

# NUCLEAR RESTRAINT

## A TWO-EDGED SWORD

By Arnold Wolfers

✻ NUCLEAR WEAPONS HAVE NEVER yet been used against an opponent who also had nuclear capabilities. Thus, we can only speculate what military actions the United States or the Soviet Union might take in times of crisis now that both sides have powerful strategic nuclear forces.

Although both major powers may seem to have no inhibitions in using these forces, powerful restraints operate against starting a two-way nuclear war. The future extent of these restraints cannot be predicted, but there could be adverse—even disastrous—consequences for any nation that failed to prepare for them. It is dangerous for a nation to overestimate the inhibitions that bind its enemy; it is equally unwise to underestimate the consequences of its own inhibitions.

To suggest "restraints" does not mean policy-makers are motivated by fear or cowardice. If the West rightly expects a credible threat of massive retaliation to deter Soviet leaders, surely it is not because it thinks these leaders are men beset with anxiety. Instead, deterrence—another word for imposed restraint—is based on expectation that the rational opponent will weigh the goals he hopes to achieve against the losses he risks in pursuing these goals. The greater the chance of self-destruction from enemy retaliation, the greater the pressures toward self-restraint, other things being equal. However, we cannot always realistically assume rational action—a sober weighing of gains against losses.

*Whether 'tis nobler in the  
mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows  
of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against  
a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?*

Hamlet, Act III



Two extreme but perhaps compatible theses about restraint under nuclear conditions have gained wide acceptance. The first holds that ample supplies of nuclear warheads and long-range carriers in both the United States and the Soviet Union make a war between them unthinkable. Both countries will realize, it is asserted, that to initiate such a war would be a deliberate act of national suicide. Subscribers to this thesis place unqualified reliance on the effectiveness of restraints prior to hostilities. The second thesis holds that if a Soviet-American nuclear war should occur, possibly by accident or miscalculation, nothing could prevent it from becoming a total war. Exponents maintain that all restraints must disappear as soon as the shooting starts or before it ceases. This second thesis will be reserved for later discussion.

#### Underlying Fallacy

The fallacy underlying the first thesis, in its sweeping formulation, is now widely recognized. The notion that nuclear duopoly automatically spells mutual deterrence (sometimes called a stable strategic stalemate) disregards the potential of a first-strike nuclear blow. To take the extreme case: If one party were confident that, by launching a first-strike surprise attack, it could "take out" the enemy's strategic force it would have no reason to fear enemy retaliation. There would be no prospect of self-punishment here to act as a restraint. Suppose a country, certain of its overwhelming first-strike advantage, did not initiate war. One could assume that it was acting under moral and political restraints sufficiently strong to offset the temptation of gaining or regaining a nuclear monopoly with little risk—and of eliminating thereby the threat of a future enemy strike, once and for all.

I shall not belabor the chances that either side in the Cold War may now have, or may attain, a reliable knock-out blow capacity. This "missile gap" problem has been thoroughly discussed. Conceivably, the

United States did have such a capacity before the Soviet shift from manned bombers to missiles. The Soviet Union may be able, for a short period, to reach such a capacity if it decides to accelerate its ICBM build-up while the United States mostly depends on a highly vulnerable force of manned bombers or immobile missiles. Without underrating the danger, I shall assume in the following discussion that the United States, before a Soviet first strike, will act to preclude a Soviet knock-out blow. Presumably it will do so by shifting to hardened or mobile missile sites and by protecting its bombers against the threat of obliteration by a Soviet first strike.

If much of the retaliatory force is made secure, the knock-out blow will cease to be a practical course of action. Then a knock-out could come only from new technological breakthroughs or stupendous negligence by one country. Thus, the best hope of either side will be a high degree of "counterforce crippling capability." One must expect, moreover, that this capability will tend to decline over the years. The protection for respective retaliatory forces may outdistance the increase in first-strike counterforce capability. This trend may be true even if one or both parties should engage in extremely costly and provocative attempts to reverse it. In any case I shall assume, here, that the United States would have to expect increasing punishment from Soviet retaliation to any first strike against the Soviet strategic force.

