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IS NUCLEAR DETERRENCE MORALLY ACCEPTABLE ?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Addressing the problems of inter-state relations, interpretations and precepts around morality embodied different patterns of analysis throughout history. With this in mind, ethical doctrines have their roots in different structures of thought as regards the intricate intersection of security concerns and morality.

Predicting a nuclear exchange which would culminate in the vast destruction of nations, the advocates of a moralist view reject the deployment and the possession of nuclear weapons by any state. Given this, a response to the question of 'is nuclear deterrence morally acceptable?' is the aim of this essay. The ultimate nature of nuclear deterrence, which is based on showing a determination to use nuclear weapons, is also discussed in this context. The essay concludes with what would follow if nuclear deterrence failed and on which premises nuclear deterrence is actually being carried on.

The moralist view is premised on the reduction or removal of the reliance on nuclear powers. Moralists criticise the meticulous arithmetic of military advantage as fundamentally irrational since the capability to destroy the earth more than once has been reached. Nonetheless, strategies constructed to diminish the harm of nuclear warfare, like damage limitation which aims to ensure a greater control over targeting policies in a nuclear war, are considered lacking in adequate prevention of the high risk of a probable increases in nuclear exchange.

On the point where morality is tangible with rationality, it might be attempted to convert this into a policy instrument. In some circumstances morality is regarded as an alternative by states in international relations. States may judge by reference to generally acceptable moral values the conduct of other states, especially that of their potential or actual adversaries. On the other hand, when their national interest is at stake, most states promptly bestow secondary importance upon moral precepts. Schwarzenberger stated that in an unorganised international society which remains divided into separate, competitive and antagonistic loyalty areas, "morality serves less as a standard of self-restraint than as a stick to beat others."¹

II. THE CONCEPT OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN EVOLUTION

In 1946, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US was the only nuclear power. From American dominance to US-Soviet strategic nuclear parity, the US boasted of its development of a decisive nuclear arsenal. Carl G. Jacobsen explained this as "there was only one true superpower. Washington's initial stock of actual bombs may have been minimal, but it demonstrated the capability, and it possessed a unique fleet of strategic bombers."² When the first Soviet missiles were developed in the late 1950s, they had considerable problems of accuracy and effectiveness. The Soviets during Khrushchev's term of office lacked a nuclear ability comparable to the US's. However, Soviet rhetoric further accelerated the Kennedy administration's nuclear development programmes.³ Not surprisingly, the fears of weakness and vulnerability could not be dispelled by continuous increases in armaments throughout these decades. A reckless arms race continued,

disregarding the fact that: “Most of history’s major wars were initiated not by nations assured of their power, but by nations who feared that inaction might erode what residual power they had, nations that felt driven to secure the advantage of the initial blow.”⁴

In the chaotic changes of post-World War II international politics, with the aim of developing policies to prevent war, improving deterrence in theory and practice was considered an adequate solution in response to the requirements of security. Avoiding war by assuring an aggressor that the degree of retaliation would result in greater devastation on his side is the major characteristic of deterrence theory. For more than forty years, one of the basic principles of NATO strategy was nuclear deterrence. It was the main theme stressed by the British Ministry of Defence that, circumstances never arise ‘when we might have to consider using them’. Besides, it is argued that, NATO could not realise such deterrence by only relying upon a conventional arsenal. In a deliberately planned world hot war, NATO policy would be conducted in three phases. In the first phase, there would be “a world wide struggle for mastery in the air and of the oceans. It will be vital during this phase to prevent enemy land forces overrunning and neutralising western bases and territories.”⁵ To ensure such definitive superiority, in the second phase it would be a requirement to destroy the enemy’s remaining land forces and, in the “bargaining phase”, when the enemy’s homeland and all it contains would be at the mercy of Western air power: “We will then carry the air attack to the point where the enemy accepts our terms.”⁶ It was also thought that the second and third phases may be concurrent.

Some analysts, on the other hand, suggest that action taken against the deployment of offensive nuclear weapons could precipitate a large-scale nuclear war under certain conditions. The actions of the US government during the Cuban missile crisis, which included high-level risk-taking, are among the most cited examples of this approach. Although anxiety about nuclear exchange has always been common since no party can be immune from the harm from a nuclear exchange, a variety of reasons stand behind this fatal risk-taking. In his analysis, Kavka considers four reasons to be the essence of this risk-taking: i) insignificant risk, ii) no alternative, iii) all other possibilities involve worse risks, and iv) it is rational for governments to take risks in uncertain situations.

