

A RAND NOTE

**When the Weak Attack the Strong:
Failures of Deterrence**

Barry Wolf

RAND

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**Prepared for the
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PREFACE

This Note is intended to shed light on the question of whether the substantial nuclear and chemical retaliatory capability of the United States is sufficient to deter Nth-country attacks employing weapons of mass destruction against the United States or its allies. To this end, the Note analyzes failures of deterrence that occurred when states attacked substantially stronger states. This Note should be of interest to policymakers and scholars concerned with deterrence theory and ballistic missile defenses.

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SUMMARY

The history of armed conflict contains many cases where weak states have attacked stronger adversaries. At least some of these attacks have occurred even when by any rational calculus such attacks would probably lead to defeat or even annihilation.

This Note examines some examples of deterrence failure to shed light on the question of whether the U.S. nuclear and chemical retaliatory capability is sufficient to deter Nth country attacks with weapons of mass destruction. The Note begins by explaining that past conventional deterrence failures are relevant to potential deterrence failures leading to the use of weapons of mass destruction. Such weapons may not always produce mass casualties, and conventional warfare has yielded casualties on a scale approaching that caused by weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, some leaders at least have shown a callousness toward the deaths of their own countrymen that indicates they will not be deterred by the risk of heavy casualties.

Conflicts initiated by weaker states against stronger ones fall into three categories: those resulting from (1) high motivation, (2) misperceptions, and (3) military vulnerabilities of the stronger state. Analysis of examples in these categories leads to the following conclusions:

- The historical cases are relevant to deterrence of Nth-country missile attacks employing weapons of mass destruction.
- Even overwhelming strength does not guarantee deterrence; therefore, the threat of heavy retaliation in kind will not necessarily deter an Nth country attack using missiles armed with weapons of mass destruction.
- A ballistic missile defense system may add to deterrence of attack by Nth countries, but it should also be able to preclude or at least limit damage if deterrence fails.

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I. INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

An increasing number of states are developing or purchasing ballistic missiles.¹ This dispersion of ballistic missiles coupled with the proliferation of the technology of weapons of mass destruction has given rise to apprehension that one or more of these nations, referred to herein as Nth countries, will eventually develop the means to attack the United States or its allies with intermediate range or intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with weapons of mass destruction.² This concern has in turn led to proposals to build thin area ballistic missile defenses that would provide protection for the United States or its allies against accidental, unauthorized, or Nth-country attacks. These defenses would be constrained to a sufficiently low level to avoid influencing superpower first strike stability; various collateral constraints would be imposed to protect against a rapid breakout of defensive weapons by one superpower that could nullify another superpower's offensive capability.

Some of those who argue that ballistic missile defenses are not needed to counter a potential Nth-country threat rely on classical deterrence-through-retaliation reasoning.³ Simply put, this argument states: "No Nth country would use or even threaten to use such weapons against the United States or the Soviet Union because either superpower could thoroughly destroy the offending country in retaliation." In essence, this argument maintains that a state will not attempt to exploit a vulnerability of a much stronger state because of the great difference in relative strength.

This argument has two interrelated weaknesses. First, the vagaries of human behavior argue against any absolute statement regarding a leader's potential to take even seemingly irrational actions. Second, the threat of counteraction by the more powerful country may not be entirely credible because of humanitarian or political concerns, especially those related to the effect of a large-scale attack on neighboring countries. An Nth-country leader may therefore act in the belief that the ultimate sanction may not be

¹The words "state," "nation," or "country" refer to organized groupings of people sufficiently cohesive to conduct warfare.

²Countries other than the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China are considered Nth countries if they are developing or purchasing ballistic missiles.

³Extensive discussions of deterrence through retaliation reasoning can be found in Schelling, 1960; Brodie, 1959; Kahn, 1960.

levied against his country and that the worst he has to fear is retaliation of a similar magnitude. As terrible as this sounds, it is not implausible that a less than fully sane leader, especially one motivated by very strong political or religious conviction, might accept such retaliation. Libyan leader Mu'ammarr al-Qadhdhafi has stated that if Libya had possessed intercontinental missiles when American planes attacked Tripoli in 1986, Libya would have retaliated by firing these missiles at New York City.⁴ Although it is not clear from the context whether Qadhdhafi would have used *nuclear* missiles against New York City, his statement does not preclude such an interpretation and, in fact, has been interpreted in that manner.⁵ Palestinian terrorist leader Abul Abbas stated even more recently that:

