

WHY NOT FIRST-STRIKE COUNTERFORCE CAPABILITIES?

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### THE ASSURED DESTRUCTION ETHIC

For almost 20 years of public discussion, the strategic thinking in our country has been tightly gripped by a marvelously logical concept called Assured Destruction. An idea that was originally intended only as a yardstick for "How much is enough?" soon became the cornerstone of our strategic policy. And the cornerstone eventually became the strategic edifice. Perhaps because of its compelling and simple logic, a very good idea has, unfortunately, driven out all other ideas that might reasonably be included in judging the adequacy of our strategic forces. One of the victims is the possibility that first-strike counterforce capabilities might have some commendable properties.

Under the dominance of the Assured Destruction concept, the adequacy of U.S. strategic offensive forces has been measured solely in terms of their retaliatory potential--by their evident capability to respond with unacceptable consequences even after absorbing the worst possible attack. Presumably this clear capability serves as a deterrent to the Soviet use of nuclear weapons against us or our allies. When translated into a yardstick for measuring the adequacy of our strategic forces, this concept incorporates several important assumptions:

- o The Soviet actions we want most to proscribe are nuclear attacks.
- o Nuclear attacks can be deterred by threatening to retaliate with unacceptable consequences.
- o Unacceptable consequences should be reckoned by the destruction of the Soviet society, variously measured in terms of urban population, industrial floor space, delivered megatons, busted cities, recovery assets, etc.
- o Our ability to destroy the Soviet society would be most jeopardized by a surprise Soviet first-strike counterforce attack.

Thus, the adequacy of our strategic forces is to be found in their second-strike countervalue capabilities, in response to a Soviet first-strike counterforce attack. The chain of logic

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evident in these assumptions is beautiful; its hold upon the strategic thinking of this country is a testimony to its elegance.

But, individually, each of these assumptions is under increasing attack. Some have questioned the credibility of a threat to destroy the Soviet society when they are perfectly capable of responding in kind. Others have questioned the comparative vulnerabilities of the U.S. and Soviet societies, given the Soviet civil defense program. Still others question whether or not a single, surprise counterforce strike is, indeed, the most stressful scenario for our retaliatory forces.

Such quarrels may only be symptoms of a deeper discomfort: a sense that the Assured Destruction concept, despite its awesome logic, is leading to an inadequate strategic posture and should, therefore, be challenged through its assumptions, wherever weaknesses can be found. Whether the assumptions have fundamental flaws, or simply minor imperfections brought to light under much close analysis, is worth some reflection. The challenges raised so far would not seem to portend any fundamental change in the character or size of our strategic forces.

#### STABILITY IN COUNTERFORCE POSTURES

The Assured Destruction concept has been extended well beyond its original purpose of measuring the adequacy of U.S. strategic forces. As embodied in the larger concept of Mutual Assured Destruction, it now pervades our notions about the propriety of strategic forces as well. Whether our strategic forces are naughty or nice is generally a question that focuses on something called stability. Notions about strategic stability are often expressed without adequate definitions, but these two themes are the most common:

- o Crisis stability: Our force posture should minimize the incentives for our opponent to use his forces in a crisis.
- o Arms race stability: Our force posture should minimize the incentives for our opponent to increase the capabilities of his forces in peacetime.

Concerns over crisis stability are focused on incentives for the use of forces; concerns over arms race stability are focused on incentives for acquiring more forces. In one instance, the worry is about the risk of precipitating war, while in the other, it is the worry of excessive consequences in the event of war. Both of these concerns--risks and consequences--are reflected in our efforts at strategic arms control: By controlling both the size and kinds of forces, we hope to reduce both the risks and consequences of nuclear war. Unfortunately, the risks and consequences of nuclear war may be inversely (or perversely) related to the risks and consequences

of conventional wars.

If we distinguish between risk (as the probability of conflict occurring) and consequences (as the damage expected if conflict does occur), then general nuclear war is frequently viewed as one of the least likely forms of conflict, but one of such enormous consequences that we must devote every reasonable effort to reducing both the risks and consequences of that event. At the other end of the spectrum of conflict, the risk (probability) of local conventional warfare is historically quite high, but the consequences (damage), especially to our own country, are seen as being comparatively modest. Thus, we must reckon with a span or continuum of conflicts: from those of high risk, but low consequences, at one end, to those of low risk, but high consequences, at the other end.

The current thrust of our arms control efforts is focused on strategic arms, to reduce the risk and consequences of nuclear war. Thus, our attention is focused on changing the awesome prospects at one end of the spectrum of conflict. But what are we doing, perhaps inadvertently, to the prospects at the other end of the spectrum?