As mentioned above, such a risk was taken by Kennedy in Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy was well aware that World War I had begun though neither side wanted it.⁷ A degree of ethical consideration regarding the impact of any nuclear war inevitably took place when the nuclear rivals experienced the highest tension in the missile crisis. Given the chilling mutually assured destruction capacity, a solid fear of the initiation of a nuclear exchange evoked the total annihilation scenarios. From then on, despite the fact that political, ideological and military confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union continued for more than two decades, both sides sought détente and avoided a direct struggle. Besides, it was widely held in defence circles that the more successful the conventional defence, the greater the incentive would be for a nuclear-armed power to rely on nuclear weapons.

Another fear which is always associated with reliance on nuclear weapons is that nuclear wars can be the result of technical or human failures. If an accidental war were to occur, there is the problem of convincing one’s adversary that what happened resulted from a mechanical breakdown or human failure and the system was ‘non-recallable’. In other words, regardless of tensions between the nuclear powers, a danger of causality always persists.

III. MORAL PARADOXES ARISING

Once the moral acceptability of nuclear deterrence is questioned, one should consider the nature of this weapon as well. Moral paradox, evidently, has its origin in the enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons. These weapons have geographically widespread effects from dust⁸, heat flash⁹, and radiation which obviously result in the death of a large group of people away from the conflict zone. A Japanese study of nuclear effects stated that when nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, and on Nagasaki three days later, about 210,000 people were killed immediately, and the death toll by 1950 was 300,000.¹⁰ Pittock emphasised that the justice of the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki remains controversial to this day. The vast effects of

nuclear war, violate another moral rule: the principle of discrimination. It is the basic point of Just War theory that violence is morally justifiable only in cases when it is not used against innocents: the ones who are not responsible for the aggressive acts. Non-nuclear weapons, with their restricted effects, are likely to be used more discriminately, but nuclear weapons are “inherently indiscriminate.”¹¹ Controversially, the idea of Just War might legitimise ideological warfare. On the other hand, Joseph S. Nye, an academic and former Assistant Secretary of Defence, pointed out that to consider the morality of means without considering the morality of ends is a ‘stunted’ approach. In his framework of analysis, Nye stated the five maxims of nuclear ethics as follows: i) self defence—a just but limited cause, ii) never treating nuclear weapons as normal weapons, iii) minimising the harm to innocent people, iv) reducing the risk of nuclear war in the near term and, lastly, v) reducing reliance on nuclear weapons over time.

According to Herman Kahn, US scientist and military analyst, nuclear weapons are intrinsically neither moral nor immoral, though they are more prone to immoral use than most weapons. But they can be used to accomplish moral objectives and can do this in ways that are morally acceptable. Whereas, it was the ‘principle of proportionality’ that led Kahn to oppose the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear enemies. This included ‘no first use’ of nuclear weapons against nuclear rivals, and not resorting to ‘massive retaliation’ and a rejection of ‘uncontrolled war’.

As regards the outcome of the use of nuclear weapons, the relation between the means and the ends is the most intricate issue upon which debates are concentrated. Interestingly, statements of anti-nuclear moralists around the fundamental theme of ‘not to let the world perish’ have similarities with historical doctrines. Christian pacifism believes in the virtue of unilateral disarmament, while the traditional Western doctrine of a Just War deemed the use of force as a last resort. On the other hand, the dilemma of possessing a nuclear arsenal in order to have a convincing deterrence capability emerges from the double-edged nature of these weapons. Evidently, the characteristics of nuclear weapons enable their use for offensive as well as for defensive and deterrence purposes. It was commonly argued in this context that where the distinction does apply is when you look at a state’s overall force structure. On the other hand, once deterrence fails, nuclear arms might be used in retaliation. To some analysts, however, the retaliatory use of nuclear weapons or their use against aggression is morally less objectionable than their use for aggression. If such an action follows the misconduct claim of the opponent, again the issue becomes subject to moral evaluations.

The use of nuclear weapons can also be coercive even though “they are designed to prevent other nations from undertaking undesirable actions.”¹² Whereas, it is advocated by some strategists that nuclear coercion is a valid course of action in certain circumstances, others believe that deterrence is the only aim of possessing nuclear weapons. However, even the limited use of nuclear weapons implies a considerable risk of further escalation. Truly, the credibility of deterrence ultimately relies on a determination to use nuclear weapons as the last resort. On 21 October 1954, Field Marshal Montgomery stated, “My opinion is that the fear of atomic and nuclear weapons is a powerful deterrent to war; but once a world hot war started both sides are likely to use them.”¹³ Again, according to some other strategists, the absolute devastating effect of nuclear weapons is a basic component of nuclear superiority. Military historian and strategist B.H. Liddell Hart was one of the first to draw the attention to the utility of relying on nuclear power “as a continuation of policy by other means.”¹⁴ Though, the use of nuclear force without ethical considerations is evaluated in this context, as an ethical justification for a resort to nuclear weapons by a totalitarian power, it leads us to a fatal fallacy. A totalitarian nuclear power may judge others by its perception of morality and justify its use of nuclear weapons—when regarded appropriate—by its own sense of ethics.

