

United States Strategy in a Changing World

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Herman Kahn invented the phrase “thinking about the unthinkable” in thinking about nuclear strategy. To help him think about such things, he employed the device of “surprise free” foundations, which combined core themes with different variations. In this essay, I address several core themes in the future of United States strategic policy. But I do so with some trepidation. Limitations of space forbid the elaboration of variations. And anyone projecting anything that rests on “surprise free” foundations amid the fundamental changes taking place in the world today must appear as utterly foolhardy, if not downright foolish. Let me state at the outset, therefore, the single-most important factor in determining the future of United States strategic policy: future actions by the Soviet Union.

Among Western students of the cold war, there exists what John Lewis Gaddis has called “the post-revisionist synthesis”.¹ Roughly speaking, the synthesis goes something like this. At the outset of the post-war era, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a serious security di-

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lemma that would have been difficult to manage under any circumstances. As a result, each undertook some offensive actions for what might have been legitimate defensive reasons; each undertook defensive actions that were misinterpreted by the other side as being offensive in character; and to some extent each simply behaved opportunistically, seeking to gain an advantage over the other. On the American side, the Baruch Plan for atomic power sharing, the Marshall Plan, the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the development of the hydrogen bomb all have been cited by scholars to illustrate one or another of these tendencies. But all the same, as the distinguished British diplomatic historian Sir Michael Howard concluded: "One of the most remarkable aspects of this whole period is the astonishing *stupidity* of Soviet policy".²

The United States rapidly withdrew and demobilized its forces; it slashed its military expenditures; it rejected repeated entreaties by several Western European States to join them in bilateral alliances; and it pursued a strategy of "economic security": providing the Europeans with the economic wherewithal to take care of their own security needs.³ Even George Kennan's original concept of containment lacked any significant United States military dimension.⁴ Yet, and as if on cue, virtually every time the United States Government faced a critical decision on whether and how to alter its posture *vis-à-vis* Europe, moves by the Soviet Union hardened the American position: the Iranian crisis; the rigged elections in Poland; the Moscow Foreign Ministers meeting; the Czech *coup*; the Berlin blockade; the outbreak of the Korean War. By the time this cycle had run its course, NSC-68 defined United States strategy as one of containment, the United States was back in Europe, the United States defence budget had increased threefold—over serious doubts raised by the Department of Defense!—the part of Germany that was allied with the West was remilitarized, and foreign policy

discourse in the United States became warped for a generation. In the world of a John Le Carré novel, Stalin's leading foreign policy adviser no doubt would be cast as a Western mole, put in place by rabidly anti-communist, militarist elements from the hardest core of the American right.

In the era of Soviet "new thinking", one would not expect such a pattern to repeat itself. In point of fact, recent reforms in the Soviet Union and the seismic changes that have swept through Eastern Europe have made a reorientation of United States strategic policy possible. But if progress is to continue, sooner rather than later, real reductions in nuclear and conventional forces will have to be successfully negotiated, Soviet tanks and large intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) will have to start rolling off the assembly lines in much smaller numbers, ways will have to be found to transport and house Soviet Warsaw Treaty troops back home, despite housing shortages and limited availability of rolling stock, and Soviet new thinking will have to reach places as far away as Cuba and Angola.

Those, in brief, are some of the main parametric conditions of the "surprise free" developments discussed below. But first a baseline.

The NATO Summit

NATO has been the centre-piece of United States national security policy since 1949, consuming over half of the total United States military effort. The July 1990 NATO summit affords a glimpse of official United States and other Western thinking about the future of the Alliance.⁵ The future promises to be quite different from the past.

Of paramount importance are proposed changes in the two corner-stones of NATO doctrine: forward defence and flexible response. The reduced forward presence is to be coupled with the fielding of smaller, restructured, and increasingly multinationalized forces, and lead eventually to

more limited conventional offensive capabilities altogether. The abandonment of flexible response reduces nuclear forces to “truly weapons of last resort”, and is linked to “a significantly reduced” role for short-range nuclear forces.

The communiqué also contains several confidence-building measures. Chief among these are a proposed joint declaration of non-aggression with members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and a pledge that NATO members “will never in any circumstances be the first to use force”. In addition, Soviet President Gorbachev and representatives of other Eastern and Central European countries were invited to address the NATO Council, and all members of the Warsaw Treaty Organization were encouraged to establish regular diplomatic liaisons with NATO countries and to intensify military-to-military contacts with NATO.