It can be argued that the relatively higher risks of conventional conflict are, to some degree, kept in check by the shadow of very much higher consequences at the nuclear end of the conflict spectrum. By reducing the perceived risks or consequences of nuclear conflict, we may be unintentionally increasing the risk of conventional conflicts. Trading nuclear war for conventional war would be a tempting bargain except for escalation. If we allow the risks of conventional conflicts to increase by making nuclear conflict less credible, then through the backdoor of escalation, the net effect may be perverse: It may ultimately increase the risks of nuclear conflict.

#### ADVOCATING THE DESPICABLE

The cumulative effect of the Assured Destruction ethic upon our strategic thinking is this: Countervalue capabilities, while a regrettable necessity, must be tolerated on both sides. Counterforce capabilities are to be eschewed, bilaterally if possible, otherwise unilaterally, as being the fuel of arms races and the hair-triggers of instability. If counterforce capabilities are coveted by some in the U.S., it is generally in a very low voice, only for retaliatory purposes, and only in very limited amounts so as to remove any possible doubt of their second-strike role. First-strike countervalue capabilities are deemed so reprehensible that they have become a non-subject: They aren't discussed, let alone advocated, by anyone, anymore, anywhere. They have disappeared into the closet.

In this article, I would like to crack the door and get first-strike counterforce capabilities out of the closet where they may be objectively considered and discussed. Toward that end, I will advance some arguments advocating first-strike

counterforce capabilities, especially for the U.S. strategic posture. While the arguments are serious, they are certainly not as complete or as well-buttressed as I would like. First-strike counterforce capabilities have been a non-subject for so long that many of the analyses that should have been made haven't. Thus, these arguments should be viewed as a "show cause" brief for lowering the emotional and conceptual barriers to the discussion, analysis, and advocacy of first-strike and counterforce capabilities.

To begin, we shall need some definitions. For the purposes of the arguments to be developed here, counterforce capabilities can be defined as the ability to conduct attacks against opposing strategic offensive forces. If that ability requires, as a prerequisite, attacks against defensive forces (defense suppression), they would be included. If that ability can be provided through attacks by tactical or non-nuclear forces, they would be included also.

Given that broad definition, counterforce capabilities can, like clothing, come in many shapes, sizes, and colors. It may be useful to distinguish between some of these as a way of focusing on the particular kind of counterforce to be advocated here.

#### Splendid Counterforce

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Splendid counterforce capabilities might be regarded as the ultimate in counterforce ambitions. They would enable the possessor to successfully attack opposing forces to the point where the survivors could no longer pose a retaliatory threat to societal survival. This is the sort of counterforce envisioned in the damage-limitation concepts that came into vogue briefly during the 1960s.

While splendid counterforce capabilities might have been possible at an earlier point in time, they are now believed by many to be unattainable by the superpowers. Nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them over intercontinental distances can now be made sufficiently survivable, numerous, and effective that preventing unacceptable damage, even in a ragged retaliatory attack, is impossible. There are some who would dispute that conclusion, but their arguments pivot on what constitutes unacceptable damage to a society.

#### Preemptive Counterforce

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If splendid counterforce capabilities are no longer possible, less ambitious objectives may remain. Preemptive use of any available counterforce abilities might be attractive in some crisis contexts, simply to have the more favorable outcome associated with going first. The difference might be small or substantial, depending upon how the rest of the war is played out. If the counterforce capabilities are viewed only as

offering some relatively modest advantage by being used rather than abused in the first exchange, then they might be classified for our purposes as preemptive.

Perfunctory Counterforce  
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Of course, one can be perfunctory about counterforce and plan so as to disarm himself in ineffectual counterforce attacks. One way to do this would be to authorize (under the Assured Destruction ethic) only countervalue weapons (lots of inaccurate, small-yield weapons) and then employ them for counterforce tasks (like hitting hardened silos) because they are the only weapons available in a single integrated plan for a spasm attack.

Limited Counterforce  
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Better counterforce capabilities, while still short of splendid, can probably be devised. The limited counterforce capabilities advocated by some in the early 1970s were represented as no threat to the "legitimate" retaliatory capabilities of the Soviets. Rather, they were argued as an important option beside the increasingly improbable threat of countervalue attacks.

But they also raised a number of concerns, not the least of which was how to bound such counterforce capabilities. While they might never be splendid, could they reach the point where they threatened more than nuclear sparring or demonstration of resolve? Perhaps these concerns anticipated that limited counterforce capabilities could lead to what will be called objective counterforce, next.