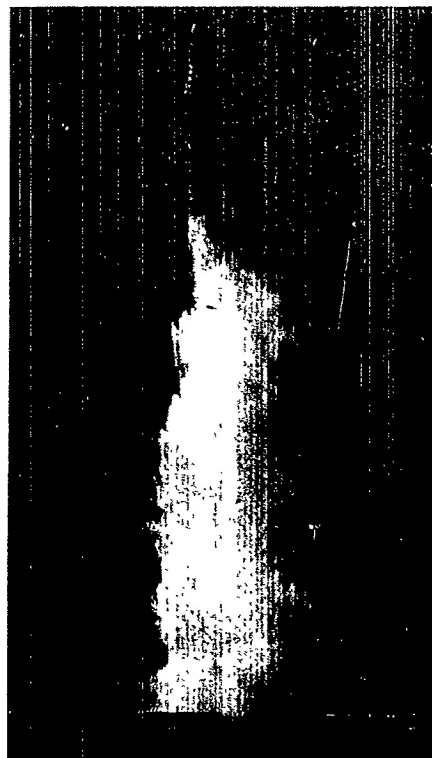
#### Retaliation Must Be Credible

The Soviet Union may be restrained from attacking the American strategic force by the prospect of the devastation to the Soviet homeland that an attack would invoke from American massive retaliation. In fact, deterrence of a Soviet attack on the United States is based on the assumption that a credible threat of retaliation will inhibit and, if massive enough, prohibit any Soviet government from attacking. No one,

as far as I know, has taken issue with this assumption. If the strategy has aroused criticism, it is because it appeared to treat impressive pre-hostilities first-strike capabilities as a substitute for dependable second-strike power. Only the latter can serve to deter a first-strike counterforce blow.

#### Retaliation As a Deterrent

The American people count heavily on the deterrent effect of the retaliatory threat. However, they may not see the inhibitions under which their own government might labor in the face of Soviet deterrent power. Some people disbelieve possible self-destruction could inhibit United States use of its strategic force. Is it not obvious, they ask, that the Soviet Union must expect the United States, if attacked, to retaliate with all its remaining striking power, no matter what the consequences or military utility of this response? And, they ask, is it not equally obvious by now that moral and political restraints, let alone military restraints, are enough to prevent the United States



*Firing of Dummy Polaris.*

from initiating war against the Soviet Union, or any other country?

With neither of these assertions need there be any quarrel; but they do not touch the main problem. The United States does not intend to start a nuclear war, preventively or otherwise. Its retaliation in kind against a Soviet counterforce strike we may assume as virtually automatic. But the United States does face an extremely serious problem of restraint in its intention to respond with strategic force to any substantial Sino-Soviet aggression overseas. This response would not initiate war—the other side would have done this. Nonetheless, it would make the United States the first to resort to strategic nuclear blows. This action—the first resort to strategic nuclear force—is one the United States and the Soviet Union will be more and more reluctant to take. As the anticipated second-strike capability of their respective opponent grows, so also does the degree of expected self-punishment.

#### Attack on US vs Attack on Allies

The distinction between US reactions to attack on the United States itself and to attacks on US overseas allies implies no difference in American concern for the interests affected. Instead, the difference is that the decision to start a Soviet-American nuclear war rests with the Soviet leaders if they attack the US—in the first case, with the US government, otherwise. In this second case strong restraints are bound to inhibit the first nuclear blow—a different situation from strategic retaliation to an enemy first-strike counterforce blow.

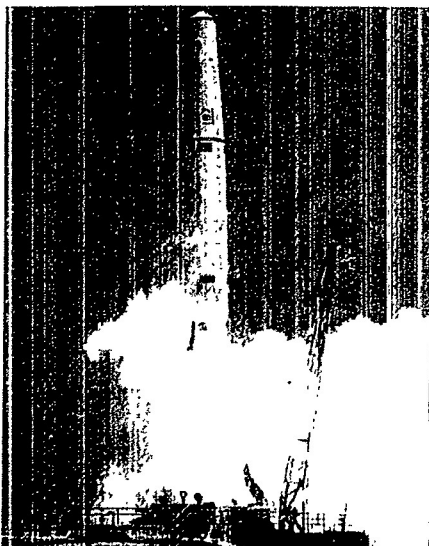
The Soviets would be ill-advised, however, to count heavily on the restraints, imposed by their counterdeterrent, upon the American response to substantial (even though non-nuclear) aggression in Eurasia. The American threat of strategic intervention might well prove more than a bluff, no matter how much self-punishment its execution would incur. A state in despair may act regardless of the consequences. As long as the United States has no other adequate way to defend its vital overseas interests, an attack on them might create just such a situation of despair. Under these conditions, the

