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BASING DETERRENCE ON STRATEGIC DEFENSE

INTRODUCTION

United States nuclear strategy rests on what popularly is called the "balance of terror"--the threat of using massive nuclear forces to retaliate against an enemy nuclear attack. This has been U.S. strategy since just about the first Soviet nuclear test. The strategy was refined in the 1960s with the adoption of the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD, in which the U.S. states that threatening mutual nuclear suicide is the best way to deter war. Even though U.S. nuclear doctrine has evolved somewhat over the years, concentrating more on destroying military forces than populations, its basic offensive nature has not changed.

It is time that it did. The deployment of the defensive weapons developed by the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI, will require that U.S. military planners think about how offense and defense can work together to make deterrence more effective. To be ready for this, the U.S. now should be thinking seriously about developing a coherent and comprehensive strategic doctrine of deterrence for both offensive and defensive strategic forces.

Threatening Suicide. A new strategic doctrine is needed because MAD is outdated. Offensive deterrence, no matter how equal the U.S.-Soviet strategic balance may be, could be unstable in time of severe crisis. And with no defenses, there is no protection if offensive deterrence should fail. Deterrence based on the threat of nuclear retaliation must be maintained, of course, until strategic defenses are deployed. Yet basing deterrence on offensive nuclear forces alone presents many problems. For one thing, reliance on the threat of nuclear terror demoralizes the West while emboldening the East. For another, the implicit threat of suicide as a deterrent can lack credibility, not only with U.S. allies, but with the Soviet Union as well. Just as serious, competing on the basis of offensive forces plays to the Soviet strength in large multiwarhead missiles and is grounded on the erroneous assumption that all Moscow wants is Western-style strategic stability.

In place of MAD, the U.S. needs a new strategic doctrine of deterrence which accepts the role of defense. It should establish the fundamental principle that offensive and defensive strategic forces are mutually reinforcing in enhancing the credibility of deterrence. Once developed, this new strategy should be used as a guideline for force planning and wartime operations. Such a new strategy could:

◆◆ Deny the Soviet Union the capability of launching a disarming first strike against U.S. land-based missiles, bombers, command, control and communication sites, and ballistic missile submarine bases. A credible denial of Soviet first-strike capability strengthens deterrence.

◆◆ Frustrate Soviet offensive targeting objectives in a protracted U.S.-Soviet conflict, making a coordinated Soviet attack on U.S. nuclear forces and command centers ineffective, risky, and therefore unlikely. A denial of Soviet nuclear warfighting options strengthens deterrence.

◆◆ Force the Soviets to be cautious in time of crisis by playing on the classic military prudence, arising from the imperatives of the worst-case scenario, of overestimating the effectiveness of an opponent's forces. Caution contributes to crisis stability.

◆◆ Provide arms control stability by offering Moscow a serious incentive to negotiate to reduce offensive nuclear arms. Real arms reductions can contribute to defense-based deterrence by making strategic defenses more effective.

THE CURRENT STRATEGY OF OFFENSIVE DETERRENCE

There are two basic types of deterrent strategy. The first is an offense-oriented deterrence which threatens punishment for an act of aggression; this sometimes is called "deterrence by punishment or sanction." The second is a defense-oriented deterrence which deters aggression by preventing an opponent from achieving his military objectives; this is sometimes called "deterrence by denial." In conventional forces, both types of deterrence exist because a mixture of offensive and defensive forces are deployed. In strategic forces, only the first type exists because only offensive forces are deployed--at least by the U.S.

Gas Warfare. The strategy of exclusively offensive deterrence is used when nations possess a super weapon against which an active defense cannot be effectively mounted. The quintessential exclusive offensive deterrence is chemical weaponry. Chemical weapons were not used in World War II even though both sides possessed them. Remembering the horror of World War I gas warfare, nations hesitated using chemical weapons for fear of retaliation in kind. This principle has been carried over to nuclear deterrence, though the idea was expanded in the 1950s to deter not only the use of nuclear weapons but all types of aggression. It was thought that since no adequate defense existed against nuclear missiles, the best way to deter a general war was to threaten the use of massive nuclear missiles.

