

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 10
Number 1 *Parameters* 1980

Article 15

7-4-1980

THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE

Philip W. Dyer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Dyer, Philip W.. "THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 10, 1 (1980). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol10/iss1/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE

by

PHILIP W. DYER

One of the features of international relations in the second half of the 20th century that makes the task of the analyst difficult is the fact that we live in two different worlds simultaneously. One, the conventional world of traditional weapons and policies, would be familiar to analysts of international relations from Thucydides onward. This is the world of approximately 150 separate and autonomous national actors, all struggling for advantage over their fellows and recognizing no authority greater than their own. It is a world of giants and midgets as diverse in population as the People's Republic of China and the Solomon Islands, and as diverse economically as the United States and Grenada.

It is a world well and poignantly described by Thomas Hobbes (referring to a different phenomenon, of course) that witnesses a struggle "of every man against every man."¹ It is a state of nature potentially more violent and grim than Hobbes ever supposed, where in the 20th century, especially, life for millions of people has indeed become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."²

It is also a world of geopolitical factors dear to the hearts of all authors of international relations textbooks. It is where natural resources, population base, economic strength, and technological proficiency are all relevant ingredients in something called "national power." It is where "heartlands" and "rimlands" were once relevant, and

where today alliances are balanced by opposing groupings and control of the seas is important.³

It is where one can still read Clausewitz with profit and learn that war is a continuation of policy "with an admixture of other means."⁴ Severed diplomatic relations, economic sanctions, ultimata, and force itself stretch across the continuum of options available to any nation in its struggle to preserve and enhance its own position.

In such a world, wars are not only possible but extremely likely. Since World War II more than 80 nations have fought conventional wars for a cumulative period of more than 350 years, killing 7 to 9 million people.⁵ The United States alone has actively engaged in warfare with varying degrees of success for over half of that period. Beyond the frightful toll in human life such wars have exacted is the enormous financial strain and depletion of resources caused by the wars and preparations for them. Again, since World War II the world has devoted almost \$3 trillion to armaments, with much of that money spent by nations many of whose citizens barely survive at a subsistence level. It is a world where these enormous sums are devoted to weapons conceived for their warfighting capability. It is where armies, navies, air forces, and reserve components are all significant contributors to a nation's power, prestige, and ability to influence events.

It is a world where international law and organizations have had only a limited impact on the management of force. It is where the United Nations for a brief period in the late 1950's and early 1960's began to emerge as a new actor on the international scene, when it looked for a while, at least, as if some alternative to the Hobbesian state of nature might emerge. It is an arena in which law becomes binding only if agreed to, judicial settlements are accepted only voluntarily, and no mechanism has yet been created for the establishment of consistent order.

It is a plane on which it is at least possible to discuss the morality of war, since there may well be ends or goals desirable enough to justify the killing of people within the framework of the just-war doctrine proposed by St. Augustine in the early part of the fifth century A.D.⁶

But, it is also the realm in which devotees of realpolitik from Thucydides to the present have stressed the right of the strong to use their strength in any way they choose. Or, in the frightful words of the Athenians in their dialogue with the Melians, it is a world where "justice is a question only among equals. . . . In international relations the strong do what they want and the weak suffer what they must."⁷ In short, it is the world of the nation-state and power politics; it has been with us for centuries and will be here with only slight changes long after we are gone. Thus, it is a familiar world and one international relations analysts often talk about without further distinguishing it from the other world.

However, there is another world—the world of nuclear weapons—that we have all become aware of since World War II, but have never become entirely comfortable with because many of its characteristics are unfamiliar and unsusceptible to the kind of traditional analysis we have grown used to. It is a world much more of Dr. Strangelove than Clausewitz, where the ultimate use of force might serve no rational policy. There are unfortunately few guidelines and little direct experience that we can draw upon in this murky region. Thus, like the medieval scholastics, contemporary nuclear strategists hurl logical arguments at each other in a vain

attempt to prove something in the empirical world by reason alone. Nuclear strategy acquires a metaphysical aura, though its practitioners would hardly look at it that way.

This world is a very recent one in human history, beginning 35 years ago for the US and 31 years ago for the USSR. Although there are other nuclear powers and their number continues to grow ominously, there are only two predominant actors in this world who possess enough destructive capacity to destroy possibly all human life on the planet. Because of the disproportionate strength of the two principal protagonists, alliances are of only marginal utility, while traditional power blocs are largely irrelevant. Either of the two countries, completely alone, without control of the seas, alliances, large conventional armies, or any of the other traditional ingredients of national power, can unleash a thermonuclear conflagration of such awesome intensity that its survivors might wish that they, too, had perished.

