

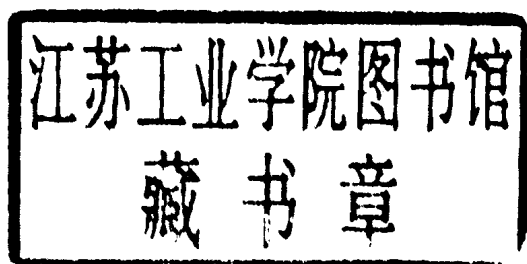
Nuclear Strategy in the Twenty-First Century

Stephen J. Cimbala



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Introduction

No theory or combination of theories is ever going to provide us with the paradigmatic equivalent of a “crystal ball,” in which we can perceive the future with the same clarity we take for granted when we view the past. But theories that successfully explain a system’s past do not normally lose their validity as they approach, and even proceed beyond, the present.

—John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, p. 191¹

Nuclear strategy has an oxymoronic ring. The idea that something as subtle and nuanced as “strategy” could be related to the use of instruments as deadly as nuclear weapons sounds almost obscene to experts and to lay persons alike. “Nuclear strategy” calls to mind the jokes about “military intelligence” or “smart warfare.” Despite understandable skepticism about their value, nuclear weapons had to be faced. With the advent of atomic bombs near the end of World War II and their use against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world of military technology had been changed forever. What changes nuclear weapons would bring about in the world of military strategy was, in 1945, still arguable.

We now have considerable distance and military hindsight on the question of how nuclear weapons influenced U.S., Soviet-Russian and other military strategies and defense policies. The Cold War has ended, and the Soviet Union is in the past tense. We can look backward more or less objectively and evaluate what nuclear weapons were good for, and what not, at least between 1946 and 1991. This is not just an aca-

demic exercise. The purpose of any policy study, likewise this one, is to draw from past experience in order to learn for the future.

Nuclear weapons remain in the arsenals of the Cold War nuclear powers: Great Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States. In addition, in 1998 two states were added to the list of openly acknowledged nuclear powers: India and Pakistan. Israel is also widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, and Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria and Libya have been reported in various sources as seeking to acquire nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The spread of nuclear weapons to these and possibly other currently non-nuclear states might upset the applecart of U.S. and allied military strategies and, arguably, make for a more dangerous and precarious world.

Chapter 1 argues that the first problem presented to U.S. policy makers in the Cold War was that of limited war. The outbreak of war in Korea caught U.S. planners, still fixated on World War II experience and programmed for global conflict against the Soviet Union, off guard. The United States was obliged in Korea to fight a limited war for limited objectives under the shadow of nuclear weapons. Some contend that a veiled threat of nuclear use by the Eisenhower administration might have expedited the Korean armistice, but other factors were also important, including the death of Stalin and his succession by a regime less interested in military confrontation with capitalism. For the remainder of the Cold War, the United States struggled to define the scope of American commitments for which conventional war was worth waging on a large scale. Always in the background was the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union and, after 1972, with China. U.S. peacetime defense expenditures in the Cold War years were unprecedented in American history, but they might have been even larger without nuclear weapons as an ultimate deterrent.

The Soviets were also required to adapt painfully to the realities of the first nuclear age. Chapter 2 covers this story by charting developments in Soviet military theory and in security policy related to the new conditions imposed by nuclear weapons. Inevitable war with the capitalist world was supplanted by the continuing standoff of peaceful coexistence without war. Under the communist party chairman, Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet political and military leadership eventually accepted the reality, if not the desirability, of nuclear deterrence. Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist Soviet president and communist party chairman, moved further in the direction of military detente based on arms control after he assumed power in 1985. Gorbachev, influenced by his assessment that nuclear war was inadmissible as an instrument of Soviet policy, declared that the international class struggle had been preempted by a new condition of security interdependence between East and West. Soviet military leaders, like their American counterparts, acquired much of their

nuclear learning in fits and starts, as during Cold War confrontations or crises.