In the nuclear age two basic types of nuclear, offense-oriented deterrent theories evolved:

1) **Mutual Assured Destruction theory**, developed primarily by former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in the 1960s. MAD proponents believe that so long as each side can destroy between 33 percent and 40 percent of the other side's population, and between 66 percent and 75 percent of its industry, no nation would risk triggering nuclear war.¹

2) **Counterforce deterrence theory**, developed primarily in the 1970s by such strategists as Albert Wohlstetter and Colin Gray.² Advocates of counterforce theory hold that targeting an opponent's military forces best deters aggression. By threatening the loss of what an opponent holds dear, namely its capacity to wage war, it is believed that war can be deterred.³

THE SIX FLAWS OF OFFENSIVE NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Although it has helped maintain the peace--and indeed may be the main reason why there has been no East-West hot war since 1945--offensive nuclear deterrence has a number of serious flaws.

Flaw #1: It is Unstable in Crisis.

If confidence in the the U.S. nuclear deterrent declines, this seriously could affect U.S. conduct in a crisis. During the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, for example, the U.S. acted decisively because of its known strategic superiority. Today, by contrast, the U.S. could be forced to back away from some vital strategic interest because of the known vulnerability of its nuclear deterrent forces.

Instead of confidence, there would be nagging questions. How should the U.S. respond to a provocation when the nuclear balance of offensive power is unclear? What happens in a crisis when concepts of stability are not shared or when perceptions of marginal advantages or disadvantages are magnified? And what happens when warfighting doctrines and targeting imperatives compel each side to consider whether it should strike first to reduce damage from a nuclear war perceived as inevitable?

Incentive to Destroy. A balance of power system based on offensive nuclear forces alone could be unstable in a crisis even if both sides have roughly equal capability. In an offense-dominant environment, no matter how certain each side is

1. Warner R. Schilling, "U.S. Strategic Nuclear Concepts in the 1970s," in Steven E. Miller, ed., *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 194.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 183-214; also see Albert Wohlstetter, "The Political and Military Aims of Offense and Defense Innovation," in Fred S. Hoffman, Albert Wohlstetter, and David S. Yost, eds., *Swords and Shields: NATO, the USSR, and New Choices for Long-range Offense and Defense* (Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto: Lexington Books, 1987), pp. 3-36.

3. There are three functional categories of deterrence in international relations. The first one is peacetime deterrence whose aim is to avoid major crises and to maintain a stable balance of power. Second is to avoid the outbreak of war during a crisis (to maintain crisis stability). Third is intra-war deterrence. The aim is to prevent a conventional war from escalating to the nuclear level.

that some of its retaliatory forces would survive after a first strike, there always will be an incentive to destroy an opponent's missiles in their silos before they can be launched. Although the rhetoric of assured destruction theory calls for absorbing a first strike before retaliating, the reality of offensive force targeting compels each side to consider launching as quickly as possible to reduce damage to its own nuclear forces. It is this, after all, which compels the U.S. and USSR to improve the accuracy and the capability to launch missile forces as quickly as possible.⁴

Nuclear Panic. Strategic relationships stable in peacetime may be unstable in an extreme crisis. The reason: with offensive nuclear forces alone, the guiding light for action is no longer rational calculation or a weighing of options to achieve military objectives, but fear and profound uncertainty. In a crisis, the peacetime, stable complacency of deterrence resting on doubt and confusion could quickly turn into the unstable panic of launching a first strike.⁵

The root of crisis instability is the absence of strategic defenses. Theorists who helped craft the rationale of Assured Destruction, such as strategist Bernard Brodie, have acknowledged that vulnerable nuclear forces are destabilizing because they invite aggression.⁶ The trouble is that all unprotected land-based missiles are vulnerable, no matter how credible a nation's offensive deterrent posture is. Vulnerability can be reduced, to be sure, by placing intercontinental ballistic missiles in concrete-hardened silos or by moving them. But these measures are expensive, present political problems, and are far from as effective as layered strategic defenses. Only defense against the offensive missile would give the U.S. more realistic options in crisis and war.