Neither nation, however, has been able to translate its incredible power into effective policy. Both have been insulted and humiliated by minor powers, often without being able to do more than simply protest. Their bargaining and negotiating positions vis-à-vis those of other nations are not noticeably enhanced by their nuclear power. Indeed, Third World countries often treat them with scorn. Like the overdeveloped weightlifter, they are so strong that their muscles frequently will not permit them to reach the flies on their backs. In short, all of their imaginative instruments of death cannot be effectively translated into decisive advantage in the more conventional world described before.

Even more surprising, it is a world where billions of dollars and valuable resources are devoted to weapon systems which will have failed if they are ever used. Generation after generation of ICBMs are developed, tested, deployed, and then stand silently in their silos over the years to be replaced by new ones, even more deadly, which follow the same pattern ad infinitum. In this country, at least, where we have never test-fired one from its

silos, we cannot even be totally sure that they would function if called upon. Our desperate hope is that we will never have occasion to find out.

Both powers recognize, although they do not like to admit it, that it is a world of deterrence but no defense. No matter how sophisticated the weapons become, no matter how many are deployed by one side or the other, each participant knows that it can be essentially destroyed by the other in less than an hour regardless of anything it can do. Unlike the conventional world we are more familiar with, there is no defense in this world. If deterrence fails, then life as we know it may cease to exist. This condition in international relations is unique. One of the primary values of the nation-state when it first arose over a millennium ago was that it provided for the safety and security of its inhabitants. While nations have, of course, frequently fought and lost wars since then, never before has an entire population been threatened by instant annihilation and known that there was nothing that could be done about it.

On the positive side, it must be noted that this world has been one of peace since 1945, which was the first and last time these weapons were used in anger. Despite an occasional crisis in Berlin or Cuba, the two superpowers have never confronted each other to the point where ultimate force was involved. Since 1960 and the Soviet attainment of a second-strike capability, both sides have recognized that a thermonuclear exchange would destroy civilization and is therefore to be avoided at almost any cost.⁸ As a result, there have been significant agreements between the two superpowers in this area beginning with the 1963 Test Ban Treaty. It was followed by, among others, the Outer Space Treaty, Latin America Nuclear Free Zone, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Seabed Treaty, ABM Treaty, SALT I, Threshold Test Ban Treaty, Peaceful Nuclear Explosions Treaty, and most recently the clouded SALT II agreement. This impressive array of agreements and treaties demonstrates that both powers have become increasingly aware of the limited utility of the

weapons and are, therefore, willing to see them controlled. Thus, while relations between the two powers at the conventional level are still marked by abrasion, competition, and struggle for advantage, at the ultimate level for the past 17 years they have been marked by limited cooperation, accord, and a mutuality of interests. This phenomenon introduces an element of stability into international relations that augurs well for the continued existence of peace. Ironically, what rational man through appeals to a common humanity has been unable to attain through millennia may now be the end product of his technology of destruction.

Such a condition might continue indefinitely, with as much stability as any human process can offer, were it not for the existence of a potentially destabilizing technological development that has skirted the fringes of both worlds for the last 30 years—the invention and deployment of Tactical Nuclear Weapons. Admittedly, the continuation of peace for that period, with no use of these weapons, might be an argument against considering them destabilizing, but the fact remains that the TNWs presently positioned in Europe introduce an element into the nuclear equation whose issue is difficult to predict. While we are somewhat

Lieutenant Colonel Philip W. Dyer, USAR, is a Professor and Vice Chairman of the Political Science Department of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. He is also an instructor with the 5049th USAR School, in Omaha. Colonel Dyer received his baccalaureate degree from Columbia University and earned the Ph.D. at Indiana University's Russian and East European Institute. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College and National Defense University. Colonel Dyer was an Assistant Professor at Drury College (Missouri) from 1966 to 1969, and has taught at the University of Nebraska since then. Colonel Dyer has written widely on the subject of tactical nuclear weapons, his latest being the article, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," in the Summer 1977 issue of *Political Science Quarterly*.



confident of our analysis of actions and reactions in the conventional world, and while we recognize the potential for catastrophe in the thermonuclear world, our knowledge of what happens in the in-between world of TNWs is dangerously deficient. In fact, TNWs represent an ominous link between the two worlds that may be better left unconnected if we are to avoid ultimate war. Even worse, the US may find itself having to use these weapons *first*, thus raising more serious moral questions than would be offered by a strategic exchange in which its use of the weapons would be in retaliation to a Soviet first use of such weapons.