Specific measures to expand the role of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) were also proposed. These include more regular consultations among member Governments, more frequent review conferences, the creation of a secretariat, the establishment of a centre for the prevention of conflict, and an inter-parliamentary body.

The conclusion by year's end of a treaty on conventional forces in Europe (CFE) was urged, along with a simultaneously negotiated package of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). Follow-up talks limiting military manpower levels were proposed and, significantly, the issue of a unified Germany's force levels was put on the table.

Finally, the purpose of NATO beyond the era of containment was alluded to: “. . . it must continue to provide for the common defense. . . . Yet our Alliance must be even more an agent of change. It can help build the structures of a more united continent”

Politically, the summit was well received, not only in the Western countries, but also in the Soviet Union, President

Gorbachev expressed interest in accepting NATO's invitation to have a dialogue with its Council. And Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, while cautioning that words always had to be corroborated by deeds, nevertheless felt that "the decisions adopted move in the right direction and pave the way to a safe future for the entire European continent".⁶

The future posture of the Soviet Union is not irrelevant to the question of whether these words will produce corresponding deeds. The words assume a continued Soviet commitment to the path of reform and peaceful change. Beyond that, continued Soviet opposition to, or unacceptable conditions imposed on, the membership of united Germany in NATO is one factor that could derail progress.⁷ Another is the failure to reach a successful CFE accord this year. If nothing else, the continued erosion of the Warsaw Treaty Organization as a military alliance makes the entire logic of alliance-to-alliance negotiations increasingly problematical. Any alternative that one can think of is infinitely more cumbersome, more time-consuming, and therefore more prone to failure than the present format.

But translating the words of the NATO summit communiqué into deeds is potentially only the beginning of what could be a very far-reaching process indeed to undo the legacy of forty-five years of vicious cycles and to turn them into more virtuous ones. What is the outer range of the possible, as of now, in future United States strategic policy? A brief synopsis follows.

Further Possibilities

Any comprehensive foreign policy design rests on a strategic concept. In the post-war era, the guiding concept for the West was containment. A new concept, or set of concepts, must now be evolved.

Europe

The most attractive successor vision that has become possible for Europe is a united Europe—not some supra-national federal scheme, which is impractical and which few want, but a Europe with overlapping political frameworks, economic institutions, and security structures, ensuring economic well-being together with political stability and peaceful change. This would be a Europe with a twenty-first century institutional architecture—not a Europe of the unpredictable and destructive shifts of traditional balance-of-power politics, nor of the frozen stability provided by fear of mutual annihilation.

This new Europe has the European Community (EC) as its undisputed anchor. A novel if modest form of political union will emerge within the EC before the end of the decade, and pan-European economic ties will emanate outward from the EC. The European Free Trade area (EFTA) already forms a contiguous zone, and trade-related barriers between the two will continue to be removed. Numerous association agreements with countries beyond EFTA already exist, and there is nothing that the newly liberated Central and Eastern European countries want more than to be tied more closely to the EC.

If the twentieth century has taught us anything about collective security organizations, however, it is that one cannot simply jump from here to there; one cannot simply will them into existence, no matter how strong the will or how good the intentions. They have to be constructed step by step, even organically. And here the new NATO has a critical role to play.

The new NATO looks very much like the original NATO, the pre-Korean War NATO, whereby the United States provided a guarantee to European security efforts. And so it should be, because the conditions enabling the original design to work now exist, while the forces that undermined

it have been swept into history's proverbial dustbin.

In the future, NATO conventional forces in a united Germany are likely to be dramatically reduced. The necessity of their presence to prevent invasion being dubious, they would come to be seen as an occupation force on German soil. The multinationalization of NATO conventional forces announced at the NATO summit at least in part speaks to the same issue.⁸ Negotiations for overall national ceilings will be conceptually difficult but can claim success if they do little more than provide a forum with which united Germany can make multilateralized reductions. And the idea of non-offensive defensive postures for the reduced conventional forces will continue to receive rhetorical and even moral support, though its practical configuration remains elusive and hence its significance unclear.

NATO nuclear forces in united Germany are sure to become an object of domestic political contestation there. Two options are available. First, such forces should become incorporated into a more Europeanized deterrent structure—presumably with France and the United Kingdom at its core, some form of German involvement, and a link to the United States. The other is a “third zero”—the mutually negotiated elimination of all short-range nuclear systems, not merely artillery shells. The former certainly would advance the cause of European integration, but the latter seems more plausible.