Surrender or Worse. Offensive deterrence as it is now constituted in U.S. doctrine is faced with a fundamental contradiction: threatening an act which promises certain self-destruction. So long as offensive nuclear forces alone are used to deter nuclear war, there will be a need to maintain and modernize U.S. strategic forces. But it must be admitted that there always will be a contradiction between making the deterrent credible, which requires planning for their actual use, and the stated aim of deterrence, which is not to use them at all. Without strategic defenses, the wartime choices could be, in the extreme, either surrender or suicide.

4. Although the tendency exists both in the U.S. and the USSR toward more prompt hard-target-kill-capable missiles, it is much more prevalent in the Soviet Union than in the U.S. In 1986 Moscow had 5,240 prompt hard-target-kill-capable warheads compared to 970 for the U.S. Against 1,500 U.S. strategic targets, the Soviets would have many land- and sea-based warheads left over after a first strike to deter U.S. retaliation. See W. Bruce Weinrod, ed., *Arms Control Handbook*, (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 1987), p. 135.

5. Another problem with offensive, assured destruction strategies is that their strategic objectives and operational tactics often work at cross purposes. For example, some advocates of assured destruction believe that the best way to deter nuclear war is to reduce the operational effectiveness of nuclear weapons by banning tests of nuclear explosions and ballistic missiles. This would do little to preclude the use of nuclear weapons out of panic once a conventional war started. Moreover, a nuclear arsenal of unreliable, inaccurate weapons likely would lead both sides back to the super-destructive warheads and bombs of the 1950s and early 1960s.

6. See Major Owen E. Jensen, "Classical Military Strategy and Ballistic Missile Defense," *Air University Review*, May/June 1984, pp. 60-61.

Flaw #2: It Demoralizes the West.

In the early 1980s, huge mobs of anti-nuclear demonstrators poured into the streets of Western Europe and America protesting U.S. and NATO nuclear policies. The political pressure generated by these demonstrations was partly responsible for Ronald Reagan's now famous "zero option" proposing the complete elimination of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

Because Western publics are told so often that war between the U.S. and the USSR will lead to global nuclear annihilation, they often become vulnerable to defeatist arguments for unilateral disarmament. Left without any defensive options against nuclear weapons, Western populations become confused by MAD proponents who say that nuclear offense is the best defense.

Elusive Public Consensus. Policymakers responsible for maintaining the West's nuclear deterrent are tossed about by changing public moods on nuclear weapons. These officials discover that the purely offensive character of nuclear strategy puts the U.S. and its allies on the defensive against the Warsaw Pact. Whereas the Kremlin makes nuclear policy without any interference from Soviet citizens, Western democratic governments must build a public consensus behind their nuclear policies. The Western fear of nuclear war is partly responsible for West European insistence on purely defensive conventional tactics in the European theater. NATO thus embraces the doctrine of "forward defense," which envisages defense as far forward as possible to the East German border but which contemplates no ground counteroffensive operations deep into Eastern Europe. Knowing that NATO is on the defensive, the Warsaw Pact is free to plan for purely offensive military operations against NATO.

The demoralization that accompanies a no-win, offensive nuclear strategy is also behind the arms-control-at-any-price philosophy. Strong arms control advocates are deep pessimists. Wrapped up as they are in the ideology of a spiraling arms race, they suffer the moral and psychological demoralization of seeing no rational alternative to a doctrine of mutual suicide. As a result, they mistakenly try to use arms control to achieve what defensive forces normally would accomplish: minimize the risk of war and reduce damage if deterrence fails. Convinced that the "arms race" and not the Soviet arsenal is the problem, arms controllers find themselves more interested in reaching arms agreements than in maintaining deterrence.

Many staunch arms controllers are also proponents of MAD theory. But they seem to have little confidence that MAD will work. If they had, it would make sense for them to raise the risk of nuclear destruction as high as possible. After all, this would make nuclear war even more "unthinkable." But MAD proponents do not advocate this because they really do not believe their own rhetoric about high levels of destructiveness making nuclear war unthinkable. Their one-sided embrace of arms control is an admission that a purely offensive nuclear strategy in general, and MAD in particular, are inherently unstable.

