially acceptable, then the United States and Nato have serious problems. Aside from the fact that nuclear weapons are the key to Nato's concept of flexible response, the potential enemy happens to be heavily armed with such weapons and is not constrained by the political pressures which hamper rational defense planning in democracies.

It is sensible to be skeptical about the feasibility of controlling a nuclear war, and particularly a protracted nuclear war. One can envisage circumstances where the United States has a surviving force of SSBNs at sea and ICBMs buried deep-underground, but where those forces have no access to anything resembling a National Command Authority (NCA). One cannot be certain that nuclear war would be controllable, but there should be no doubt as to why it is important that we strive to provide for such control. A defeatist, or fatalistic, attitude towards control virtually guarantees that if deterrence ever fails, it fails deadly. Control would be very difficult to sustain, but very difficult is not synonymous with impossible.<sup>2</sup>

For the United States to invest heavily in the ability to control the employment of its nuclear weapons, and in some substantial capability to enforce damage limitation

(through counterforce attacks and active and passive defenses), is both important for deterrence and is essential as the responsibility of today's policy makers to the past and to the future.

Active and passive defenses, in the forms of air and missile defense, should be integral to the concept of deterrence. The concepts of protracted war and war-survival are not offered as alternatives to deterrence; they constitute the dominant theory of deterrence. Nuclear utilization theory has at its heart the idea of denying victory to the enemy and, no less important, of avoiding defeat ourselves. Whether or not the scale of damage that would be suffered in a central nuclear war is compatible with the idea of "victory" for our side is another matter. "Victory" and "defeat" are not absolute ideas, rather do they relate to the achievement or failure of achievement of political objectives. Those objectives may be more or less extensive in scope.

To deter the Soviet Union through the threat to deny victory, the current official US policy story, must entail the United States developing a survivable capability to strike, either promptly or in a delayed manner, at places deemed by the Soviet Union to be essential for the preservation of its political system. By way of some contrast the Soviet Union appears to be committed deeply to the idea of "assured survival."

The United States cannot assess its deterrent requirements solely on the basis of assuming a reasonable and prudent adversary who is calculating expected losses against possible gains within a context of peacetime normalcy. US nuclear forces will be needed as a major influence upon Soviet minds perhaps only once or twice in a generation, if then. This is not to deny the day-in, day-out relevance of nuclear forces to consideration of the correlation of forces—they are a central feature on the military landscape—but it is to deny that the requirements of deterrence are very onerous day by day. The proper, though admittedly most stressful, test of strategic postural adequacy would be a political condition where the Soviet leadership anticipated the imminent breakup of its Empire unless it took offensive action, militarily, to attempt to control physically the external environment of that Empire. In short, a situation where the US strategic posture was directly relevant to Soviet policy decision would be a situation wherein the Soviet Union probably would be close to being beyond deterrence. Needless to say, the United States has a major interest in minimizing, to the extent it is able, the possibility of such a situation coming to pass.

The greatest Soviet fear is loss of political control. If such control is lost, all is lost. Political control in the form of individuals, official records, and communication links can, and to some degree should be, targeted directly. The principal target should not so much be the official organs of the state, but rather the awe in which the state is held by society at large. The regime has to be seen to be failing. The United States cannot directly produce political revolution through nuclear attack, but it can enforce progressive defeat upon the means of coercion of the Soviet state. But, if the Soviet state can succeed in military operations abroad, it should be able to pick up the pieces at home and recover at some leisure. It must be emphasized that the Soviet political control structure must be placed at risk, for deterrent effect, but should not actually be struck until very late in a war—if then. Although the United States need not be stronger than the USSR everywhere and in all respects, the deterrence policy of the Reagan administration, which requires that the United States be able to wage a

prolonged conflict, makes very plain the need for the enduring survivability of strategic forces able to threaten, and strike at, Soviet "core" political values.

The ability to limit damage to the United States, on a major scale, is essential for the credibility of the US deterrent. It is all well and good for the US defense community to design more and more sophisticated ways of hurting the Soviet Union in a manner particularly distressful in Soviet perspective. But, it should never be forgotten that the United States has no inherent interest in punishing the Soviet Union, and still less interest in punishing Soviet citizens for the actions of their government. In practice, in the undesired event of war, an American president is going to be much more interested in saving American lives than he is in taking Soviet lives.