Chapter 3 considers once again the already overwritten episode known to historians as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. The author cannot claim to have discovered new archives, or evidence as such, pertinent to the crisis. But a stronger case can be made for rethinking some of the conclusions drawn by other investigators, including expert historians and political scientists who have devoted a great deal of attention to the missiles of October. In Chapter 3, we suggest that the crisis lends itself to roseate misconstruction about the utility of nuclear weapons for brinkmanship and for diplomatic coercion. Cuba 1962 was a crisis that never should have come about except for considerable political mismanagement in Moscow and in Washington. Once it came about, it was handled with less than glittering dexterity by Kennedy and Khrushchev, despite the laurels showered upon the American president and his advisors in many studies. Cuba 1962 was a narrow and fortuitous escape from mutual disaster: understood as such by policy makers, the experiment of poorly-thought-out nuclear brinkmanship was not repeated for the remainder of the Cold War.

The Cold War was dangerous enough, but the degree of danger was limited by the small number of nuclear powers and by the fact that the two "superpowers," the United States and the Soviet Union, presided over an essential bipolar international system. The end of the Cold War and the probable spread of nuclear weapons adds uncertainty to the stability of the new world order, as discussed in Chapter 4. Despite the experience of the Cold War nuclear arms races and occasional military confrontations, some draw the lesson that nuclear deterrence worked to stabilize international relations between 1946 and 1991 and that it will work in the same fashion into the next century. This optimistic view of an international environment permissive of the spread of nuclear weapons and yet marked by deterrence and arms race stability is wrong. The theoretical arguments in favor of proliferation as compatible with stability are flaccid, and the policy implications of those arguments cannot be sustained. Instead of a carefully managed nuclear proliferation marked by stable deterrence and an absence of nuclear fears, the next century is likely to see nuclear weapons used as "equalizers" against high-tech conventional powers such as the United States and its NATO allies.

Chapter 5 examines a case of qualitative nuclear proliferation. Russia has inherited the strategic nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union. We refer to this shift from "Soviet" to "Russian" nuclear forces as a case of proliferation for the following reason. The United States knew with some confidence that the nuclear forces of the former Soviet Union were at all times under firm party and regime political control, at least until

the abortive coup of August 19–21, 1991. On the other hand, the future of civil-military relations in the new Russia is open ended. Russia's nuclear weapons are post-Cold War political and military two-way streets. Since Russia's conventional forces have disintegrated for want of virtually everything since 1991, nuclear weapons remain Russia's sole claim to major power status in Eurasia. But Russia retains nuclear weapons far in excess of her own military needs for deterrence, even if Russia's new military doctrine allows for nuclear first use in the face of some forms of conventional attack. Russia should conclude START arms reduction agreements with the United States that could contribute to stable deterrence at lower levels, and both states should seek to improve political relations to the point at which deterrence, at least the nuclear kind, becomes superfluous.

Chapter 6 considers the coexistence of nuclear deterrence and "third wave" or postindustrial warfare and wonders how peaceful that coexistence can be. Nuclear deterrence theory and nuclear strategic thinking were products of second wave civilization, or the industrial age. As we enter the "third wave" society, driven by information and electronics, nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction seem as obsolete as *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, and so they are, at least in terms of waging discriminate war while limiting collateral damage against targets not expressly aimed at. The Gulf War of 1991 was the first window on the future of long-range, precision-guided, advanced conventional weapons, and on the knowledge-intensive technologies for seeing and comprehending the battlefield that will support those weapons in major conflicts. This is a war form in which the United States and a few other high-tech states have progressed beyond the present capabilities of any aspiring peer competitors. This advantage in information-based warfare may have a dark side, however. The attributes of information warfare may, in time of crisis between nuclear armed opponents, play havoc with the requirements for stable deterrence. Eager "infowarriors" could contribute to a failure of deterrence based on a mistaken decision for preemption, an accidental or inadvertent nuclear escalation or other undesired side effects of combining nuclear deterrence with info-compellence.