What would be expected of the United States in this scheme of things? Intelligence and communications facilities to provide early warning of any potential future attack on Western Europe; a network of bases and stockpiles that could be remobilized on relatively short notice; small numbers of ground forces—no more than 50,000-65,000 are required—to staff these and help provide highly mobile conventional support, especially in European peripheral areas; and a residual theatre nuclear deterrent, in the long run probably based largely on submarines.

There have been repeated suggestions, in both the United States and some Warsaw Treaty countries, that at least one or two of the latter, and perhaps the Soviet Union itself, at some point might be invited to join a revamped NATO. At this point that idea still seems far-fetched. Pan-European security ties are more likely to be created via the CSCE. Indeed, it will be a major accomplishment for the CSCE, even in the medium term, to realize the new roles recommended for it by the NATO summit, let alone to turn itself into a more fully fledged organization for conflict resolution and dispute settlement.

Insisting that NATO be dissolved because the Warsaw Treaty Organization is dissolving, and that both be replaced directly and immediately by a European security organization, be it CSCE or some other mechanism, would leave Europe roughly where the creation of the League of Nations left the entire world in 1919—nowhere it should have wanted to be, as subsequent events showed.

Asia-Pacific

The year 1989, and 1990 thus far, have belonged to Europe. However, President Gorbachev's hastily arranged June 1990 San Francisco meeting with President Roh Tae Woo of the Republic of Korea reminded us that there exists another "theatre" in which the cold war drama has been played out, the Asia-Pacific region. And the story line in that theatre has not yet reached the point of suggesting happy endings.

In Asia-Pacific, there is no EC and no NATO to resolve the multitude of local security dilemmas—as has been accomplished in Europe with Franco-German relations, the source of so many past conflicts. There is not even an equivalent to the CSCE. The centre-piece of United States strategy in Asia-Pacific remains its defence treaty with Japan. United States troops stationed in the Republic of Korea, together

with a string of military bases, of which those in the Philippines are the most critical, round out the infrastructure of United States extended deterrence in the region.

A complex of problems plagues this region. Chief among them is that the United States–Japan defence treaty has become so anachronistic that it provides but an artificial and therefore fragile stability. It continues to treat Japan as a client State at a time when Japan has become the world's leading financial power, at a time of intensifying United States–Japanese economic disputes, indeed, when Japan's military expenditures already are the third highest in the world. The precipitous dismantling of the United States–Japan defence treaty, however, most likely would trigger a series of arms races in the region, fuelled by a global weapons industry that is characterized by numerous new entrants and surplus capacity, leaving all in the region worse off than they are now. Thus the treaty must be changed in a way that acknowledges Japan's status without, at the same time, threatening its neighbours.

The Korean peninsula retains its place as a potential fuse of major conflict. United States policy changes have been marginal, Soviet signals have been mixed and confusing, and the ability of either to control its respective ally is much diminished. Elsewhere, the intractability of the Kampuchean conflict affects all of South-East Asia. China remains preoccupied with its coming succession struggle, so that anyone trying to play a China card today draws the joker in the deck. And if the cold war has ended in the North Pacific, the two super-Powers have neglected to inform their respective navies.

In sum, whereas the potential clearly exists in Europe to move beyond balance-of-power politics, in Asia-Pacific a reasonably stable balance is the best one can hope to achieve. Even that will require restraint and imagination all around. A Helsinki-like process for the region is urgently needed.⁹

Given the complete absence of collective conflict management mechanisms in the history of the region, coupled with the presence of long-standing bilateral antipathies, the most logical place to start is with bilateral discussions of confidence-building measures by the United States and the Soviet Union. The mandate of and participants in such discussions gradually could be expanded. Confidence-building measures in time might lead to discussions of arms control and finally to restraints on forces.

Strategic Nuclear Forces

Throughout the cold war, the United States strategic nuclear arsenal has stood behind these two regional containment frameworks as the ultimate deterrent against actual war. Today, the United States and the Soviet Union are lumbering towards a strategic arms reduction, or START, agreement. When the negotiations were first undertaken, the agreement portended an epoch-shaping event; now it will be an event only if it is not reached or, for some reason, fails to get ratified. One reason for the altered attitude is that the issue of strategic nuclear forces has been overshadowed by fundamental changes in the very geopolitical factors that were assumed to be constants. Another is that START will not deliver as much as was promised—and far less than it would be possible to achieve.

Below, I briefly address what may become possible down the road. In doing so, no attempt is made to review every scheme for the future of strategic nuclear weapons that has been advanced, including their outright abolition. I limit myself to three scenarios that certainly differ from the *status quo*, but also have the virtue of just possibly becoming “doable”.