Before developing this argument, however, it is necessary to glance briefly at tactical nuclear weapon systems and their development to properly appreciate their potential threat. The idea that atomic weapons could be configured in a variety of forms apparently occurred to J. Robert Oppenheimer sometime in the late 1940's. With the Soviet development of the atomic bomb in 1949, our stalled atomic weapons program was rejuvenated.⁹ Oppenheimer and most of the General Advisory Committee to the Atomic Energy Commission urged the development of TNWs, while Dr. Edward Teller and others pushed for the development of the H-bomb.¹⁰ The advent of the Korean War accelerated both programs, with the result that both weapons were eventually developed. By 1953 atomic shells and the guns to fire them were in Europe, and the US had begun its long and costly attempt to compensate for NATO's supposed inferior manpower with the increased firepower of TNWs. Over the years these weapons have been progressively improved and updated in an effort to keep NATO strong. Ironically, the weapons have never received more than lukewarm support from the Europeans themselves, the people they were theoretically designed to protect.¹¹ More recently, speculation on the neutron bomb and other forms of enhanced radiation weapons has brought this subject once again to public consciousness.¹²

Presently, more than 7000 TNWs are positioned in Europe; NATO, at least in

theory, has incorporated the weapons into the defense of its territory. The weapons vary enormously in both range and destructive capacity. On the lower end of the scale are 155mm and 8-inch howitzer projectiles that can be fired from both towed and self-propelled weapons. The nuclear shells for these weapons have been engineered to fit conventional artillery pieces without modification, thus making all 600 or so of these weapons presently in Europe nuclear-capable. The range of the weapons extends up to approximately 25,000 meters, and the yield varies from less than one kiloton (kt) to more than 10 kt. The second level of ground-launched weapons comprises the Lance and Pershing missiles, which have ranges of 3 to 80 and 110 to 450 miles, respectively, with yields of 1 to 100 kt and 60 to 400 kt.¹³ In addition, there are atomic demolitions of various sizes.

Tactical aircraft greatly increase both the range and yield of atomic weapons available to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe. The two principal weapon systems are the Air Force's F-4 and F-111, which have respective strike radii of 800 and 1700 miles and are each able to carry bombs that vary from .1 kt to 1 megaton.

Precisely what role do TNWs fulfill? This author has argued elsewhere that they do not in fact fulfill any rational role in either defense or deterrence.¹⁴ However, claims have been made frequently, especially by American planners, that the weapons serve a dual role. On the one hand, it is argued that the mere existence of the weapons in NATO deters the Soviets from attacking. If they fail in that role and the Soviets do attack, then it is suggested that the warfighting ability of the weapons will help the numerically inferior NATO forces stop the Soviet legions. Although both of these claims are in fact doubtful, for the purposes of this essay we shall assume that they are sensible positions.

The deterrent function of TNWs is in many ways similar to that of strategic weapons. No one, it is hoped, would willingly begin a war where such awesome firepower might be unleashed. However, American planners implicitly concede that the weapons might not

be as effective a deterrent as the strategic ones, since they frequently conjure scenarios in which the Red Army launches a surprise attack against NATO. Thus arises the frequent suggestion that NATO should increase its conventional armaments in order to present a more credible deterrent.

However, if the deterrent function fails, then the weapons would apparently be used to defend Europe. It is this second function, warfighting, that is especially disturbing. Given the diversity of the ranges and yields of the weapons, a war employing them would cause unprecedented damage and could easily escalate beyond the confines of the Continent. While there would probably be universal agreement on both sides that a nuclear weapon fired at an armored division in the open within five miles of the front line would constitute a tactical use of such weapons, agreement on definitions among American planners unfortunately breaks down as the possible targets become more ambiguous. Thus, an enemy corps headquarters near a city of 100,000 within 30 miles of the front might be tactical, but what about a transportation center 250 miles back? The three traditional criteria for distinguishing "tactical" from "strategic," i.e. nature of target, distance from battlefield, and size of weapon, rapidly dissolve as TNWs enter the picture. The NATO commander, for instance, has discretionary authority to employ weapons nominally designated as tactical but having the capability to obliterate the Soviet ports of Murmansk and Odessa under the mushroom clouds of one-megaton weapons. Surely the Soviets would not suffer the loss of major cities without some kind of nuclear retaliation on the American homeland. Admittedly, the point is not clear (very little is in this strange world), but it is at least a possibility that once the nuclear firebreak had been crossed there would be no logical stopping point subscribed to by both sides in the heat of battle until both sides had escalated to "wargasm."¹⁵ Even if that did not happen, one can only shudder at the thought of what Europe would look like after having been "defended" in a full-scale tactical nuclear war.