This double-edged morality can be differentiated in terms of ‘jus ad bellum’ (the reason to go war) and ‘jus in bello’ (the way in which war is conducted). And an “acceptable” war in these terms can be launched under condition that only military targets are fired on. In contrast, with a shift in politics, civil targets can also be targeted. Nevertheless, the massive power of nuclear weapons makes it impossible to make secure that which is not targeted.

Although deterrence requires a determination to benefit nuclear weapons in retaliation and counter strategies based on a non-retaliation policy or rejecting the retaliatory use of nuclear weapons have aspects making the deterrence less reliable, huge environmental damages and the loss of life are the outcomes of any nuclear exchange regardless of its size. From the legal perspective, restrictions are imposed upon the use of such an uncontrollable power. It is stated in the Geneva Protocol I of 1977, article 35, that:

“I. In any armed conflict, the right of the Parties to the conflict, the right to choose methods or means of warfare is not unlimited.

II. It is prohibited to employ weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering.

III. It is prohibited to employ methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.”¹⁵

Bernard Brodie, one of the earliest scholars of deterrence theory, maintained that with the inclusion of strategic nuclear weapons, strategic bombing should be the ultimate form of war. Standing against preventive war, pre-emptive strike and massive retaliation, Brodie argued that a US retaliatory force should be ready as deterrence could not be workable on every occasion. He drew attention to nuclear deterrence in his structural analysis of deterrence, and he stressed the danger of being unable to predict one's own behaviour in a crisis.¹⁶

IV. WHEN DETERRENCE FAILS

If the answer to the question of what will happen if nuclear deterrence fails is: ‘an actual use of nuclear force will take place in retaliation against an aggressor’ then, one should note that the uncertainties regarding the effects of a limited or a large-scale nuclear attack are numerous, although it is certain that the minimum consequences would be disastrous. Hypothetical calculation of deaths, economic damage, facilities of available protection together with special case scenarios, such as an attack that took place during the winter, causing the further difficulty of removing the frozen radioactive dirt, constitute diverse subjects for predictive studies.¹⁷

Scientific evidence indicates that a wide scale nuclear war would be followed by a considerable change in the climate of the world for at least several months. The climate might be changed for years, and due to the clouds of smoke and dust a nuclear winter may emerge. If the worst predictions are fulfilled, nuclear war and a nuclear winter could wipe out most plants and animal species in the northern hemisphere, and severely threaten with similar effects, life in the southern hemisphere. The effect of blast is the immediate outcome of any nuclear explosion. The tremendous impact of a nuclear explosive blast, with its sudden change in air pressure, has catastrophic results. The wide range of consequences from blast and shock to thermal and initial radiation, combined with physical injuries and residual nuclear radiation (fallout), are included in the effects of a nuclear explosion. A series of illnesses like flash-blindness, caused by excessive light, or environmental depreciation, with the devastating effects on peoples morale, like black rain¹⁸ or the greenhouse effect,¹⁹ are among the outcomes of nuclear explosions.

There is a threshold for severe climatic calamities. Approximately two or three hundred nuclear explosions over cities, generating smoke, or about 2,000 to 3,000 high-yield surface bursts at nuclear missile silos send fine particles into the atmosphere. These particles cause only minor effects until this threshold is reached. Beyond this threshold, the effects increase enormously.²⁰

Prolonged effects subsequently emerge.²¹ Winds would spread the black cloud of smoke and dust from the areas of conflict, affecting the global atmosphere in many ways. Erno Meszaros²² indicated that “a large-scale nuclear war would introduce huge amounts of soil and soot aerosols into the atmosphere ... these introductions would be certain to have dramatic effects on hemispheric weather conditions for a period of weeks or months.” Another aspect which should be mentioned here, is the condition of countries that were not targeted by nuclear weapons. They would also be

effected in physical terms, as well as having suffering economically with a worldwide cessation of trade. Besides, the effects of longitudinal radiation will show themselves from lower to higher levels.