The conclusion advances a number of arguments that make inferences about the nuclear future based on the nuclear past. Some of these judgments are very counterintuitive to current thinking about policy and strategy, at least as it appears in the counsels of government and in the prestige journals. So be it. The future of nuclear weapons, as spelled out here, is that their main significance is not to threaten Armageddon in an instant. Instead, the uses to which the more numerous nuclear arsenals of the future will be put, compared to the past, will be highly nuanced and situation specific.² Deterrence will be only one among many combinations of policy and strategy pursued by a more heterogeneous cast

of actors armed with weapons of mass destruction.³ The goals for which their WMD will be threatened or used will be as diverse as are the reasons for state and non-state actors going to war in the past: power, revenge, hatred, glory, reasons of state so defined, ethnic rivalry, religious intolerance and all the rest.⁴ The world after the Cold War returns to "normalcy," (i.e., a condition of Hobbesian competition and frequent outbreak of war in the seams of the international system). The pertinent question is whether the center can hold.

NOTES

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

2. A more complex international system, compared to the Cold War, will demand of theorists and policy makers a willingness to juggle more than one model of causation or paradigm simultaneously. This may result in paradigm redundancy, but as historian John Lewis Gaddis has noted, paradigm redundancy is better than paradigm "fratricide" in dealing with complex social behavior. See Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War*, p. 191.

3. Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), *passim*.

4. On this point see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), esp. pp. 95ff.; and Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), *passim*.

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Part I

Nuclear History and Its Lessons

Chapter 1

Limited War in the Nuclear Age: Military Frustration and U.S. Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important challenges posed for U.S. and Soviet military thinkers was the adjustment from the total war mentality that had been required to defeat the Axis coalition in World War II. As the numbers of U.S. and Soviet nuclear weapons and intercontinental delivery systems multiplied, it became apparent that a world war or a war in Europe could not be fought to a politically acceptable outcome. *This* meant that generals and admirals on both sides of the Cold War had to face the wrenching possibility of fighting wars for limited political objectives with limited military means. The idea did not go down easily in either the East or the West.

In this chapter I review some of the challenges presented by limited war to U.S. political leaders, military planners and academic strategists by the unexpected setting of the Cold War. (The Soviet adaptations in strategy as a result of the nuclear age, and what their nuclear learning portends for the future, will be addressed in the next chapter.) I first take the story more or less chronologically from Korea through the Gulf war of 1991. It was a clear case of on-the-job learning, and very much against the instinctive American way of war.¹ It also holds portents for the future of American military art under an equally stressful transition forced by technology: from reliance upon weapons of mass destruction, and deterrence by threat of punishment, to reliance upon weapons of precision aim and reduced collateral damage, with deterrence based on threat of denial of opposed military aims.

THE COLD WAR AND U.S. LIMITED WAR STRATEGY

The extension of U.S. peacetime defense commitments to Western Europe, followed by the stationing of permanent American garrisons there, was a politico-military strategy for Cold War competition. But it was also a strategy for freezing the status quo in the center of Europe, thereby reducing the risk of inadvertent war between the United States and the Soviets.² NATO was to symbolize the absence of proclivities among the British, French and Germans to fight with one another as a by-product of its importance for deterring Soviet attack. NATO was also to reassure the Europeans against another U.S. cop-out if Europe's calm were threatened by another aspiring hegemon. Although not fully appreciated even now, NATO's political roles were as important as its military one. Most U.S. foreign policy influentials did not anticipate an actual shooting war in Europe during the latter 1940s or early 1950s. As George F. Kennan had anticipated, what was more probable was the slow squeeze of Kremlin pressure against American and allied interests both directly, as in the Berlin crisis of 1948, and through surrogates, as in Korea in 1950.