United States would face a choice between the two unmitigated evils: large-scale self-destruction or a humiliating defeat in Eurasia—a defeat that could gravely jeopardize its own future. It would be far preferable if the United States were able to avoid such a choice altogether. It is bad enough to rely on deterring your opponent through his doubts as to your own qualms. It is still worse to act from sheer desperation because you have failed to provide alternate—less self-punishing—ways to protect your interests.

#### Nuclear Threat Suicidal

Rising Soviet second-strike capabilities will diminish the deterrent and increase the suicidal effect of American nuclear threats. Therefore, other ways to protect American overseas interests should prove more and more appealing. The obvious alternative is to establish locally-deployed, non-strategic military forces to defend the overseas free nations without the active assistance of the US strategic forces.\* But the prevailing view, in both the United States and in allied countries, is that such forces are neither possible nor desirable. Some hold it physically impossible for the Free World to match the Sino-Soviet bloc in military capabilities for land warfare. Others call it futile because they say a war involving the Soviets would in-

\*I cannot attempt within the framework of this discussion to explain why I do not believe that independent allied strategic forces could serve as a substitute for either the US "Grand Deterrent" or for stronger local forces.



*Thor leaving launching pad.*

evitably become total. The second argument reflects the thesis that restraint in war will prove impossible under nuclear conditions.

The notion of a physically insuperable Sino-Soviet superiority in land forces rests on shaky foundations. The Soviet Union, taken by itself, is clearly inferior to the West in man-power, industrial resources and in many of the skills required in war. Further, it is doubtful whether the well of Chinese manpower could be used in a European or Middle East war. In South East Asia and the Far East, Red China's numerical superiority cannot be overcome unless India joins the defenders of the Free World. However, the war in Korea proved that other factors can compensate for numbers.

#### Local Defense Inferior

The Free World's local defense capabilities on the Eurasian continent are now unmistakably inferior. This is likely to continue, though on a less forbidding scale, even if the Soviet Union cuts back its land forces. This inferiority must be attributed to political and psychological factors: in particular, the lack of incentives to make needed sacrifices to establish adequate local defense forces. That such incentives do not exist either in the United States or in allied countries is most clearly demonstrated by the trend in recent years toward reducing rather than building up NATO "Shield" forces—toward increased reliance on the American strategic nuclear "Sword." This came at a time, paradoxically, when the risks of such reliance were increasing. There are several reasons for this trend. None is more prominent, however, than the general conviction that efforts to substitute local forces for the "Grand Deterrent" would serve no useful purpose.

There is an idea that there can be no limit on weapons used in all but very unsubstantial Soviet-American military encounters. The idea applies particularly when, as in Europe, both parties would have a major stake in the outcome. The basis is the belief that one or both of the major powers will eventually prefer to intervene with their strategic forces rather than risk the losses they might suffer by persisting in a policy of force limitations.

Suppose the Soviets start a war without striking at the American strategic force. They presumably act on the assumption that limited aggression will not provoke US strategic reply. They will be trusting the counterdeterrent effect of their second-strike force. It seems likely, therefore, that it will not be the Soviets who begin the exchange of strategic blows during the course of such a war. After all, they will have *already* made the decision not to launch a first-strike surprise attack—at the outset when it would have been most effective. Of course, if the Soviets were pushed to the wall during the conflict, they might in desperation draw their nuclear sword. This suggests that demanding unconditional surrender of an opponent who still controls unexpended nuclear power would be suicidal.\* In such a war, the substitute for total victory would be gains sufficiently limited not to provoke an irrational enemy to mutual devastation.