Flaw #3: It Lacks Credibility.

Current U.S. strategy envisages an American President unleashing a nuclear attack in response to a Soviet conventional invasion of Europe or a limited nuclear

attack on the U.S. itself.⁷ Is such a strategy credible? Is it believable that a President would launch a nuclear retaliatory attack on the Soviet Union knowing that the Soviet response would kill millions of Americans?

While the Pentagon may have any number of retaliatory options ready for the President, including fairly limited ones, even limited strikes can bring the full weight of the Soviet arsenal down on the heads of American citizens. In such a situation, threats of retaliation risk lacking credibility. Under the conditions of the current strategic balance, it will be difficult for the Soviets to believe that the U.S. would take the offensive action of full-scale nuclear retaliation, which in the end would make matters worse for the U.S. than had it done nothing at all.

Flaw #4: It Undermines NATO's Confidence in the U.S.

Fred S. Hoffman, the chairman of the 1983 presidential panel that studied the strategic impact of the Strategic Defense Initiative, draws a startling conclusion about impact of MAD on NATO. He states: "Nothing could decouple the United States from its allies more completely than the belief that the United States would use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union only in response to an attack on U.S. territory. But if mutual deterrence based on MAD means anything, it means this."⁸ The strategic coupling of the U.S. to its European allies has become questionable because the vulnerability of the U.S. to Soviet nuclear attacks has weakened the U.S. nuclear guarantee to Western Europe.

NATO has tried very hard to overcome the problem of decoupling by adopting "flexible response" as a military doctrine. This calls for credible military action, such as effective conventional defense and the use of tactical nuclear weapons, which does not require a retaliation from U.S.-based strategic forces. But the problem of U.S. vulnerability still remains. It makes little sense for the U.S. to promise that it will come to the aid of its allies with its ultimate deterrent--strategic nuclear forces--if the price is self-annihilation. It is little wonder that West Europeans doubt the credibility of this promise.

Flaw #5: It Provides No Fallback If Deterrence Fails.

A major nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union would kill at least 140 million Americans.⁹ Thus if offensive deterrence fails, the consequences would be catastrophic. In assured destruction theory, or in any other offensive deterrence

7. For a good discussion of the credibility problems associated with an offensive-oriented nuclear strategy, see Keith B. Payne and Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Policy and the Defensive Transition," *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1984, p. 828.

8. Fred S. Hoffman, "Imperfect Strategies, Near-Perfect Defenses, and the SDI," in Hoffman, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-1; also see Wohlstetter, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-33.

9. Warner R. Schilling, "U.S. Strategic Concepts in the 1970s: The Search for Sufficiently Equivalent Countervailing Parity," in Steven E. Miller, ed., *Strategy and Nuclear Deterrence: An International Security Reader* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 199

theory, no provision is made for the failure of deterrence because it has been argued that greater mutual vulnerability produces strategic stability.¹⁰

Flaw #6: It Misunderstands Soviet Strategy.

Stanley Kober, a defense analyst at the Hudson Institute, observes: "Unlike the United States, the USSR has never separated deterrence from defense: while recognizing that, given the present dominance of nuclear offensive technology, deterrence at this time must be based on the ability to retaliate for an attack, the Soviet Union has always held that the ability to defend as well as to retaliate provides superior deterrence."¹¹ It is for this reason that the Soviets maintain the world's only operational anti-ballistic missile system, which is currently deployed around Moscow, and why they place so many of their warheads on large land-based ICBMs capable of destroying U.S. missiles in their silos.

Since they fear no U.S. first strike, the Soviets do not, as the U.S. must, diversify their nuclear forces into a survivable "Triad" of land-based missiles, submarine-based missiles, and long-range bombers. Rather, the Soviets concentrate on heavy ICBMs which threaten U.S. nuclear forces with a first strike.