There is an Arabic saying that revenge takes 40 years. . . . If not my son, then the son of my son will kill you. Some day, we will have missiles that can reach New York.⁶

Soviet-Israeli interactions provide stronger evidence that deterrence through the potential for massive retaliation is not universally accepted. Israel has tested a longer-range version of the Jericho II missile, which could reach targets in the Soviet Union. It has been alleged that part of Israel's rationale for building this version of the missile was to be able to threaten Soviet targets, thereby precluding Soviet intervention in a Middle Eastern conflict. And, indeed, Israeli tests of the missile drew a "stern warning" from the Soviet Union.⁷ The Soviets apparently do not rule out the possibility that the Israelis might threaten them with nuclear weaponry despite the undoubted Soviet ability to completely destroy Israel.

OBJECTIVE

This Note analyzes historical failures of deterrence in situations that would be analogous to a state's use of nuclear weapons against an adversary possessing a much stronger nuclear arsenal. It will concentrate on cases where states were not deterred from attacking far stronger powers; such examples may shed some light on the subject of whether the United States or allies under its nuclear umbrella might be threatened or attacked with

⁴al-Qadhdhafi, 1990, p. 8.

⁵The SDI Report, The Heritage Foundation, No. 21, May 14, 1990 (citing "NBC Nightly News").

⁶Horwitz, 1990, pp. 1, 10.

⁷Spector, 1988, pp. 27, 32.

weapons of mass destruction by substantially weaker countries that would have reason to fear strong retaliation.

The use of historical analogies may be questioned on the grounds that an Nth country's use or threatened use of weapons of mass destruction might result in an annihilating strike against that country, an outcome far more daunting than has faced many of the leaders of weaker states contemplating threats or attacks against stronger adversaries. Nonetheless, historical comparison is still relevant for several reasons.

First, a limited attack with weapons of mass destruction would not necessarily produce massive casualties on either side. For example, in the Israeli-Soviet situation, an Israeli first strike might well be directed against one or more Soviet air bases. Such a strike could have a militarily or politically beneficial effect without causing the numbers of casualties that would result from an attack on a heavily populated area. Israeli leaders contemplating such a strike might discount the possibility of retaliation against their population centers. This threat discounting might be abetted by the type of wishful thinking concerning outcomes that can sometimes be the product of desperation, as was the case with the Japanese decision to initiate war against the United States in 1941.⁸ If massive retaliation was considered improbable, a strike with weapons of mass destruction might not involve a quantum leap from a decision to attack with conventional weapons.

Second, conventional warfare has on occasion resulted in losses comparable to those that might be suffered by an Nth country subjected to a nuclear retaliatory strike. The Soviet Union lost approximately 20,000,000 people during World War II; this was about 10 percent of its population at the time. Paraguay once lost approximately *85 percent* of its population as a result of a war that it undertook against superior forces.⁹ It has been argued that prospective losses from conventional warfare are less deterring than losses from nuclear warfare because the former are seemingly less certain.¹⁰ However, there is a sufficiently

⁸When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, they were in a position they perceived as desperate. The United States and its allies had frozen Japan's assets and embargoed oil shipments to that country. At the same time, the United States was making demands that the Japanese leadership believed would lead to the loss of all of their gains in China. The Japanese leadership came to believe that either war or what amounted to "national suicide" were the only choices and that Japan's position would only get worse with the passing of time. Although the Japanese leadership realized that greatly superior U.S. war potential would result in a Japanese defeat in a long war against the United States, they indulged in the wishful thinking that the United States would not choose to wage a prolonged war against Japan. See Russett, 1967, pp. 97-99.

⁹Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, pp. 9-11.

¹⁰See Mearshimer, 1983, pp. 23-24.

long record of severe destruction from conventional warfare to put nations on notice of the high potential for terrible losses; despite this, nations have not stopped waging conventional wars.

It has also been argued that the rapidity with which massive casualties would be suffered in nuclear warfare distinguishes nuclear from conventional deterrence. However, large, rapidly accruing casualty totals were expected before World War II. Former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan has stated, "We thought of air warfare in 1938 rather as people think of nuclear warfare today."¹¹ World War II was fought despite such perceptions. There are even instances where nations have participated in warfare even though they potentially faced not just defeat or the destruction of part of their population, but physical annihilation. The islanders of Melos refused to yield their sovereignty to Athens in 416 B.C., despite Athenian threats (subsequently executed) to put all of the grown male Melians to death and sell the women and children as slaves.¹²

Third, leaderships that have decided to participate in conventional warfare have often been well aware that they, at least, faced death if matters turned out poorly; yet that has not deterred them. Given the callousness many leaders have shown toward the deaths of their countrymen, it is at least conceivable that the leader who is not deterred by the likelihood of his own death will not be deterred by the likelihood millions of others will perish. Josef Stalin reportedly said: "A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic."¹³ When Germany's defeat became inevitable in World War II, Adolf Hitler ordered a "scorched earth" policy, the whole tenor of which amounted to: "If I'm going to be destroyed, I'll take as many as I can with me."¹⁴ A leader manifesting such a mindset would not very likely be deterred by the prospect of nuclear retaliation.