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, the Truman administration had a hard sell for military buildup, including a rapid expansion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. NSC-68, a high-level policy study calling for major U.S. rearmament in view of an imminent Soviet military threat to Europe and Asia, had been completed shortly before the eruption of North Korea's forces across the 38th parallel in June 1950.³ Chinese entry into the war only convinced many Americans that a Sino-Soviet bloc now threatened U.S. global interests. However, Korea was an improbable war for which American strategic planners had scarcely prepared. Expecting a global war against the Soviet Union begun in Europe, planners had given little consideration to the possibility of U.S. involvement in limited wars supported by the Soviet leadership but fought by other governments and forces outside of Europe.

Korea posed strategic and policy-making dilemmas in Washington. The Truman administration's decision to fight a limited war was controversial on several grounds. Field commander Douglas MacArthur chafed at political restrictions on military operations. Truman neglected to ask for a formal declaration of war against North Korea or against China after Chinese troops later entered the fighting on the Korean peninsula. The war was fought under the auspices of a United Nations collective security operation. Since the precedent had been set for commitment of U.S. forces to limited war without a congressional declaration of war, the precedent would be repeated to disastrous effect in Vietnam. Nor was the U.S. intervention in Korea exemplary of truly multilateral collective security operations, since it was in fact a U.S. military operation terminated according to U.S. requirements. Thus it provided no model

Table 1.1**Historical Trends in U.S. Defense Spending (DOD Budget Authority in Billions of Constant 1989 Dollars)**

1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960
227.5	361.6	297.7	217.9	190.4	193.2	202.3	198.1	209.7	202.8
Non-war Year Average (1954-1960): 202.1									
1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
204.0	234.6	237.4	227.3	217.5	261.1	284.6	289.3	277.9	250.6
Non-war Year Average (1961-1965): 224.2									
1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
226.2	218.8	208.8	201.3	193.9	202.1	212.0	209.1	208.5	213.2
Non-war Year Average (1973-1980): 206.1									

Source: Lawrence J. Korb, "Where Did All the Money Go?," ch. 1 in Stephen J. Cimbala, ed., *Mysteries of the Cold War* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishers, 1999).

for future uses of U.S. military power on behalf of collective security missions. To the contrary, the Korean War led to the militarization of containment and to the hardening of Cold War fault lines between the communist and capitalist worlds.

The war in Korea also opened the door to unprecedented U.S. peacetime defense budgets. Despite the fact that it was deliberately limited in geographical scope and in military escalation, the war was expensive, and defense spending never really reverted to the fiscal austerity of the Truman administration prior to 1950. Table 1.1 depicts the growth of U.S. defense budgets from FY 1950 through 1980.

The Korean War was treated in American military thought and doctrine as an exception and an aberration, and few appropriate lessons about the attributes of limited war fighting were drawn from it. The availability during the Eisenhower administration of larger numbers of nuclear weapons supported the shift to a declaratory strategy for general war of massive retaliation. While administration officials were eventually forced to retreat from this formulation in cases of less than total war, for global war against the Soviet Union, Eisenhower defense planning relied mainly upon promptly delivered and massive air atomic offensives. Special study committees such as the Gaither Committee pointed to the need for a larger menu of military responses, and Army officials chafed at the allocation of defense resources within arbitrary ceilings and under plan-

ning assumptions favoring Air Force and Navy procurement. NATO's declared objective of 96 active duty and reserve divisions was far beyond any commitment its members were actually willing or able to provide. Thus, reliance on nuclear weapons for extended deterrence became all the more necessary as a result of allied as well as U.S. domestic budgetary priorities.

The Army emerged from the 1950s as the fourth wheel of a defense establishment whose preferred military doctrines favored the more technical and less manpower-intensive arms of service. Under the Kennedy administration things would soon change. Kennedy preferred the strategy which became known as flexible response, calling for improved U.S. conventional forces for crisis response, forward presence and, if necessary, actual war fighting in order to raise the nuclear threshold in Europe. This last rationale was pushed hard within NATO by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, to the detriment of alliance solidarity on doctrine until the French departure from NATO's military command structure in 1966 and the promulgation of flexible response in 1967. Flexible response arguably allowed a greater role for the ground forces in U.S. military doctrine and force planning, but by the time flexible response became official NATO doctrine, the lines between Cold War "East" and "West" had solidified and neither side seemed interested even in limited probes against the other.