While the Soviet Union builds a large land-based ICBM force possibly capable of launching a first strike against U.S. nuclear forces, the U.S. debates about which missile, the MX or the Midgetman, is best suited for absorbing these first strikes. The U.S. obsession about the survivability of its land-based missile force is a tacit admission that for political reasons the U.S. cannot compete effectively with the Soviet Union in an offense-dominant strategic environment.

BASING STRATEGIC DETERRENCE ON DEFENSE

The U.S. has no intention of adopting a Soviet-style doctrine and force posture permitting a massive first strike against Soviet military targets. As such, the U.S. needs a more credible strategy and force posture based on a mixture of offensive and defensive forces. Basing deterrence on defense will reduce the risk of war. It will reduce the likelihood of a Soviet first strike and help stabilize crises that could escalate into nuclear conflict.

Under current strategic conditions the Soviet Union can calculate with near mathematical certainty the damage its nuclear strike could cause to the U.S. Moscow can calculate how many warheads are needed to destroy every ICBM and strategic command and control site in the U.S.

10. It is a strategic axiom that sea-based nuclear forces are stabilizing precisely because they are less vulnerable than land-based missiles. Furthermore, the entire debate in recent years over the basing modes of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles has focused on which new missile, the MX or the Midgetman, would be most survivable. It has long been understood that in practice survivable nuclear forces, whether protected by strategic defenses, mobile basing modes, or the cover of sea (when deployed in submarines), have far greater deterrent value than missiles which are not survivable.

11. Stanley Kober, "Strategic Defense, Deterrence, and Arms Control," *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1987, p. 125.

Factor of Uncertainty. Such certain Soviet calculations would be impossible if the U.S. had effective, survivable strategic defenses.¹² Military commanders can never be absolutely certain of calculations measuring fire exchange ratios for conventional forces because an active and unpredictable enemy capable of defending itself creates a factor of uncertainty which cannot be perfectly quantified. Strategic defenses would introduce this uncertainty factor into the Soviet decision-making process. Facing defenses that would stop a significant portion of their ballistic missiles, the Soviets no longer could treat a first strike on the U.S. as if it were a turkey shoot.¹³

But could not Moscow simply increase the number of warheads to overwhelm the U.S. defenses? It would not be easy. According to a study by the Marshall Institute, a Washington-based research organization, to compensate for a U.S. defense that is 90 percent effective, the Soviets would have to more than quadruple the number of their strategic ballistic missile warheads. At what this would cost, it would make more sense for Moscow to invest these resources into systems to defend themselves from U.S. nuclear attacks.¹⁴

Moscow's Plan. Greater Soviet uncertainty can be achieved not only from lowering the number of warheads which penetrate the defense, but from breaking up the finely tuned structure of a coordinated Soviet attack. By pinpointing different but functionally related targets, the Soviets plan to disrupt the U.S. capability to retaliate effectively.¹⁵ If they faced effective and survivable defenses of U.S. missiles and command, control and communication centers, however, the Soviets never could be certain whether a coordinated attack would hit all the right targets at the right time. Example: a Soviet first strike may destroy a large number of ICBMs, but not the command and control sites which afterwards could coordinate an accurate counterattack with the surviving missiles. Or perhaps many ICBMs and some command and control sites are destroyed, while most bomber bases are not. The Soviets would then have to face a massive U.S. bomber attack.

REINFORCING DETERRENCE

Strategic defenses reinforce deterrence because they increase uncertainty about the success of an attack and because they enhance the survivability of ICBMs and long-range bombers. Strategic defenses also give the U.S. a competitive advantage against the Soviets. By countering ballistic missiles, they give the U.S. strategic

12. See Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

13. The Soviet Union targets military assets first and foremost, not civilian targets. Thus the U.S. would enhance deterrence considerably by protecting nuclear missiles, strategic bomber bases, ballistic missile submarine ports, and command, control and communication centers in the United States.