In the non-nuclear world of St. Augustine and others, war could be considered just if it satisfied certain requirements.¹⁶ Clearly, a country could use force to withstand aggression and to defend itself. Furthermore, force could be used to prevent a greater evil. Similarly, helping a country unable to resist a third country's aggression also seems to suggest a possible moral use of force. At the other extreme, clear wars of aggression for material gain such as a US invasion of Saudi Arabia to keep the oil flowing would probably present serious moral dilemmas to most Americans.

However, what about the case of a US tactical nuclear response to conventional aggression leading to a thermonuclear exchange that obliterated most life on this planet? Such a scenario is frightful but not unlikely as long as TNWs are positioned in Europe. An initial NATO conventional response to Soviet conventional aggression would undoubtedly be acceptable to most Americans, but escalation of the war from the familiar world of St. Augustine to the possible holocaust of Dr. Strangelove raises serious moral problems that many Americans have never adequately considered. The proposed first use of nuclear weapons of whatever destructive capacity opens up the potential for Armageddon that must be avoided at all costs. Since no one knows on either side what happens after atomic weapons are introduced into warfare in the modern day, it is reasonable to assume that the worst is possible. Because that outcome is so disastrous, and the only sure way to avoid it is to forgo the use of the weapons, TNWs should not be relied upon for their warfighting capability. Thus, from a moral perspective alone, setting aside questions of strategy and tactics, the US should divorce itself from a defensive posture that posits the first use of TNWs.

But, it might be argued, if NATO did not use the weapons there is a good chance that the Soviets would overrun Europe. Given present force levels, this is indeed a possibility. Such an outcome would clearly be a disaster of the first order. The destruction of political freedom in Europe as well as its loss to the West would be calamities without

parallel. However, would they justify the possibility of ending life as we know it on this planet? Political systems come and go, and as long as there is life there is a chance that even Soviet-style communism will pass from the scene.

How successfully would the Russians be able to occupy a hostile area of the world like West Europe, and how big would the army of occupation have to be? How could a country of 250 million people, even with a strong economy, successfully control over an extended period of time countries with more than 400 million people and even stronger collective economies? Obviously, I do not know the answer to such questions, but it seems at least arguable that Soviet military advances into West Europe would raise more problems for the Soviets than they would settle. If, on the other hand, the West's defensive actions precipitated a thermonuclear exchange that could destroy not only Soviet, but European and American civilizations as well, then it is hard to see on what grounds such a course of action could be justified.

It is especially difficult to justify such a policy when we consider that the West has the resources to prevent a successful attack by Warsaw Pact forces. It is nothing short of amazing that the NATO nations, with a combined population in excess of 500 million people, concede a numerical advantage in military manpower to the Soviet Union with a population of 250 million.¹⁷ Surely, if the threat is indeed as great as advertised, there is no sufficient reason why a half billion of the wealthiest, most technologically proficient people on earth cannot defend themselves without recourse to TNWs against a numerically and technically inferior people. The actual industrial and potential military power of the NATO nations far overshadows that of the Soviet Union. While it is certainly true that the Western democracies might not wish to devote as large a proportion of their resources to armaments as the Soviets, such a degree of sacrifice probably would not be necessary. NATO as a defending force would not have to match the Soviets man-for-man and tank-for-tank. A conventional defensive

army strong enough to deter the Soviets from adventurism or to defeat them should they launch a conventional attack could be substantially smaller than the offensive force. With each atomic artillery shell costing in excess of \$400,000, scarce monies could well be spent by the US on conventional weapons.¹⁸

That the West has conceded conventional superiority to the Soviets is attributable to one of two reasons. Either there is an enormous failure of will in the West, as Solzhenitsyn argues, and its civilization is so decadent that collapse is imminent anyhow, or the NATO nations of Europe do not really perceive the Soviets as a major threat. If the first is true, then there is probably little point in saying or doing anything—like the citizens of Rome in its final days, the West can only sit paralyzed and watch its civilization fall with or without a nudge from the Soviets. If the second is true, then there is all the more reason for the US to offer to remove the 7000 TNWs from Europe in exchange for an equivalent concession by the Soviets. Nuclear demilitarization of Europe would not only provide greater security, but it would also reduce the possibility of a theater war escalating to total thermonuclear war.