In sum, while it is probable that the decision to use weapons of mass destruction against a far better armed enemy would not be made lightly, such a decision cannot be regarded as unique and thus without potential historical analogues.

¹¹Payne and Fink, 1989, pp. 25, 29.

¹²Karsten, Howell, and Allen, 1984, p. 63.

¹³Bartlett, 1980, p. 766.

¹⁴Albert Speer has stated that by 1944 "Hitler himself was more and more ruthlessly determined to bring on total catastrophe." Speer, 1970, p. 401.

II. TYPES AND EXAMPLES OF DETERRENCE FAILURES

A TAXONOMY OF DETERRENCE FAILURES

There have been more than a few cases in which weaker—sometimes substantially weaker—states have attacked stronger ones.¹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita found that weaker nations initiated 17 of 76 conflicts (22 percent) that occurred between 1816 and 1974. Moreover, weaker nations initiated 14 out of 43 of the 20th century conflicts (33 percent), indicating that weaker countries may be getting more belligerent.²

An examination of historical materials reveals three primary factors associated with threats against, or attacks on, substantially stronger states:

- *The weaker state was highly motivated.* The high motivation may be due in whole or part to a strong commitment to particular values, a psychopathological leader, or a “crazy state” mentality.³
- *The weaker state misperceived some facet of the situation.* Misperceptions have included instances where the weaker state (1) perceived a vulnerability that did not exist, (2) expected no retaliation from the strong state, or (3) believed allies would come to its aid.
- *The stronger state was vulnerable.* Such vulnerability may occur in the context of large-scale or low-intensity conflicts.

Motivation pertains to the weaker state’s purpose in attacking; misperception and vulnerability refer to conditions that appear to increase the weaker state’s likelihood of success. There is a potential for tradeoffs between strength of motivation and perceived likelihood of success, as more highly motivated states would seem to require less likelihood of success to attack and vice versa. And indeed, some very highly motivated states, such as the Jews under Roman rule, attacked substantially stronger powers even against great odds.

¹The terms “stronger” and “weaker” refer to the overall strength of a state; weaker states may be able to obtain local or transient superiority, as some of the examples cited below will demonstrate. In some cases one state may be potentially stronger than another. See pp. 15-17.

²Bueno de Mesquita, 1981, pp. 141-142.

³The term “crazy state” is borrowed from Israeli analyst Yehezkel Dror; the term’s meaning and application are discussed below.

However, both high motivation and one or more factors that appeared to increase the chance of success were often, though not always, associated with attacks by states against substantially stronger foes.

The remainder of this Note will discuss cases illustrating each of the three primary factors associated with attacks against much stronger states. Although, as noted, such an attack may be associated with more than one of these factors, some cases are especially representative of a particular category.

ATTACKS RESULTING FROM HIGH MOTIVATION

High Motivation Generally

There are numerous examples of highly motivated states attacking much stronger nations. These examples include the three Jewish revolts against the Romans in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D., the 19th century Ashanti attacks against the British in Africa, the 1857-1858 Indian Sepoy Mutiny against the British, the 19th and 20th century Riff wars conducted by rebels against France and Spain, the numerous Kurdish insurgencies against Iraq and Iran, the Dutch revolt against the Spanish in the 16th century, the Egyptian assault on Israel in 1973, and the Sino-Soviet clashes in 1969. In nearly all of these cases, there was neither strong state vulnerability nor weak state misperception. The weaker state struck because conditions had become unbearable, a threat to the country's existence was perceived, or very substantial political advantage was expected to derive from the attack. The lack of real vulnerabilities in the bulk of these instances is evidenced by the fact that of all the attackers, only the Dutch won. (The Chinese and Russians can be said to have fought to a draw.)