Objective Counterforce  
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What if counterforce capabilities, while not splendid, were sufficient to shift significantly and irrevocably the balance of strategic offensive forces? While not capable of any immediate threat to the opponent's Assured Destruction capabilities, they might be able to create an imbalance of force that could no longer be reversed and thereby deny any prospect of advantage in further counterforce exchanges. Since such an ability would have a specific goal, beyond limited, but short of splendid, it might appropriately be called objective counterforce.

Objective counterforce capabilities in a first strike, CF1, could theoretically reduce opposing strategic forces to a point where the recovery of any force advantage by retaliatory counterattacks is no longer possible. On the other hand, objective counterforce capabilities in a second strike, CF2, could theoretically recover or even create a force advantage by retaliatory counterattacks, even after absorbing any counterforce first-strike.

Objective counterforce capabilities might be defined in several ways:

CF1 is the capability to strike first and thereby foreclose to an opponent the possibility of advantageous force relationships in any subsequent counterforce exchanges.

CF2 is the capability to respond to any counterforce first strike and thereby foreclose to an opponent the possibility of advantageous force relationships in any subsequent counterforce exchanges.

CF1 is the capability to deny CF2 to an opponent.

CF2 is the capability to deny CF1 to an opponent.

Note that CF1 and CF2, while compatible if jointly held, are mutually exclusive if separately held. Thus, the existence of these capabilities depends upon properties of both opponents' strategic forces to absorb and deliver counterforce attacks.

What useful purpose could be served by these capabilities to shift irrevocably the balance of strategic forces? They would, by their existence, threaten to foreclose any advantage to an opponent at the strategic counterforce level of conflict. They would threaten an opponent with the alternatives of 1) engaging in further counterforce exchanges with the dismal prospect of being the first to exhaust his strategic reserves, or 2) escalating to countervalue attacks, or 3) desisting. Why one would want to pose such awesome alternatives to an opponent is best considered within the framework of an escalation ladder.

#### BALANCING ON AN ESCALATION LADDER

Consider a simple escalation ladder with the following steps or rungs:

- o Countervalue attacks
- o Counterforce campaigns
- o Limited strategic operations
- o Theater nuclear warfare
- o Conventional theater conflict

The steps in this ladder are arbitrary and incomplete. One could add steps above and below the ones listed, or choose to distinguish between more or different levels than these. But such differences shouldn't affect the arguments to be made here.

First, consider the balance of forces between the Soviets and the U.S. at the top and bottom of this ladder. At the top,



at the level of countervalue attacks, most would argue for the existence of a rough balance. Some might demur because of asymmetries in the vulnerabilities of the Soviet and U.S. societies; but that is not central to the argument.

At the bottom, at the level of conventional theater conflict, it is increasingly accepted that the Soviets enjoy a preponderance of capabilities, especially on or near their own borders. This too may be argued, depending on context, locale, time period, etc. But, in this case, the perceived balance at the bottom of the ladder is central to the argument.

Ever since World War II, the dominance of the Soviet army for any conventional conflict in Europe has been an uncomfortable fact of life. At first, the atomic bomb was to be our equalizer if we had to fight the Soviets in a war over Europe. We were never too clear about how those few bombs would be used to offset the Soviet ground advantage in Europe, but the threat of their use was credible and without a Soviet response in kind.

By the time the Soviets also had atomic bombs, we had the preponderance of strategic forces for credible, disarming counterforce attacks. We could credibly threaten "to bomb them back into the Stone Age," to use the phrase of the times. Splendid counterforce was briefly a reality.

With the prospect of an eventual balance in strategic forces between the Soviets and the United States, we turned once more to our technical virtuosity for a nuclear advantage. First, we sought the leverage promised by theater nuclear weapons against the weight of the Soviet army. Then, as it became apparent that the Soviets could and would acquire theater nuclear weapons as well, we began to flirt with the idea of limited nuclear operations. By this time, arms control considerations began to dominate our strategic posture.

Thus, for more than three decades, nuclear weapons have been the means through which the U.S. has sought to counterbalance the preponderance of Soviet conventional warfighting capabilities in Europe (and elsewhere). We were successful in creating what we (and apparently the Soviets) perceived to be advantageous, albeit temporary, imbalances in capabilities at each one of the nuclear levels on the escalation ladder. However, the only persistent feature of the balance on this ladder has been a significant and persistent imbalance at the level of conventional theater conflict.