It therefore becomes essential that the US, after appropriate consultation with its NATO allies, take the initiative in arranging with the Soviets negotiations aimed at a mutual withdrawal of Tactical Nuclear Weapons from Europe, with accompanying commitments not to reintroduce them in the event of hostilities. The most likely framework for such negotiations appears to be the continuing Mutual Balanced Force Reduction talks between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Withdrawal of the TNW crutch might prove to be just the impetus needed for NATO to put its conventional forces on a sounder footing.¹⁹

NOTES

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 103.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
3. Early exponents of such concepts are, of course, H. J.

Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal*, 23 (No. 4, 1904), 421-37; and Alfred T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and its Effects Upon International Politics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900).

4. Karl von Clausewitz, *War, Politics and Power*, tr. Edward M. Collins (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), p. 255.

5. These figures were presented in a public lecture by Professor Alan R. Millett of Ohio State University on 14 February 1978 in Lincoln, Nebraska.

6. Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 154-72.

7. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 331.

8. Or, in the words of the Soviet 22d Party Congress: "The C.P.S.U. considers that the chief aim of its foreign policy activity is to provide peaceful conditions for the building of a communist society in the USSR and . . . to deliver mankind from a world war of extermination." See Dan N. Jacobs, ed., *The New Communist Manifesto and Related Documents* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 20.

9. For a detailed study of this period, see Philip W. Dyer, "The Decision to Make and Deploy Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A Case Study in the Foreign Policy Process" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1970).

10. Warner R. Schilling, "The H-Bomb Decisions: How to Decide without Actually Choosing," *Political Science Quarterly*, 76 (March 1961), 24-46.

11. Exercise "Carte Blanche" in 1956, in which NATO forces alone employed TNWs, resulted in 1,700,000 "deaths" among German civilians and 3,500,000 "injured." Cleaner and more flexible weapons today might cause fewer deaths, but is it realistic to assume that only NATO would use them?

12. See, e.g., William R. Van Cleave and I. T. Cohen, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons: An Examination of the Issues* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1978); Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons: European Perspectives* (New York: Crane, Russak, 1978).

13. The US at the present time is replacing the longer-range missiles with Pershing II's that have a range of 1000 miles. See "High-Level Lobbying for SALT," *Time*, 22 October 1979, p. 37.

14. Philip W. Dyer, "Will Tactical Nuclear Weapons Ever Be Used?" *Political Science Quarterly*, 88 (June 1973), 214-29; and "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," *Political Science Quarterly*, 92 (Summer 1977), 245-57.

15. The ambiguity of this world is nicely, though perhaps unintentionally, expressed in the following: "In the event of a conventional attack which cannot be held by conventional means, tactical weapons would be used by the West in very limited numbers. . . . *What happens next is not quite so clear and is believed to be still under study in the NPG* (Nuclear Planning Group of NATO)." (Bernard Burrow, *The Security of Western Europe* [London: Charles Knight, 1972], p. 64) (italics supplied).

16. Deane, p. 160.

17. Even if all the Warsaw Pact nations are added in, NATO is still superior. However, I do not think it is wise to add in Warsaw Pact armies and countries if the scenario is a clear aggression on the part of the Soviets against Western Europe. See Dale Herspring and Ivan Volgyes, "Political Reliability in the Eastern European Warsaw Pact Armies," *Armed Forces and Society*, 6 (Winter 1980), 286-90.

18. This figure, which is undoubtedly higher today, was used by Senator Stuart Symington several years ago. See *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Military Applications*, 93d Cong., 1st Sess., 22 May and 29 June 1973, part 2, p. 101.

19. This article does not consider other possible scenarios for the employment of TNWs, e.g. at sea or in limited wars like Korea, because other issues become involved, the analysis of which would expand the length unduly.