START may be—and should be—the last super-Power strategic arms control effort driven by concern with numbers. The average citizen seems to grasp much more firmly than

many strategic specialists have done the existential irrelevance of whether the two sides can destroy each other ten, twenty, or thirty times over—and that a reduction from thirty to twenty, say, makes no one more secure.¹⁰ Future negotiations should be driven by doctrine, from which numbers can then be derived.

Sufficient deterrence. One candidate for a central doctrinal role is the notion of “minimum deterrence”—though I would prefer a term like “sufficient deterrence”, because once this discussion reaches the public the term “minimum” is sure to be construed as “just barely enough”, in turn implying that more would be better—at which point we would be right back where we started from: with outcomes that range, in Stanley Hoffmann’s apt description, “from mediocre to miserable”.¹¹ What does “minimum” or “sufficient” mean? Definitionally, it means the lowest level required for a secure retaliatory strike, thereby deterring any first strike. Views obviously differ as to precisely where that threshold lies. But according to serious analysts who favour a move in this direction, its upper bounds seem to be somewhere around 3,000 warheads, assuming *no* change in current approaches to targeting.¹² A mutual reduction to 3,000 warheads in itself would be radical; relaxing “efficiency” ratios assumed in current targeting strategies, or changing those strategies altogether, would bring the levels down further still.

At very low levels, a number of very big problems appear that do not matter much at the present levels, some of which are poorly understood. Force configuration and survivability are crucial; reliability is crucial. Precisely how any of them would work remains to be determined. It does seem clear that strategic defences would destroy any hope of moving toward “sufficient deterrence” at very low levels. And, insofar as utmost transparency and early warning would be the central nervous system of such an arrangement, anti-

satellite weapons would undermine it. Finally, the levels of nuclear forces possessed by the secondary nuclear Powers presumably would become a factor at some point.

But of paramount importance to the success of “sufficient deterrence” at very low levels is the ability of the two sides to believe one another. In part this is a technical problem, to be dealt with by necessarily intrusive verification mechanisms. In part it is also a confidence-building issue, of encouraging dialogue between strategic specialists and military planners on the two sides—much as the NATO summit encouraged diplomats and soldiers to do. In the final analysis, however, it comes down to reputation. Accordingly, if the Soviet Union wishes to encourage movement in this direction, the sooner any further treaty-violating radar installations, misplaced INF missiles, or mysterious outbreaks of anthrax are discovered, the better.

Virtual Deployment. A more ambitious doctrinal change, which has been proposed by a group of United States defence specialists, is for United States policy to move away from the deployment assumption, that is to say, the expectation that every research and development (R&D) programme will or should yield a deployable weapon system.¹³ The argument is made that the reduced international threat, the increase in transparency and warning-time available, force reductions, and budgetary declines, all suggest that the intrinsic deterrent value of R&D itself be exploited more effectively. “Virtual” deployments consist of weapons programmes that are researched and developed to the point where the weapons systems *could* be deployed within some specified but significant period of time. The aim would be to deter not only attack from the other side, but also *deployments* by the other side, by demonstrating the capacity to match them, and thereby in principle preventing weapons systems from being built in the first place. A mix of deployed and virtually deployed systems is foreseen.

What makes this proposal worthy of consideration, apart from its intrinsic merit, is that economic necessity to some extent will push in its direction. The doctrinal change, then, becomes the self-conscious articulation of a virtue that necessity may produce.

Co-operative Deterrence. Finally, a still more far-reaching doctrinal change would be a move towards what Michael May has termed “co-operative deterrence.”¹⁴ This also envisions United States deployments of a small number of highly survivable nuclear forces. But here they would be exercised under the aegis of co-operative security structures. An example would be a European body to which the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union, as well as other European nuclear and non-nuclear States, would belong. The criteria for membership would be a willingness to guarantee each other’s borders, to set force levels by agreement, and a prior commitment to respond to aggression.

The most plausible locale for such a scheme would be in Europe, as May suggests. However, the nuclear forces that would most plausibly have fallen under the aegis of such an arrangement, in my view, would have been intermediate-range forces, which have been eliminated, and short-range forces, which I expect soon will be. The scheme seems much more difficult for strategic forces.

The United Nations

The Soviet Union under President Gorbachev has discovered the United Nations. This inevitably raises the question whether the United States will rediscover it. The answer perforce is long and complicated. Here I limit myself to two brief remarks that relate to the subject of this paper.