#### Key: Allied Forces Overseas

As far as the United States is concerned, the likelihood that it would begin an exchange of strategic nuclear blows would depend upon estimates made at the time. These must weigh the risks of such intervention against the moral, political and military dangers of non-intervention. The United States can avoid the choice between a strategic exchange or sacrifice of vital American interests only if American and allied forces deployed overseas can defend those interests without a US strategic strike.

However, at least one deep-seated conviction will have to be shaken before the United States and its allies can be persuaded to devote new efforts to building up their non-strategic capabilities. It has been widely assumed that strategic intervention would be certain if any substantial American troops were involved or suffered reverses in a battle on the Eurasian mainland. This is the "trip wire" concept, popular in Europe, which suggests that an assault on

\*If, in the spring of 1945, Hitler had possessed a score of ICBMs in his alleged Alpine redoubt, we may assume that he would have preferred to bring down the rest of the world with him than to have his country go down alone.

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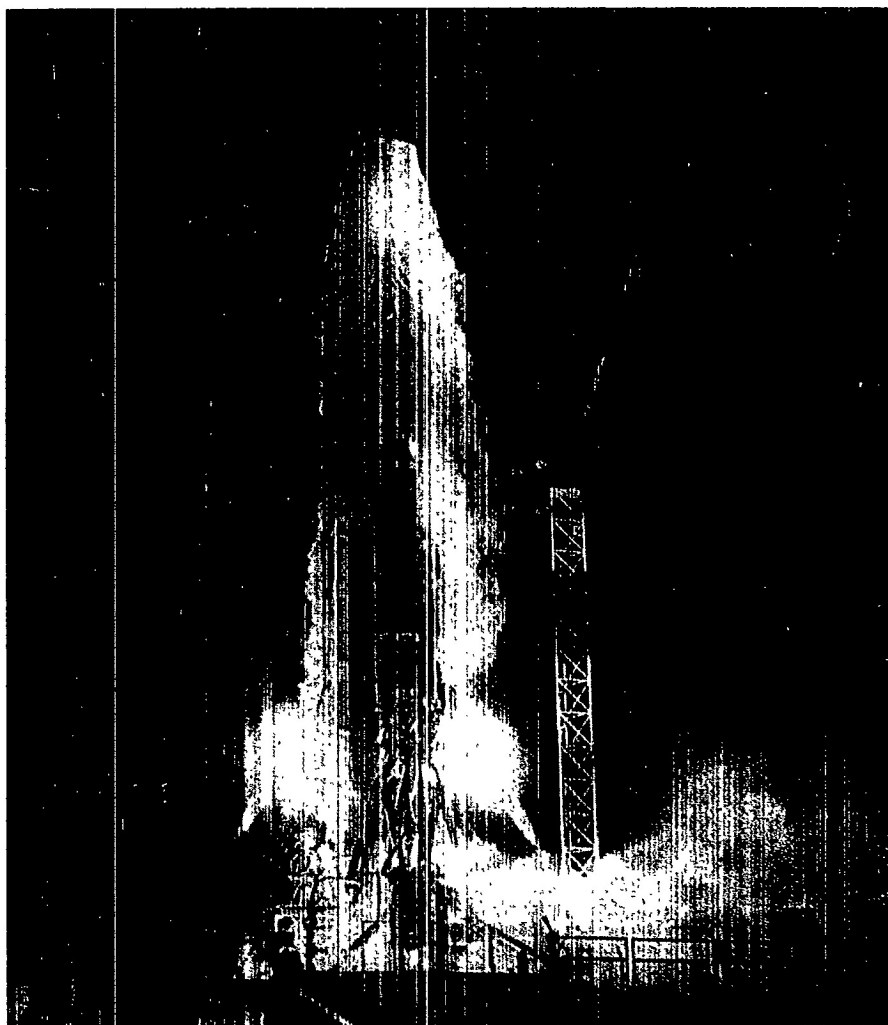


American forces in Europe would automatically trigger the US strategic nuclear sword. Yet, unless the United States had robbed itself of all freedom of choice, such a response would be made only if, in a given instance, the United States preferred a Soviet-American nuclear war to the risks and hardships of a localized conflict.