In many of these cases, the attacking state had a rationale that would strike contemporary Western observers as obvious, regardless of where their sympathies lay. For example, the 1973 Egyptian strike on Israel is understandable as a limited attack pursued for the purpose of strengthening Egypt's bargaining position. In this and other of the cases, the attacking state's motivation was generally sufficient that resort to force does not seem to have been a mismatch of ends and means. However, other states have challenged substantially stronger nations for reasons that appear difficult to understand, at least to those observers who are not conversant with the weaker state's culture. Actions of this type include Libya's 1986 attacks against the United States in the Mediterranean and the more recent Iranian assaults against U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf.

Such hard to comprehend attacks by weaker states pose a special danger to stronger nations. The attacks may be unanticipatable because the stronger nation cannot comprehend the weaker nation's cost-benefit calculus. In such cases, the calculus may be heavily influenced by a psychopathological leader or a "crazy state" culture.

Psychopathological Leadership

The possibility of a state armed with weapons of mass destruction and led by a psychopathological leader cannot be dismissed out of hand. One writer has observed that "at least seventy five chiefs of state in the last four centuries led their countries, actually or symbolically, for a total of several centuries while suffering from severe mental disturbances."⁴ In fact, one nuclear-armed nation has been led by a psychopathological leader; Josef Stalin ruled the Soviet Union at a time when that country had developed nuclear weapons. Nikita Khrushchev, one of Stalin's inner circle, refers in his memoirs to "the sickness which began to envelop Stalin's mind in the last years of his life."⁵ The purge trials of the 1930s and the massacre of the Kulaks strongly indicate that Stalin's disturbance was not confined to his last years.

Weak as well as strong states have been governed by psychopathological individuals. One of the most tragic attacks ever made by a state against stronger opposition has been attributed to a leader's megalomania.⁶ This conflict was the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870). The conflict began when Paraguayan dictator Francisco Solano Lopez invaded Brazil and then declared war on Argentina when that nation refused to let Paraguayan troops cross its territory. Brazil and Argentina, in alliance with Uruguay, crushed Paraguay after six years of fighting. Paraguay's population at the beginning of the conflict was approximately 1,400,000. By war's end, the population had been reduced to 221,000, of whom only 29,000 were adult males.⁷

"Crazy State" Culture

A "crazy state" culture may also result in a cost-benefit calculus that is difficult for outsiders to comprehend. The term "crazy state" has been used by Yehezkel Dror to refer to such groups as "the Christian Crusaders or the Islam Holy Warriors . . . anarchists . . .

⁴Roberts, 1988, p. 186.

⁵Khrushchev, 1970, p. 246.

⁶Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, pp. 910-911.

⁷Ibid.

contemporary terrorist groups . . . Nazi Germany; and—to a more limited extent—Japan before the Second World War.”⁸ Although Dror’s concept is multidimensional and cannot be easily defined, the historical examples he uses tend to be groups with an extremely strong commitment to nonrational (by contemporary Western standards) ideologies and a willingness to use force to realize their goals. It is important to remember that the term “crazy state” is used to identify states whose cost-benefit calculus may be extremely difficult for a contemporary Westerner to understand; the term is not a judgment that the state’s values are “crazy” in an absolute or universal sense.

Many states that have attacked substantially stronger counterparts certainly could have been “crazy states,” the Jewish zealots who revolted against Rome being an especially likely example. Both Iran and Libya can arguably be considered states of this type, and a “crazy state” cost-benefit calculus seems likely to have contributed to their attacks against U.S. forces. A weak “crazy state” led by a psychopathological leader may have particularly great potential to take actions that appear to defy logic; Adolf Hitler’s Germany occupied the Rhineland at a time (1936) when France’s army was substantially stronger than Germany’s.⁹ Although Hitler in that case read Allied intentions correctly, perhaps no wholly sane leader would have taken this risk because the consequences of failure would have been so terrible. As Hitler himself said, “A retreat on our part would have spelled collapse.”¹⁰

ATTACKS RESULTING FROM MISPERCEPTION

Misperceptions that have resulted in attacks against substantially stronger states have included instances where the weaker state (1) perceived a vulnerability that did not exist, (2) expected no retaliation from the strong state, or (3) believed allies would come to its aid.

The Weaker Country Perceives a Vulnerability That Does Not Exist

The simplest example of a country perceiving a vulnerability that does not exist is when the country’s strength is grossly overestimated compared with the opponent’s strength. One example of this occurred in 1948 when many Arabs were possessed of “magnificent overconfidence” that the massed Arab armies would defeat the Israelis; this attitude was shared by such military men as British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery.¹¹ When the

⁸Dror, 1971, p. 23.

⁹Horne, 1979, p. 70.

¹⁰Shirer, 1959, p. 293.