Kahn's study of the effects of radiation on people's morale indicates the terrifying aspects of living with radiation. He advises the distribution of radiation meters to people "to maintain the morale and the risk-taking capability of the cadres who would be exposed to radiation."²³ Kahn's exposition of his analysis is necessary to quote, to frame the chilling case of a radioactive life:

"Most people already know, or will know in a post-attack world, that if you get a fatal dose of radiation the sequence of events is about like this: first you become nauseated, then sick; you seem to recover; then in two or three weeks you really get sick and die If one man vomits, everybody vomits. Almost every one is likely to think he has received too much radiation. Morale may be so much affected ... the situation would be quite different if radiation meters were distributed. Assume now that a man gets sick from a cause other than radiation ... , his morale begins to drop. You look at his meter and say, 'You have received only ten roentgens, why are you vomiting? Pull yourself together and get to work'."²⁴

The living conditions and the psychology of individuals determined in terms of "REM"²⁵ will probably be one of the realities of a post-nuclear world where humanitarian and civic criteria are entitled to a secondary degree of importance.

Not surprisingly, the assured destruction schemes of nuclear rivals inevitably lead to target selection policies which include the civilian population. The reasons behind this are: i) targeted areas of military, political and economic importance are close to the cities, where there are dense civilian populations, ii) city avoidance is disregarded in an all-out war and the civilian population is deliberately targeted.

In reality, policies from the mutually assured destruction (MAD) capability (which is based on the fact that MAD is assured for both sides), to the mutually assured survival (which assumes that both super powers have defences that are much more efficient than their offences, making the mutual attacks meaningless), US targeting policies placed an emphasis on 'counterforce'²⁶ rather than 'countervalue'²⁷ destruction. However, if the definite threshold of mutual destruction was reached on both sides, the question of uncertainty persists. Besides, it is certain that as regards retaliation in an escalated nuclear exchange, civilian targets will become subject to devastating attacks. Former Secretary of State Robert McNamara and his Pentagon associates estimated that a US retaliation would have to be capable of destroying one-quarter to one-third of the Soviet population, and one-half to two-thirds of its industrial capacity.²⁸ At this stage, this declared policy represented a shift from the city avoidance strategy of McNamara.

It is in essence, no more than wishful thinking to consider cities immune to nuclear attacks once mutually assured destruction is achieved. Explicitly, this policy changed in the years of Nixon and Ford when 'essential equivalence' took its place. With the 'countervailing' strategy initiated in the late Carter administration and the Reagan years, apparently changes occurred in technology as well as in rhetoric.

The Reagan policy was to stand against the levels of corresponding Soviet threat mainly on the basis of developing the concepts of: assured destruction, flexible targeting, escalation, reciprocal targeting restraint, forward defence and countervailing strategies, Strategic Defence Initiative being the most cited one.²⁹ While the US was taking the lead in nuclear warfare technology, an updating of the strategies were necessitated as the Soviet declaration of 'No First Use', made at the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament on 15 June 1982, in rhetoric, carried the Soviet Union beyond NATO. The Soviet publication *Whence the Threat to Peace* stated that if there was no first nuclear strike, there would be no second or third strike. This would naturally make all talk about the possibility or impossibility of victory in a nuclear war absurd—the question of nuclear war would fall away altogether.

At this juncture, START negotiations came onto the scene. After nine years of talks, a US-Soviet treaty on the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (START I) was signed by President George Bush and Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachov in Moscow on 31 July 1991. Under this treaty, US and Soviet strategic arms were to be reduced to equal aggregate levels over a seven-year period. Another strategic arms reduction agreement was signed by Presidents Bush and Yeltsin in Moscow on 3 January 1993. However, unlike the mileage made in the framework of START I, START II is still waiting for the ratification of Duma deputies.³⁰

As 1997 began, the Clinton administration reportedly was studying the possibility of seeking an agreement with the Russian Federation on the outlines of a follow-on START III Treaty.³¹

V. CONCLUSION

The initial considerations of NATO on the statement of a 'No First Use' policy brought out a variety of issues. In the military posture of NATO, this required an increase in its conventional forces. But essentially, a 'No First Use' policy includes the intention of never using nuclear forces first, with a public declaration of this. Although a 'No First Use' policy is an important step to avoid a nuclear clash, it must be borne in mind that the circumstances may arise making first use easier than second use.

In the conclusion of his famous *Pathology of Politics*, Hans Morgenthau argued that moralising about the politics of international relations has never produced a significant effect. Evidently, in practice, it is considered that security in the contemporary world cannot be achieved through unilateral disarmament and removing force arsenals on the basis of moral premises. Whereas, with a view to the characteristics of nuclear weapons, which are not like any other arms, it is definite that one single wrong decision in the making of nuclear strategy can lead to disastrous conclusions and from this point of view the possession and the use of nuclear arms are essentially moral problems.