It might decide against a localized war, because of the strong general aversion to such a war. The specter of new "Koreas" on the Eurasian

mainland is certainly appalling. But, with local defense forces that have a reasonable chance of avoiding defeat—if necessary, by trading space for time until reinforcements arrive—the losses and frustrations of such a localized war might appear trifling compared to the incalculable adverse effects of a two-way strategic nuclear war.

Renewed American interest in creating a more powerful shield for the free countries of Europe and Asia will not, however, be enough. It will



*Atlas begins journey into orbit. Cape Canaveral, 18 December 1958.*

avail little, unless America's allies share this interest and make the necessary sacrifices in its behalf. Before committing themselves to more powerful shield forces, these countries must first determine whether augmenting their local defenses will improve or undermine their overall security position. Such forces will undeniably reduce the deterrent value of the American threat of strategic intervention; the Russians will have less reason to fear the response of a desperate adversary. The added financial burden is another consideration.

Yet the alternative to these particular risks and burdens may represent an even greater evil for the allies. Reliance on the US "Grand Deterrent" was the ideal solution to their security problem as long as the threat of American strategic intervention was almost certain to deter Soviet attack. But, as the credibility of this threat declines, the odds and results of its failure to deter must be examined by these potential victims of aggression.

#### Press the Button

If the Soviets did attack, these countries would face one of two almost equally ominous predicaments. On the one hand, the United States might "press the button" and release the furies of a two-way strategic nuclear war.\* Its allies could take comfort from this only if they hopefully assumed that the exchange of nuclear blows would literally pass over their heads. They would thus remain the nuclear sanctuaries. Alternatively, the United States might refrain from executing its threat of massive retaliation against the aggressor on the ground that the prov-

\*Whether a war initiated with a strategic strike would necessarily become truly total cannot be answered here. Conceivably, restraints may affect the conduct of war even after the first strategic blow has fallen. Rather than rushing madly or mechanically toward the extremity of mutual obliteration, the adversaries might observe limitations, for instance, in the choice of targets, or on the "dirtiness" of their weapons. The problem deserves special and careful consideration

ocation was not great enough to warrant such self-punishing action. Then, the victim of the attack would suffer the consequences of over-reliance on the Grand Deterrent. He would lack the local forces now needed for protection against the enemy. He could suffer defeat. In the face of weak local defense forces, the aggressor would now be restrained only by his uncertainty as to how far he could extend his gains without finally provoking American strategic intervention.

If the overseas countries came to realize the two discouraging possibilities suggested by the present condition of the shield forces, one would expect them to look eagerly for a more promising solution to their security problem. Unfortunately, the



**Titan—newest and biggest ICBM.**

only obvious alternative — the creation of American and allied local forces, strong enough to deter or repulse any attack the Soviets or Red Chinese might dare launch against them — has certain features that are also abhorrent to the potential "battlefield countries."

#### Along the Bamboo Curtain

First, no matter what efforts are made to strengthen the shield, it could offer no assurance of an impenetrable "Maginot Line" along the Iron and Bamboo Curtains. In the opening phases of a war, an enemy surprise attack might penetrate allied territory. It might in some areas — especially in Asia — push as far as the coastal regions and peninsulas. Here naval power could be brought fully into play. The American people are averse to the repetition of a "Korea," a war fought on foreign soil. It is not surprising therefore that allied peoples should regard with horror the type of war in which they risk the sequence of "occupation and subsequent liberation." This objection can be overcome only by a sober comparison between the evils expected, respectively, from reliance on US strategic intervention and reliance on local forces.

#### Protracted War

Second, allied efforts toward self-sustaining local defense forces are discouraged by the prospect that "tactical" nuclear weapons will be employed, even in a localized war. It is hard enough for a country to face up to the possibility of a protracted conventional war on its territory. Even surrender may seem preferable to a war fought with the kind of nuclear weapons now becoming available to the shield forces. While caution and self-restraint might guide the belligerents in the use of these weapons, such a war might still degenerate into a total war as far as the battlefield countries are concerned. Greater allied shield efforts may not be forthcoming, there-

fore, unless increased conventional capabilities can provide the defenders with an alternative to the "tactical" use of nuclear weapons.