Currently, the U.S. is trying to correct the imbalance in conventional force capabilities in Europe. Although the intent is laudable, optimism must be tempered by 30 years of contrary evidence. Immediately after World War II, we gave up on the idea of trying to maintain the standing army necessary to compete on an equal footing with the Soviets, even with our technological advantage. In the intervening years, the Soviets have, if anything, closed the technological gap. Much is in their favor: a geographically central position, the necessary political

control for raising and maintaining large standing armies, and the rapid pace of modern warfare when compared to democratic decisionmaking and mobilization.

Having exploited our technical virtuosity for three decades to maintain a nimble, offsetting balance at the nuclear levels of the escalation ladder, have we exhausted the possibilities? Do our more recently acquired arms control concerns now make these levels repugnant for imbalances? Can we relinquish favorable imbalances at the nuclear levels without resolving the unfavorable imbalance at the conventional levels? Can any offset be found at the nuclear levels on the ladder to deter the Soviets from exercising their preponderance of conventional power for coercive purposes?

At the lowest nuclear level on the ladder, theater nuclear warfare no longer provides any promise of substantial unilateral advantage. True, the threat of escalation to theater nuclear warfare raises the prospective level of pain, but it wouldn't seem to confer any particular advantage to the U.S. or its allies. The Soviets, given their advantage at the conventional force level, would surely prefer not to see escalation to nuclear weapons; but if we choose that level, would they find themselves at any unilateral disadvantage? It could be argued that we would only hasten the inevitable by escalation to theater nuclear weapons in the event of a war in Europe.

The prospects at the next level up are no brighter. Escalation to limited strategic nuclear operations, as a demonstration of resolve or as a selective strike at certain critical targets, again is a threat of increased pain. Do we really believe that the Soviets are at a disadvantage when it comes to a test of pain? Are we somehow less vulnerable, more stoic, more capable of persisting than they?

At the top of the ladder, the threat of countervalue attacks is no longer a very credible counterweight to the Soviet conventional forces. At this level on the ladder, we now have a stalemate. The endgame is not to threaten to "pull the chain," but to leave one's opponent with the choice of moving to that level or desisting. We must insure that we are not stuck with that choice. Rather, we must look far enough ahead, up the escalation ladder, to be sure that we can always force that choice upon our opponent. To control who must choose at the countervalue level, we should insure our position on the next lower step, at the strategic counterforce level.

First-strike counterforce capabilities could provide the advantageous counter-initiative needed to deter the Soviets at the conventional levels of conflict. As defined here, CF1 capabilities represent a potential military advantage that could provide the U.S. with a credible threat to shift the strategic balance if the Soviets unleash their preponderance of conventional forces. The Soviets would have to contemplate the possibility that exploiting their advantage at the level of conventional theater conflict might prompt a counterforce

campaign where they would face the prospective choice of escalating to countervalue attacks or desisting.

Is it really that simple? To use CF1 capabilities to offset a preponderance of conventional forces is to compare quite different things. How would CF1 capabilities stop the Soviets from overrunning Europe if that became their objective? Perhaps Europe in exchange for some substantial portion of their strategic forces would be an attractive bargain to the Soviets. These questions deserve careful consideration, but we must distinguish between warfighting and deterrence arguments.

The existence of forces, whether counterforce or countervalue, is no guarantee that they will be used in the event of war or that they will be successful in deterring. Deterrence may fail; and they may not be used even if deterrence does fail. Whether we would want to exercise CF1 capabilities if the Soviets unleashed their conventional forces is a warfighting question, as is the question of whether or not to execute the Assured Destruction threat if the Soviets started busting our cities. The question should not be whether CF1 could fail as a deterrent (clearly, it can), but whether it is a deterrent and worth its costs. We must ask ourselves the very same questions about our countervalue or Assured Destruction capabilities.

If we are going to acquire counterforce capabilities, why should we seek CF1 as opposed to the less pugnacious CF2 capabilities? The answer is that CF2 is a responsive counterforce capability; it isn't a response to a conventional attack, by definition. Thus, it doesn't represent a counter-initiative that might deter the coercive use of the Soviet preponderance of conventional forces.

Couldn't the Soviets also (or already?) have a CF1 capability? And couldn't they exercise that capability as a prelude to the use of their preponderance in conventional forces? The answers here are yes, of course. But now the price of admission, the threshold, has changed. To use their advantage in conventional forces for coercive purposes, the Soviets would first have to initiate a major nuclear war at the counterforce level. It is one thing to find that war is, regrettably, escalating; it is quite another to initiate war deliberately at such a destructive level.