From the vantage point of the United States security policy, probably the most important issue to which the United Nations could make a contribution is in restraining the frightful proliferation of weapons in the developing

world: increasingly unconventional “conventional” systems, chemical weapons, ballistic missiles with chemical warheads, and, of course, nuclear weapons. The United Nations system has aided substantially in some of these areas, especially in the form of the nuclear non-proliferation Treaty and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. By and large, the arms control—or rather the “disarmament”—efforts of the United Nations have been preoccupied with the super-Powers, with weapons of mass destruction possessed by the so-called “first and second worlds”, and even with the verification of arms control agreements between them. This is all well and good, and is said to express the moral concern of the international community. It should be noted, though, that the probability of the super-Powers conducting a nuclear exchange, employing poison gas, engaging in the genocidal extermination of one another’s—let alone their own—populations, or merely firing a shot at each other in anger, is infinitesimal compared to those same events occurring among and within developing countries—indeed, some of the more egregious of these offences already occur there. But that fact seems somehow to evoke among the majority of the Members of the United Nations neither the moral concern nor the desire to involve the international community with even remotely comparable fervour. So long as the United Nations persists with this pattern, its utility and standing in the domain of global security, at least as viewed by the United States, will remain limited.

Secondly, only now that the cold war has unravelled do we appreciate fully how important institutional frameworks are to manage change. Recall the difference in this regard between Europe and Asia-Pacific. The United Nations could and should do more to enhance the prospects of regional security, not merely by missions by the Secretary-General before wars break out and by peace-keeping troops when they are over, but by helping to facilitate the emergence

within regions of the institutional processes and mechanisms, confidence-building measures, and collective experiences that would make regional conflict management a more viable proposition in the future.¹⁵

Conclusion

An era in history is characterized not merely by the passage of time, but also by the distinguishing attributes that structure people's expectations and imbue daily events with meaning for the members of any given social collectivity. In that sense, an era has ended in international relations. We cannot start entirely afresh; what comes before to some extent always shapes what follows. But the ruptures we are experiencing do allow us to move in different directions, some of which would have been—literally—unthinkable only a few years ago. I have tried to sketch out some of the new possibilities that relate to the core of United States strategic policy. Among other consequences of recent changes is the gradual redefinition of the very concept of security itself, to encompass economic dimensions and to some extent also environmental manifestations. But that will have to be a topic for another occasion.

Notes

- 1 John Lewis Gaddis, "The emerging post-revisionist synthesis on the origins of the cold war", *Diplomatic History*, 7 (Summer 1983).
- 2 Michael Howard, "Introduction", to Olav Riste, ed., *Western Security: The Formative Years* (Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1985), p. 14 (emphasis in original).
- 3 Robert A. Pollard, *Economic Security and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 4 John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982), chap. 2.
- 5 All references to the summit communiqué are to the text as published in *The New York Times*, 7 July 1990, p. 5.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Comments by Soviets on NATO.
- 7 In fact, starting from initially strenuous opposition, the Soviet Union has been moving progressively towards the position that its

interests and the overall geopolitical and economic stability of Europe are better served by German membership in NATO and by avoiding measures that would single out a united Germany for special (punitive) treatment.

- 8 I note in passing the implausibility of over 350,000 Soviet troops remaining in the eastern part of a unified Germany for any substantial length of time without triggering a highly adverse backlash.
- 9 See the useful discussion by Stuart Harris, "Architecture for a new era in Asia/Pacific", *Pacific Research*, 3 (May 1990).
- 10 For two superb works on this subject, one largely theoretical and the other more historical, see, respectively, Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1989), and McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, Random House, 1988).
- 11 "Do nuclear weapons matter?" *New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1989, p. 31.
- 12 Michael M. May, George F. Bing and John D. Steinbruner, *Strategic Arms Reductions* (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1988).
- 13 Ted Gold and Richard Wagner, "Long shadows and virtual swords: managing defense resources in the changing security environment", unpublished paper, January 1990, a summary of which appears in David Auerswald and John Gerard Ruggie, eds., *The Future of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy* (La Jolla, Cal., University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, 1990); and Leon Sloss, "A framework for thinking about nuclear forces", unpublished paper, 1 February 1990.
- 14 Michael M. May, "What do we do with nuclear weapons now?" *IGCC Policy Briefs*, No. 1 (July 1990), published by the University of California Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation. May is a former director of the Livermore weapons laboratory.
- 15 The Secretary-General's efforts in Central America may be a useful beginning.