### Choice of Evils

The term "tactical," as it is used in this context, should be defined. For purposes of clarification, a new definition will be proposed. Rather than distinguish between strategic and tactical nuclear war by reference to the range and yield of the weapons employed, I suggest that a distinction be made in terms of the territories involved. Thus, a nuclear war in which the territories of the United States and the Soviet Union remained outside the battlefield could be termed "tactical." A war would be considered "strategic" if it included targets within the area of the two powers possessing large strategic forces. The rationale for this distinction lies in the fact that employment of nuclear weapons limited to targets outside the United States and the Soviet Union would minimize the risk of triggering an all-out strategic nuclear war. For America's allies, however, such a war would have the demoralizing effect of permitting their major enemy and major ally the privileged position of nuclear sanctuaries. Meanwhile, they suffer intolerable destruction. This consideration, combined with the risks of their own virtual annihilation in a nuclear war on their territory, should be enough to prevent them from initiating the use of nuclear weapons.

### Response in Kind

Yet, some writers contend that the

pressure to do so would prove irresistible. It would be unprecedented in military history, they argue, for nations not to use their most powerful weapons in support of their fighting forces. This contention denies both historical experience and reason. A weapon is powerful not merely because it can destroy; it must also be able to promise net benefits to its user. Would the United States, for example, have dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki — the most destructive weapons man had possessed to that time — if it had been known that the Japanese could reciprocate by atomic bombardment of San Francisco and Los Angeles? In the case discussed here, the tactical resort to nuclear weapons against an enemy who can retaliate with the same weapons may spell disaster without military advantage. These grounds alone argue that America's allies should want local defense forces not bound to the tactical use of nuclear weapons. Obviously, because the attack itself might employ nuclear weapons, the defender must be able to respond in kind.

Fortunately for allied solidarity, the interests of the United States and its allies coincide on this issue. A tactical nuclear war, as here defined, would not immediately expose the United States to nuclear destruction. Still, the United States would have strong reasons to fear the war's eventual degeneration into a strategic nuclear war. Such a development might occur through inadvertent damage to targets on Soviet soil. This could trigger a Soviet retaliatory strike against the United

States. An all-out strategic war might also result from tactical enemy attacks on American strategic force elements deployed on allied territories or in adjacent coastal waters. Such attacks might force the United States to launch a first-strike counterforce blow at the Soviet Union, since they might seriously threaten to reduce the American second-strike capabilities on which deterrence of a Soviet first strike on the United States depends.

### Sino-Soviet Aggression

With an adequate and assured second-strike capability, then, the United States can hope to restrain the Soviet Union from an attack on the continental United States. At the same time, however, we must expect that the Soviets will be able similarly to restrain our willingness to use US strategic force in a first strike against the Soviet Union. The primary American deterrent against Sino-Soviet aggression in Eurasia has been the threat of such a strike. The establishment of local defense forces, strong enough to ward off defeat with conventional weapons, offers the possibility of avoiding a nuclear war. But, American reliance on nuclear deterrence has led to neglect of such a conventional shield. Thus, aggression in Eurasia, defying the American threat of strategic intervention, would now force the United States to make an agonizing choice between evils — evils that would be incomparably greater than the sacrifices necessary for strengthened conventional capabilities or the risks and losses of conventional war.

USMC

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### They're Coming in the Windows

☛ DURING A TOUR AS OFFICER OF THE day at Quantico, the OD was centered among:

- 1) A 6-foot, 2-inch Marine who was swearing, "Nobody can lock me up!"
- 2) A radio blaring about an accident involving a semi-trailer and a pedestrian off post; another concerning a horse and a car on post.
- 3) The alarm for the security vault ringing due to a short in the line.
- 4) The clattering of pistols of MPs changing the watch.

All noise and movement halted when the Sergeant of the Guard jumped to his feet and shouted, "Count the property!"

Capt R. E. Harris

### Unification

☛ LIFE AROUND THE PENTAGON was full of surprises in the days of SecDef Louis Johnson.

A Marine captain stationed at HQMC awoke one spring morning to find himself unified. He reported to the senior Marine colonel in the section, who drew him into a Pentagon corridor and briefed him, in full, as follows:

"Nobody knows what's going on. Just look out for the so-and-so's with black ties."

Anonymous (\$15.00 to Navy Relief)