14. The calculations are by the author based on information in the Marshall Institute Report. Marshall analysts conclude that against a 90 percent effective U.S. defense, 38,000 warheads would be needed by the Soviets to destroy 1,000 of the highest priority military installations in the U.S. See George C. Marshall Institute, *Report of the Technical Panel on Missile Defense in the 1990s*, (Washington, D.C.: George C. Marshall Institute, 1987), pp. 7-8.

15. Hoffman, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

leverage against a Soviet nuclear arsenal that puts a premium on heavy, multi-warhead ICBMs capable of quickly destroying U.S. missiles in their silos.

Forcing the Soviets to be Cautious

Military planners are a cautious lot. They normally assume the worst about an opponent. Military planners use worst-case scenarios in planning because they do not want to be surprised by intelligence failures or the consequences of mistaken judgments about the capability of the enemy.

Effective and survivable strategic defenses would introduce an element of restraint into crises.¹⁶ Facing U.S. strategic defenses, the Soviets would make military decisions according to worst-case estimates, probably assuming that U.S. defenses are more capable than they really are. In strategic matters, the Soviets traditionally are cautious.

The best strategic formula for maintaining stability in a crisis would be to achieve offensive arms reductions combined with deployed strategic defenses that are survivable, capable of refiring, and comparable in effectiveness on both sides.¹⁷ Such an approach would ensure that, as defenses are deployed in phases, no side will ever have the incentive to strike the other first.

Even if all these conditions are not met, strategic defenses could still contribute to crisis stability. They would complicate Soviet targeting, force Soviet decision-makers to be cautious in a crisis, and provide protection against accidental nuclear launches.

Arms Control Stability

Strategic defenses can play a positive role in arms control negotiations. As has been the case with SDI, they have kept the Soviet Union at the bargaining table discussing offensive arms reductions. It is unlikely that the Soviets would have agreed to eliminate intermediate and short-range nuclear missiles in Europe if it had not been for the pressure of SDI.

Far more important is that if the Soviets deployed strategic defenses, they would find it in their interest to achieve further reductions in strategic offensive missiles. With their strategic defenses, the Soviets would want to keep the number of U.S. multi-warhead missiles as low as possible to improve the effectiveness of their own defenses.

16. See Kober, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

17. James A. Thompson, "Deterrence, Stability, and Strategic Defenses," in Hoffman, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

CONCLUSION

For years the U.S. has relied on an offensive nuclear strategy of deterrence. So far it has helped keep the peace. It is less likely to do so in the future. The Soviet Union's nuclear buildup casts doubt on the credibility of the U.S. deterrent. The changed strategic balance has exposed flaws in the U.S. strategy of offensive deterrence. This strategy increasingly lacks credibility with the Soviets and U.S. allies. Without defenses of any kind it offers no fallback if deterrence fails. It could be unstable in times of severe crisis, and it demoralizes the West while emboldening the East. Finally, it misunderstands the nature of Soviet strategy and warfighting doctrines.

Devising a New Strategic Doctrine. To accommodate the strategic defenses which someday will be deployed as the result of the Strategic Defense Initiative, the U.S. should be contemplating a new strategic doctrine coupling offensive to defensive forces to ensure deterrence. A comprehensive study should determine how this doctrine could guide strategy, force planning, and operations of strategic forces.

In this doctrine the deterrent role of strategic defenses should be recognized. Strategic defenses can bolster deterrence by denying the Soviets the option of a calculated first strike against U.S. command centers and nuclear forces. By complicating Soviet targeting of U.S. forces and command centers, strategic defenses could break up coordinated nuclear attacks, thereby making limited Soviet first strikes unsuccessful and very risky, and reducing damage in a protracted war. Strategic defenses also could force the Soviets to be cautious in times of crisis because of the military need to overestimate the effectiveness of U.S. strategic defense forces. And they could provide a more stable arms control environment as well by keeping the Soviets at the bargaining table to reduce offensive nuclear forces.

It is time, therefore, to think seriously about the specific ways in which strategic defenses can reduce the risk of war. The task of deterring war, the preeminent aim of U.S. national security policy, should not rest on the threat of suicide. It should rest on the assurance that no Soviet attack would ever achieve unambiguous victory.

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