Civilian and military strategists, as well as some policy makers who recognized the inappropriateness of massive retaliation for other than all-out nuclear war, struggled during the latter 1950s and early 1960s to define a concept of selective military strategy suited to the variety challenges to U.S. security. Robert Endicott Osgood, for example, called for increased sophistication in U.S. academic and public understanding of the requirements of limited war in the nuclear age.⁴ Henry A. Kissinger, academic strategist later to serve as national security advisor to President Richard M. Nixon and as Nixon's secretary of state, examined the potential role of nuclear weapons in U.S. limited war strategy.⁵ Thomas C. Schelling applied bargaining theory to the study of military strategy in several influential works.⁶ William W. Kaufmann explained the military strategy of the Kennedy administration as an effort to provide an extended menu of military options even for nuclear war.⁷ Maxwell Davenport Taylor, writing as former U.S. Army chief of staff, critiqued Eisenhower's strategy as negligent of preparedness for limited war and as insufficiently attentive to the needs of U.S. ground forces.⁸ These and other varieties of limited war theory were not without shortcomings:

Limited-war theory had numerous flaws. It was primarily an academic, rather than a military concept, and it drastically misunderstood the dynamics of war. Its authors seemed to say that since limited war was mainly about bargaining

and diplomacy, it required no knowledge of military matters and indeed military considerations should not affect its conduct . . . In terms of bargaining theory, moreover, they (limited war theorists) assumed a greater capacity than was warranted on the part of a gigantic bureaucracy like the United States government to send clear, precise signals, and they reduced the behavior of potential enemies to that of laboratory rats.⁹

If strategic deadlock reigned in Europe, Khrushchev's insistence that wars of national liberation could be unleashed against Third World regimes supportive of U.S. policy called forth from the Kennedy administration a burst of doctrinal innovations. Special operations and low-intensity conflict studies, as the term was later denoted, led to an emphasis on subconventional warfare, psychological operations and nation building as constituent elements of U.S. military strategy.¹⁰ But only a fringe of the armed forces officer corps, such as the Green Berets, committed themselves to careers along these lines. The more traditional arms of service lacked serious interest in special operations and regarded their counterinsurgency brethren with undisguised distaste. As the U.S. commitment to Vietnam escalated well beyond the engagement of special operations forces and intelligence operatives, conventional military mind-sets displaced the political side of the politico-military equation on which special operations had been predicated. U.S. conventional forces in Vietnam, on the evidence, fought well against North Vietnamese conventional forces and Viet Cong units when the latter were willing to stand and fight pitched battles.

However, it became apparent by 1968 even to the Department of Defense that the United States could not win the counterinsurgency or conventional wars at an acceptable cost: Johnson's resignation and Nixon's phased disengagement followed. Having decided that escalation from limited commitment to a major U.S. military campaign in South Vietnam was necessary, President Johnson nonetheless sought to balance the requirement for military escalation against his other priorities in domestic politics, especially his cherished Great Society programs recently passed by Congress. Johnson's "guns and butter" policy filled the armed forces' enlisted personnel requirements by expanded draft calls instead of mobilizing the reserves. The result of this approach was to create nationwide dissent against the war, first across U.S. college campuses, and then in other segments of the general population.

The domestic turbulence on the home front, in part due to Johnson's lack of any apparent strategy for victory, brought the U.S. military escalation in Vietnam to a stopping point. When U.S. Commander-in-Chief William Westmoreland asked for several hundred thousand additional troops in 1968, then Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford suggested to Johnson that he pull the plug. Johnson did so, announcing his intention