¹¹Bell, 1969, pp. 93, 129.

Arabs attacked, the Israelis were able to halt all three invasion forces and repel two of them beyond the original frontiers of Palestine.¹² A similar example was that of the French in 1870, who believed that their armies were greatly superior to that of the Prussians, when in fact the reverse was true. The Prussians had a 2:1 advantage in men, were better equipped, and had technologically superior artillery, better transport and logistical arrangements, superior military intelligence, and a well-thought-out plan of campaign.¹³

A different type of vulnerability misperception was the Persian leadership's belief in 1856 that the British were too occupied in the Crimea to be able to respond to a Persian incursion into Afghanistan.¹⁴ The British had warned Persia not to occupy the Afghan city of Herat. The Persians ignored the warning and attacked Herat; the British won the ensuing war.¹⁵ Persia had seriously overestimated the extent to which Britain's operations against Russia precluded resources from being used against Persia. The War of 1812 involving the United States and Britain was also arguably an example of a state believing a stronger state to be vulnerable because it was elsewhere committed. Although the United States ostensibly declared war to preserve the "freedom of the seas," there was considerable pressure for war from U.S. expansionists who were determined to annex Canada while Britain was occupied with the Napoleonic wars.¹⁶

The Weak State Expects No Retaliation from the Strong State

There are two types of cases in this category. The first is where a state attacks a substantially stronger state's territory; the second occurs when a state attacks another nation and a substantially stronger third state intervenes.

The Substantially Stronger State Is Itself Attacked. There have been instances where the weaker country does not believe the substantially stronger country will rise to the challenge even when its own territory is attacked. This was India's belief in the 1962 Indo-Chinese war.¹⁷ The Indian General Staff had actually calculated that the Chinese enjoyed substantial superiority in the disputed area of Ladakh. Moreover, Indian patrols had to be supplied by air while the Chinese had a very good road network.¹⁸ These facts were

¹²Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, p. 1238.

¹³Ibid., pp. 832-833.

¹⁴Blainey, 1988, p. 233.

¹⁵Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, p. 846; Richardson, 1960b, p. 83.

¹⁶Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, pp. 794-795.

¹⁷Karsten, Howell, and Allen, 1984, p. 68; Lebow, 1981, p. 164.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 166.

known to Indian decisionmakers who nevertheless believed that their course of action would succeed because China would not react. This belief was wrong, and India lost the ensuing struggle. Similarly, Argentina greatly underestimated Britain's resolve to defend the Falklands in 1982.¹⁹ And when Egypt launched its "War of Attrition" against Israel in 1969-1970, the Egyptians mistakenly dismissed the risk that Israel would bring its air force into play to nullify Egyptian firepower along the Suez canal. Within six months, the Egyptian air defenses along the canal had been destroyed and its ground troops exposed "to punishing fire."²⁰ However, weaker nations sometimes correctly perceive that stronger ones will not respond. Hitler believed that the much stronger French would not respond when he sent troops into the Rhineland in 1936; even so, he sent only one division in order to cut losses in case the French did respond.²¹

Another Nation Is Attacked and the Much Stronger State Intervenes. A state may attack another nation while under the misperception that a much stronger state will not come to the defender's aid. The North Korean attack on South Korea and the Chinese shelling of Quemoy and Matsu, each of which resulted in an unexpectedly strong U.S. response, are cases of this type.²² A more recent example is the 1990 Iraqi attack against Kuwait, which resulted in a coalition of nations, including the United States, first embargoing and then attacking Iraq.

A State Counting on Allies Attacks a Substantially Stronger State or Its Ally

A perfect historical example of a weak state counting on its own allies attacking a strong state or that state's ally is the attack upon the Swiss town of Solothurn by the Count of Kiburg-Burgdorf in 1383. The Count, who was deeply in debt, hoped that if he captured the prosperous town, his overlord and allies would aid him against the powerful Swiss confederation, which could be expected to attempt to recapture the town. As it turned out, the Count's gamble failed.²³ More recent examples include:

¹⁹Jervis, Lebow, and Stein, 1985, p. 110.

²⁰Ibid., p. 44.

²¹Goerlitz, 1959, p. 306.

²²Karsten, Howell, and Allen, 1984, p. 45 (Quemoy-Matsu).

²³Naroll, Bullough, and Naroll, 1974, pp. 281-292.