1 Schwarzenberger, Georg, *Power Politics*, London, Steven & Sons Ltd., p. 491.

2 Jacobsen, Carl G. (1982), *The Nuclear Era: It's History It's Implications*, GB, Spokesman, p. 27.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

5 Carver, Field Marshal Lord (1982), *A Policy for Peace*, Redwood Burn, Trowbridge, Wiltshire, p. 33.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

7 Kavka, Gregory S. (1977), *Moral Paradoxes of Nuclear Deterrence*, Cambridge University Press, p. 172

8 *The nuclear dust generated by a nuclear explosion, consists largely of silica particles from molten or pulverised rock and of sulphuric acid droplets which form from the sulphurous gases given off in eruption. It is a mixture of other particles from the material pulverised or vaporised by the explosion. See Pittock, A. Barrie (1987), Beyond Darkness, Australia: Sun Books, p. 216.*

9 *The heat flash is the thermal radiation given off in a fraction of a second by a nuclear fireball, and which can cause burns or ignite fires at great distances from a nuclear explosion. See Ibid., p. 219.*

10 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

11 Lee, Steven, 'Morality and Paradoxical Deterrence', in Jeffrey, Paul and Ahrens, John (eds.)

(1986), *Nuclear Rights/Nuclear Wrongs*, Oxford, p. 146.

12 Kavka, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

13 Carver, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

15 Geneva Protocol I of 1977, See, Roberts, A and Guelff, R. (eds.), *Documents on the Laws of War*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 387-446.

16 Boot, Ken, 'Bernard Brodie', in Baylis, John and Garnett, John (eds.) (1991), *Makers of Nuclear Strategy*, London, pp. 34-35.

17 *The Effects of Nuclear War*, Office of Technology Assessment, Congress of the United States, 1980, pp. 10-11.

18 The rain falling through or out of a fire plume contains soot thus, it acquires the black colour. Black rain was observed after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Second World War.

19 The greenhouse effect is the common name for the effect of certain atmospheric gases which allow sunlight to pass through to the earth's surface, but absorb and re-radiate infrared heat radiation from the surface. Some of this heat radiation is returned to the surface. Carbon dioxide is the main gas causing this effect. In principle, it is opposite to the nuclear winter, although the magnitude and time scale is different.

20 Sagan, Carl, 'Nuclear War and Climatic Catastrophe: Some Policy Implications', in Grinspoon, Lester (ed.) (1986), *The Long Darkness: Psychological and Moral Perspectives on Nuclear Winter*, New York, p. 26.

21 In this case, as the fine particles fall out of the atmosphere, carrying radioactivity to the ground, the light levels increase and the surface warms. The depleted ozone layer now permits solar ultraviolet light to reach the earth's surface in increased amounts. See *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

22 Meszaros, Erno, 'Techniques for Manipulating the Atmosphere', in Westing, Arthur H. (ed.) (1984), *Environmental Warfare A Technical, Legal and Policy Appraisal*, London, p. 18.

23 Garnett, John, 'Herman Kahn', in Baylis, John and Garnett, John (eds.) (1991), *Makers of Nuclear Strategy*, London, p. 84.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

25 REM is derived from the initials of the term 'roentgen equivalent man'. The number of rems of radiation is equal to the number of rads absorbed, multiplied by the relative biological effectiveness of the given radiation.

26 In simple terms, 'counterforce attack' refers to assault directed at the adversary's military forces and complexes. Some of the targets will be 'hard targets' such as reinforced concrete nuclear missile silos. These comprise of crucial targets as their destruction results in the emergence of a fireball (a volume of tremendously hot air which is caused by a nuclear explosion). A 'ground burst' is a nuclear explosion where the fireball touches the earth's surface and raises large amounts of dust and produces serious radioactive fallout.

27 'Countervalue attack' is an attack directed at the economic and industrial bases of the opponent's side. In general, this involves the cities with 'airbursts' (ie. a nuclear explosion which takes place high in the atmosphere as the emerging fireball does not reach the ground). This causes less radioactive fallout than a ground bursts.

28 Cimbala, Stephen J., 'Strategic War Termination: The Missing Element', in Stephen J. Cimbala and Joseph D. Douglas Jr. (eds.) (1988), *Ending a Nuclear War: Are the Superpowers prepared?*, Exeter, p. 158.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 159.