#### SOME PROPOSITIONS

From this kind of reasoning, several propositions emerge:

- o Minimum deterrence postures (Assured Destruction only) are credible only when one enjoys superior non-nuclear options wherever vital concerns may be threatened.

Those who believe that countervalue capabilities are enough must also believe that our non-nuclear capabilities are sufficient for the protection of any vital interest short of

national survival. That implies something interesting either about their assessment of U.S. conventional force capabilities or about the extent of U.S. vital interests.

- o Given the existing preponderance in Soviet conventional forces, our ability to "restore the balance" with an effective second-strike counterforce option may be less important than our ability to shift the balance with a credible first-strike counterforce option.

Those who are tentative about counterforce capabilities and would embrace them reluctantly, only for "restoring the balance" if we were drawn into a counterforce war, would provide nothing with which to offset the coercive threat of the Soviet advantage in conventional forces. The prospects of a Soviet-initiated counterforce war, while worth considering as a contingency, seem somewhat more remote than the Soviet use of their conventional forces to oppose us in Europe, Asia, or Africa--areas where we claim vital interests.

Several corollaries follow logically:

- o Threatening to restore the balance by means of a counterforce second strike is a strategy compatible with conventional force superiority.
- o Threatening to shift the balance by means of a counterforce first strike is a strategy compatible with conventional force inferiority.

Curiously, the only form of counterforce given the slightest consideration within the U.S. defense community (CF2) makes for a better Soviet than U.S. strategy; while the form of counterforce which is universally condemned (CF1) makes for a better U.S. than Soviet strategy.

Have we somehow forgotten, in our contemporary efforts to control strategic arms, that our conventional and nuclear postures have been and will remain linked? Our conventional capabilities have never been good enough to give away a credible, advantageous nuclear initiative. The only advantageous nuclear initiative left to us as a deterrent may be the credible threat of striking first with an effective counterforce strike.

#### SCRUTINIZING THE ASSUMPTIONS

These arguments have involved a number of assumptions that may be contentious. Where those assumptions are obvious and can be recalled, the arguments can be logically attacked or joined. But hidden, undetected, or unremembered assumptions can be barriers to intelligent debate. Since the arguments advanced here are likely to beg debate, it may be helpful to trap the assumptions in one place for scrutiny. Here are the principal, recognized assumptions:

- o The risk (probability) of conventional conflict involving the superpowers is substantially greater than the risk of nuclear conflict.
- o The Soviets enjoy a peacetime preponderance of conventional forces that will be difficult for the U.S. to overcome short of wartime mobilization.
- o There are areas of vital interest to the U.S. where the Soviets may confront us with superior conventional force capabilities.
- o The Soviets might credibly threaten the use of their conventional forces for coercion.
- o The U.S. does not enjoy any significant advantages over the Soviets in the contemplation of theater or limited nuclear operations.
- o Adequate countervalue capabilities are assurable for the Soviets and the U.S., against any credible or foreseeable first strike (although they could be put at risk in an extended counterforce campaign).
- o Objective counterforce capabilities are technically, economically, and politically feasible.

Any of these assumptions can be challenged, to some degree, on their face. Whether they can be challenged to the extent of finding more validity in the counterassumption is the test they should be given. If they can't be easily overturned, then perhaps they provide a basis for considering arguments for (as well as against) counterforce capabilities. Once that happens, a number of questions must be confronted:

Can CF1 or CF2 postures be realized, given the ambiguities of the strategic calculus and the uncertainties attending nuclear warfare? The burden of proof undoubtedly lies with those who would advocate such postures. But the atmosphere in the defense community has not been conducive to any serious, competent study of the question.

Are CF1 or CF2 postures unilaterally enforceable? If such postures are possible, are they fragile to the responsive actions of an adversary? Can it be demonstrated that responsive actions will lead toward more stable postures?

Is there a tradeoff between CF1 and general purpose forces? There is the suggestion of such a tradeoff in the arguments developed here. Are those tradeoffs to be made on the margin; or do they represent mutually exclusive approaches to the problem?

Are we really prepared to live in the world we seem to be striving for in our arms control efforts? Do we really want to deny, to ourselves as well as to the Soviets, a credible nuclear

first-strike option? If so, it would seem that we need to rethink our whole concept of national security: What are our vital interests, and what is our strategy to secure them?

As we prepare to wrap up our concerns about strategic nuclear warfare in the paper of arms control agreements, to put them away on the shelf, and to free our attention for more important things, do we dare to let thoughts of first-strike counterforce capabilities out of the closet? I hope so, for they touch the very heart of why nations have and will bear arms, from the spear to the atom.