- The Austrian attack on Serbia, Russia's ally, in 1914. The Austrians, who were decidedly inferior to the Russians (an inferiority borne out by the generally poor Austrian performance against the Russians in World War I), attacked Serbia in the belief that Germany would come to Austria's aid if Russia honored its obligations to Serbia.
- The Suez canal attack of 1956, where Britain and France attacked Egypt, despite possible Soviet opposition, assuming that the United States would at least not oppose them.²⁴
- The Hungarian uprising of 1956, where U.S. and other Western radio broadcasts incorrectly led Hungarians to believe that outside forces might come to their aid against the Soviet Union.²⁵

ATTACKS RESULTING FROM VULNERABILITY OF STRONGER STATES

The third circumstance under which countries have threatened or attacked substantially stronger states is when the stronger nation is vulnerable in some way. Such vulnerabilities often have to do with geographical distance, a (remediable) lack of fighting forces, or the engagement of the stronger country elsewhere. Attempts to exploit these vulnerabilities have resulted in both high- and low-intensity conflicts, though the former are fairly rare. Although such vulnerabilities have not in and of themselves constituted a motivation for threats or attacks, they have facilitated such actions. Sometimes the stronger nation was aware of the vulnerability and did not remedy it because the likelihood of exploitation was believed to be too low or the cost of remedying the vulnerability was unacceptable. Such vulnerabilities have at times permitted the weaker nation to achieve at least a temporary local superiority. Examples of these vulnerabilities will be discussed in the contexts of high- and low-intensity conflicts.

The Exploitation of Vulnerabilities in High-Intensity Conflicts

There have been few cases involving high-intensity conflicts initiated by nations hoping to exploit the vulnerabilities of substantially stronger states. The reason for this is simple: Before the advent of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, gross disparities in power between two nations usually precluded the substantially stronger state from being vulnerable in high-intensity conflicts. However, there are several recent (by historical

²⁴Thomas, 1966, pp. 81, 131, 160-161.

²⁵Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, p. 1233; Meray, 1959, pp. 115-117.

standards) cases where states have had vulnerabilities that substantially weaker nations attempted to exploit in high-intensity conflicts. These examples include the Falklands War (1982), the Japanese-American component of World War II (1941-1945), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and the Boer War (1899-1902).

The Falklands War. The Falklands war is a clear case of a nation attempting to take advantage of a flaw in the substantially stronger state's armor. In this case, the vulnerability was produced by (1) the distance of the Falklands from Britain, (2) the lack of a substantial garrison in the Falklands, and (3) the declining British Navy. Argentina was by far the weaker power; however, her strength was not insignificant. Argentinian land-based aircraft sunk British ships, and if the Argentinians had destroyed even one of the two British aircraft carriers in the battle, the British might have had to accept defeat.²⁶ Furthermore, the Argentinian leadership simply did not believe that the British would consider the Falklands worth fighting over. This misperception may well have influenced the Argentine leadership at least as much as any perceived gap in British power.

The Japanese-American Component of World War II (1941-1945). The Japanese decision to declare war on the United States was made reluctantly, with full knowledge of the prodigious U.S. economy. The Japanese hoped that if the attack on poorly defended Pearl Harbor fully succeeded and the U.S. carriers were destroyed, then U.S. power would be effectively neutralized during the time required for the Japanese to build up a strong defensive system, which the United States would not want to challenge in a prolonged struggle.

The Russo-Japanese War. The 4,500,000 man Russian Army far outnumbered its 283,000 Japanese counterpart; this was true even if the 400,000 Japanese reserve troops were counted.²⁷ However, the Russians had only 83,000 field troops and 50,000 garrison troops east of Lake Baikal. Moreover, Japanese naval strength was superior to Russian naval strength in the Far East.²⁸ The Japanese launched the war with a surprise attack that severely damaged Russian naval strength in the Far East, thereby exploiting local naval superiority to the fullest.

The Boer War. In 1899, British-Boer tensions had escalated to the point where the Boers issued an ultimatum giving the British 48 hours to cease military preparations they were making. The British refused, and the Boer states allied and went on the offensive.

²⁶Hastings and Jenkins, 1983, p. 216.

²⁷Dupuy and Dupuy, 1970, pp. 920-921.

²⁸Ibid., p. 921.

One source estimates that the Boers had 83,000 men of fighting age and never had more than 40,000 in the field. The British were ultimately to put 500,000 men into South Africa.²⁹ The Boers therefore may be considered a much weaker state than Britain. However, it is unquestionable that, at the beginning, the balance of forces favored the Boers by approximately 3:1.³⁰ Moreover, the initial Boer tactics were much better. This case clearly is an example of a state taking advantage of a real, though transient, vulnerability of a substantially stronger state. (It is also a case where the strong motivation of the weaker party was important.)