US strategic forces should be so postured that, to the degree possible, they deter attack upon themselves. A deceptively based MX system, with a noteworthy ballistic missile defense (BMD) backstop, could and should function for deterrence as a major "firebreak": that is to say as a target set that the Soviet Union could not strike at with profit. Meanwhile the MX could impose very burdensome costs on the Soviet Union as Soviet ICBM payload is placed at prompt risk of attack.<sup>3</sup> But, nuclear war must be considered as a *campaign*. The United States should not initiate central nuclear employment if it anticipates, with high confidence, suffering intolerable damage by way of Soviet retaliation. Nonetheless, it is a fact that it is Nato that has the major net deficiency in theater forces, meaning that it is almost certain to be the United States who first needs to have to resort to "strategic" nuclear weapons—to attempt to redress a growing theater disaster.

Active and passive defense, in conjunction with considerable counterforce ability cannot preclude damage to the American homeland, let alone assure national survival. Nothing can be assured concerning nuclear war, save for the certainty of unprecedented damage to be suffered with unusual rapidity. Nonetheless, a national commitment to damage limitation is of the greatest importance. What should such a commitment accomplish?

- \* It should deny the Soviet Union the ability to win a military victory.
- \* It should enable the United States to take, and perhaps retain, the strategic initiative in an endeavor to seize and retain escalation dominance.
- \* It should make the difference between a catastrophe that we survive as a political, social, and economic entity, and a catastrophe that we do not survive.
- \* Also, a United States committed to damage limitation should be perceived (which, after all, is where deterrence is or is not effective) as a robust competitor and as a more reliable friend and ally.

It certainly is true that the advent of nuclear weapons and rapid means for intercontinental delivery stresses active defenses as never before. The arithmetic of prohibitive kill ratios achieved by air defense has been altered dramatically in favor of the offense. However, there is a permanent technological dialectic between the offense and the defense. Because all American cities cannot be defended with very high confidence in the 1980s, it does not follow that that task will be incapable of accomplishment twenty or thirty years from now. It is popular to argue that only a perfect, or very near perfect defense, is worth buying. This is incorrect.

Speculation concerning probable Soviet style in central nuclear targeting is exactly that, speculation. However, the United States is not totally ignorant

concerning the probable character of Soviet style in central-war waging. There are grounds for believing that Soviet targeteers focus heavily upon American military and C<sup>3</sup>I targets, with some attention paid to important war-supporting industries. We should anticipate Soviet conduct of a central nuclear war according to fairly traditional military criteria. While the Soviet Union may not be interested in imposing maximum damage upon American society, as an end in and of itself, one should not anticipate Soviet willingness to pay a heavy price in terms of immediate military effectiveness in order to hold down collateral damage to urban and industrial America. Logically, if they were to seek to exploit the vulnerabilities of American society, Soviet leaders would choose to conduct a central nuclear war, in its initial stages, in a very controlled and restrained manner, leaving America's cities as hostages to American political acquiescence.

In practice, the Soviets almost certainly would choose to leave the United States a great deal more to lose following an opening round of a war. But, it would be a mistake to assume that the Soviets conceive of nuclear war as a political bargaining process rather than as a war. While the Soviets probably would not inflict any more damage than they believed they had to for military reasons, it is almost certainly correct to argue that they design their war plans with a view to the efficient allocation of scarce nuclear assets.

The most agreeable, and certainly economical, theory of damage limitation holds that both sides, for fear of the consequences of retaliation, would conduct nuclear war extremely carefully, and that damage would be limited, by reciprocated choice, as a consequence of deliberate targeting restraint, in kind and in quantity. Most of what American defense planners think they know about Soviet military style does not encourage endorsement of this theory. Soviet nuclear rocketry is informed by a theory of application which derives directly from the artillery.

It is more likely than not that in the event of war, virtually the entire Western theoretical literature on the subject of intra-war deterrence and controlled response, with various "thresholds," will be discovered, belatedly, to have been mere vanity and wishful thinking. Without assuming the worst possible case, by any means, it is only prudent to assume that the Soviet Union would attempt, in very short order, to win the military war by denying the United States the physical ability to continue to wage it. If that is the case, the pertinent question, of real-time importance, would not be "how can we (the United States) encourage restraint on the Soviet part?," rather would it be, "how well can our forces fight?—and how much of the American homeland can we protect from destruction and damage?"