The Exploitation of Vulnerabilities in Low-Intensity Conflicts

Examples of low-intensity conflict initiation by substantially weaker powers include raids, hostage taking, seizures of ships and aircraft, and similar actions. In many of these cases the substantially stronger power was clearly vulnerable to such attacks but for one reason or another did not remedy the vulnerability. The last 20 years or so have been particularly rife with such incidents, probably in part because of the proliferation of armed groups not overtly associated with a state, and the increasing perceived international restraints upon larger powers' freedom of action. However, such instances are not confined to the recent past.

The Barbary Pirates. The Barbary Pirates were actually rulers of small kingdoms on the North Coast of Africa. The United States had paid tribute to them to preclude attacks against U.S. shipping during the years after independence when the Continental Navy was not maintained. Only after the United States rebuilt its naval force and was no longer engaged in conflicts with European powers did the tribute cease.³¹

Indian Raids Against U.S. Settlers. In June 1784, the Continental Congress disbanded the U.S. Army, leaving only 100 men to guard property. By 1786, attacks by Indians against western settlers persuaded Congress to raise about 500 regular troops. However, the Indians were still "contemptuous" of this force and continued their depredations. In 1792, Congress authorized the establishment of a regular force of 5000 men under "Mad Anthony" Wayne who eventually defeated the Indians at the Battle of Fallen Timbers.³²

²⁹Ibid., p. 855.

³⁰Parkinson, 1979, p. 27.

³¹Bemis, 1963, p. 79.

³²Dupuy and Dupuy, 1956, pp. 122-123.

The Seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Iran. The 1979 seizure and government-permitted occupation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran is an outstanding example of a far weaker country exploiting a *known* vulnerability of a much stronger country. The November 4, 1979, seizure, which began the “hostage crisis,” was actually the second such seizure that year; the first had ended after three and a half hours.³³ Both Iran and the United States therefore knew that the embassy was vulnerable. The United States either could not or did not choose to rectify this vulnerability, which Iran exploited despite the fact that the embassy seizure was a legitimate *casus belli*; many nations have gone to war over less.

The Destruction of the Marine Barracks in Lebanon. In October 1983, 241 Marines were killed when a truck carrying explosives breached the gate and crashed into a Marine barracks in Lebanon. Although this was clearly a case where a vulnerability of a stronger power was exploited, the anonymity of the perpetrators shielded them from retaliation. Such a case may be relevant to deterring the use of ballistic missiles: If the identity of an aggressor could be concealed, the threat of retaliation would plainly lose much of its force.

The Seizure of Vessels and Aircraft. Small countries have proved themselves willing to seize the aircraft and vessels of even the superpowers. The 1968 seizure of the USS *Pueblo* by North Korea and the 1975 taking of the U.S. merchantman *Mayaguez* by Cambodia are perhaps the best known of these incidents, but they are not the only ones to have occurred. Ghana seized two Soviet trawlers in 1968, and the North Koreans shot down a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft in 1969.³⁴ The 19th century is replete with incidents of attacks on sailors, ambassadors, and missionaries from stronger powers.

³³Barber, 1985, p. 453.

³⁴Shulsky, 1979, pp. 123-127.

III. CONCLUSIONS: HISTORICAL LESSONS APPLIED TO THE NTH-COUNTRY THREAT

Aggression by states against substantially stronger states, though not common, is far from unprecedented. Weaker state motivation and misperception, as well as strong state vulnerability, have been associated with such attacks. All of these factors could be associated with attacks by states armed with weapons of mass destruction against much stronger opponents.

The “motivation” cases are obviously applicable. The fact that leaders have hazarded the well-being and, sometimes, the continued existence of their nation when sufficient motivation was present must be considered of utmost concern. If the weaker nation is a “crazy state,” or the leadership is psychopathological, or both, it is at least conceivable that a strike with weapons of mass destruction could occur under circumstances that the strong state would never consider sufficiently provocative to justify such a strike. Such an outcome may not be likely; it may in fact be one of low probability. But it cannot be discounted completely.

“Misperception” factors could also contribute to a country’s decision to attack the United States or its allies with weapons of mass destruction. There are several reasons, all of which relate to historical examples of misperception, why an aggressor using weapons of mass destruction might not believe that a devastating retaliation or even a retaliation in kind would necessarily be forthcoming from a stronger state. If the aggressor state had a powerful ally that was expected to come to its aid, the aggressor might calculate that retaliation would carry some probability of setting off a third world war and was therefore unlikely. If the aggressor attacked allies of a power armed with weapons of mass destruction and not the power itself, the aggressor might believe that the power would not come to the aid of its allies, especially if the aggressor has a strong protector or some capability (not necessarily by ballistic missile) to conduct a strike with weapons of mass destruction against the strong, nuclear-armed state. No U.S. ally except for Britain, France, and (possibly) Israel has its own force of nuclear weaponry.¹

The “vulnerability” scenarios are also potentially applicable. Neither the United States nor its allies have any form of long-range ballistic missile defense. Moreover, delivery of weapons by container ship or other unconventional method is also possible.

¹The Israeli government has never admitted possessing nuclear weaponry. There is nevertheless a widespread belief that Israel has such weapons.

Vulnerability is particularly acute for those U.S. allies who are geographically proximate to politically unstable nations or “crazy states.” Thus, a general vulnerability exists, though some nations are more vulnerable than others.

All of the factors cited above could lead to the use or threatened use of ballistic-missile-delivered weapons of mass destruction against the United States or its allies. It is not difficult to imagine this happening. One example from today’s headlines immediately comes to mind: Iraq has the potential to attack United States troops in Saudi Arabia with chemically armed ballistic missiles. If we look toward the future, an attack against the United States or its allies with ballistic-missile-delivered weapons of mass destruction becomes even easier to visualize for several reasons.

First, both ballistic missile technology and weapons of mass destruction continue to proliferate; Brazil may soon have the first non-U.S. ICBM in the western hemisphere.² Second, U.S. involvement in the Third World is likely to continue and perhaps even increase as the Soviet Union’s role as a counterweight diminishes. The United States might well have sent troops to Saudi Arabia after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait even if the Soviets were still actively hostile, but it would undoubtedly have been a more difficult decision. There is considerable dislike of the United States in the Third World; this antipathy has sometimes seemed to be a cornerstone of foreign policy in such countries as Iran and Libya.

Third, the Third World has at least its share of psychopathic leaders; in fact, the argument can be made that the often bloody trail of leadership selection in many Third World countries encourages the recruitment of paranoid personalities because those who lead “fighting organizations” may find paranoid qualities functional in their leadership roles.³ At least some of these psychopathic personalities may lead “crazy” states characterized by tremendous antipathy toward the United States; Libya under Qadhafi and Iran under the late Ayatollah Khomeini arguably fall into this category.

Although it is not part of this study’s objective to draw a specific scenario for the use of weapons of mass destruction by a weak state against a much stronger power, such a situation is certainly conceivable. In the future, certain nations in Latin America or the Middle East may have weapons of mass destruction mated to ballistic missiles. A conflict could arise in either area, and the United States might well intervene, given its past history and its continuing interests in these areas. A psychopathic leader of a fanatically “crazy” state marked by strong anti-U.S. feeling might decide that the United States is

²Milhollin and White, 1990, p. 10.

³Tucker, 1971, pp. 469-470.

sufficiently sensitive to casualties that it can be cowed by threats. The nation's leader therefore issues a threat: Any further U.S. military action will result in a strike against U.S. troops, allies, or the United States itself with weapons of mass destruction.

No judgment is made here as to the likelihood that these hypothetical events will occur. But human behavior is sufficiently variable that even an overwhelming retaliatory capability has not been and cannot be considered an absolute guarantee against attack. This conclusion does not in and of itself justify the building of a thin ballistic missile defense system, if only because there are numerous ways in which weapons of mass destruction could be delivered. (Of course, such methods might not be considered satisfactory to an aggressor, perhaps because they lack the symbolic significance, the degree of control, or the speed of delivery of missile weapons.) Regardless, if the possibility of attack is not dismissed out of hand, then potential modes of defense must be given some consideration.

If the United States or the Soviet Union builds a ballistic missile defense to limit vulnerability to Nth country attacks, the defense must be effective, and its effectiveness should be demonstrated. If the system's effectiveness is not demonstrated, then misperceptions of vulnerability are more likely to occur. Such misperceptions could lead to an Nth country threat or attack. Moreover, even if the system's effectiveness is demonstrated, an Nth-country ballistic missile attack or threat is not out of the question: Deterrence may fail. The historical record shows that tradeoffs between motivation and opportunity have resulted in attacks against states that were seemingly not vulnerable. A ballistic missile defense may have to deny as well as deter. Therefore, although any ballistic missile defense system that is built will undoubtedly add to deterrence, it must also be able to preclude or at least limit damage if deterrence fails.

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