Investment in active and passive defenses does not make war any the more likely to occur, contrary to the strange beliefs of some people. No American president is going to become a nuclear adventurer simply because he has active and passive defenses which, in conjunction with timely offensive-force attrition of enemy capabilities, might hold American casualties down to the low tens of millions.

But, investment in civil defense, in air defense, and in several layers of ballistic missile defense, should mean that an American president, *in extremis*, could threaten to initiate nuclear action in defense of ultimate Western values, and that threat should be credible. The theoretical, strategic, and political case for heavy investment in damage-limitation is clear indeed. Stated at its most succinct: A United States with a plausible theory of survival in a central nuclear war campaign is a United States

capable of fulfilling its current foreign policy obligations; a United States bereft of such a theory (as today) is a United States incapable of fulfilling those obligations.

The question of what the proper balance should be between the offense and the defense does not lend itself to definitive answer. The American homeland must be protected because one simply cannot afford to assume that the deterrence system will "work" forever.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that the next century will see a technical-strategic shift from a condition of offense-dominance, as today, to a condition of defense-dominance. However, it is well to remember why the United States invests in long-range nuclear weapons. The most stressful task with which the US long-range nuclear forces are burdened is that of makeweight for conventional or nuclear theater deficiencies. Unlike the Soviet situation, the United States cannot be content merely to neutralize the political influence of the other superpower's strategic forces. If the United States should ever need to wield the threat of strategic nuclear employment, it would be with coercive purposes in mind, to induce the Soviet Union to pull back from a recent gain. Unless the United States has a persuasive theory of how it limits its societal vulnerability, the initiation of central nuclear war would, quite literally, be to begin a campaign that it could not finish. In the classic phrase, the Soviet Union would have "escalation dominance."

Opponents of active and passive defense tend to fail to address the logical (indeed, realistic political) connection drawn here between relative freedom of offensive action and the ability to limit damage at home. It is not at all obvious, furthermore, that any American gains in the fields of active and passive defense would easily and near-automatically be offset by Soviet counteraction. If very high technology is what the United States is particularly good at inventing and exploiting, we should back American reentry physicists against Soviet BMD designers, and American BMD designers against Soviet physicists. Also, it should not be forgotten that Soviet defense industry, in all its aspects, is not an agile instrument, easily fine-tuned to respond to particular American military programs. If, for example, American BMD deployment were to trigger Soviet BMD deployment, that would have a major impact on resource availability for other Soviet high technology programs which, considered in the round, might well be beneficial to Western security. The "slack" in US high technology industry should easily accommodate the heavy competitive pressures.

No great reliance should be placed on any single damage-limitation program. The United States needs civil defense, air defense, BMD, and offensive forces capable of reducing the threat with which the defenses would have to cope. The issue here is not whether this or that BMD system assuredly will work very well. Active and passive defenses would vastly complicate the tasks of Soviet defense planners, greatly increase Soviet uncertainty, and should make a major difference in the credibility of the United States commitment to honor its treaty commitments without, in so doing, necessarily committing national suicide.

This paper has not sought to make light of nuclear war. Nor has it placed enormous faith in any particular defense technology. The case for large-scale investment in active and passive defenses, as part of a balanced strategic posture, must, in the first instance, be appreciated at the level of strategic argument. With one's eyes fully open as to the prospective horrors of nuclear war, one should endorse a substantial,

though admittedly imperfect, multi-layered defense, over no defense at all. We should not ensure by our actions that if deterrence fails it must fail deadly.

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### NOTES

1. Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr. and Wolfgang Panofsky, "MAD Versus NUTS," *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1981/82, p. 304.
  2. For a pessimistic analysis, see Desmond Ball, *Can Nuclear War Be Controlled?* Adelphi Papers, no. 169 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Autumn, 1981).
  3. I have presented this argument in detail in *Strategy and the MX*, Critical Issues Series (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1980); and in *The MX ICBM and National Security* (New York: Praeger, 1981).
  4. See Fred Charles Ikle, "Can Nuclear Deterrence Last to The End of the Century?," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1973, pp. 267-285.
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