

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 17
Number 1 *Parameters* 1987

Article 15

7-4-1987

NATO DEFENSE: NO NEED FOR BASIC CHANGE

David C. Hendrickson

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

Recommended Citation

Hendrickson, David C.. "NATO DEFENSE: NO NEED FOR BASIC CHANGE." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 17, 1 (1987). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol17/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.

NATO Defense: No Need For Basic Change

DAVID C. HENDRICKSON

© 1987 David C. Hendrickson

There is considerable conviction today that the military strategy which has sustained the Atlantic Alliance for the past generation has reached the end of its tether; that it is no longer adequate in the deterrence of Soviet attack, nor reassuring to the societies which continue to rely upon it. This belief that our traditional strategies have been deeply compromised—on the one hand by the growth of Soviet power, on the other by basic changes in the outlook of Western societies—has sparked a wide range of proposals for fundamental change. Some want to renounce the threat to use nuclear weapons first in the event of a Soviet conventional attack in Europe; others want to alter radically the bases of NATO's conventional strategy. Still others believe that the time has finally come to begin withdrawing American forces from Europe, that Europe must now assume a military and political role commensurate with its economic power. These proposals for fundamental change are not novel. They are variations on themes that have formed part of the American strategic debate since the foundation of the Atlantic Alliance in 1949. Some reach much further back in time, calling forth a vision of American security profoundly at odds with core assumptions of postwar American strategy.

The disparate remedies calling for fundamental change and the diagnoses stressing the inadequacy of current arrangements reflect views closely related to one another. Unless one can plausibly show that serious defects exist in current NATO strategy, the argument that it should be transformed necessarily appears much weaker. These defects, however,

have been greatly exaggerated. In spite of some perception of imminent collapse and the widespread calls for wholesale renovation, the edifice continues to stand. There has been no war in Central Europe since 1945, and the basic factors restraining either side from initiating one seem likely to persist for a long time to come.

Nuclear Strategy

Fundamental to the stability of the postwar order in Europe has been the existence of nuclear weapons. In all likelihood, there would have been no war in Europe between the United States and the Soviet Union had these weapons never been invented—so sturdy are the other factors supporting the postwar order—but their existence on a progressively larger scale on both sides of the Iron Curtain has induced a remarkable caution in their possessors. This fact is no longer as widely appreciated as it once was; indeed, it was progressively forgotten in the midst of the alarm created by the Soviet strategic buildup of the 1960s and 1970s. For the most widely drawn lesson from that buildup was that the achievement of Soviet nuclear parity had “neutralized” the American nuclear arsenal, and had thereby given the Soviet lead in conventional forces a significance it had not previously had. The first use of American nuclear weapons in response to a Soviet conventional attack, in this view, had become either utterly incredible or unbelievably dangerous. As such, the critics argued, it could neither contribute to deterrence nor any longer form the underpinning of American security policy.

The denigration of the deterrent role of nuclear weapons rests upon a curious combination of assumptions. We are told, on the one hand, that nuclear weapons would never be used, that the threat to use them is sheer bluff and therefore can no longer form the basis of a credible deterrent. On the other hand, we are asked to believe that any use of nuclear weapons, on however limited a scale, would rapidly lead to their unlimited use. Both analyses force the conclusion that the United States ought to move away from reliance on nuclear weapons. Yet in their estimate of the passions to which a war between the superpowers would give rise, these two analyses are inconsistent. The former analysis assumes that a conflict between the superpowers would be dominated on the American side by the fear of the consequences to which escalation would lead, that we would surrender

Dr. David C. Hendrickson is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Colorado College. He received a doctorate in political science from Johns Hopkins University in 1982. Dr. Hendrickson is the author of *The Future of American Strategy* (1987), *Reforming Defense: An Inquiry into the State of American Civil-Military Relations* (forthcoming in 1987), and (with Robert W. Tucker) *The Fall of the First British Empire: Origins of the War of American Independence* (1982).

rather than risk the suicide that a resort to nuclear weapons might bring. The latter analysis assumes that a conflict would follow the course of reciprocal action—sketched by Clausewitz in the First Book of *On War*—which leads combatants, in theory, to extremes: “If one side uses forces without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the first will gain the upper hand. That side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent toward extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war.”¹

Both of these analyses are implausible because they assume that one or the other of these imperatives would completely dominate in the event of a Soviet-American war. The dilemma of policy in the event of a Soviet attack, it is true, would be a terrible one; at the extremes, the choice is no doubt between “suicide and surrender.” Since the alternatives at either extreme are so horrific, though, it is far more likely that Western statesmen would seek a path of action that would somehow avoid both.

Only if Soviet leaders could with confidence assure themselves that our choice would be surrender would their initial attack satisfy the minimal requirements of rationality; but they have no basis for making this assumption. On the contrary, it is apparent that however large the initial strike—whether limited to a conventional attack on Western Europe or an unlimited attack on the nuclear retaliatory systems based in the continental United States, or something in between—the Soviet Union would have started something it could not finish. “Men must either be caressed or else annihilated,” says Machiavelli. “They will revenge themselves for small injuries,” he continues, “but cannot do so for great ones; the injury therefore that we do to a man must be such that we need not fear his vengeance.”²

Under the conditions existing today, in which neither side can disarm the other, this fundamental condition cannot be satisfied. Annihilation is impossible: vengeance is inevitable. That vengeance would be tempered by fear is certain; that the impulse to retaliate in some fashion deeply injurious to the other would be wholly overcome by fear is much less so. For surrender no less than escalation would carry with it profound dangers. The abyss exists on either side.

If the United States were to use nuclear weapons in the event of war, the choices then facing the Soviet leadership would all be very bad. It might be faced with the collapse of discipline within its field armies. The vaunted momentum of its offensive might be completely broken, perhaps irreparably. A retaliatory strike against NATO’s theater nuclear forces would not eliminate the American theater nuclear capability, much of which is not located in Europe at all. Worse, a Soviet retaliatory strike against NATO might cause enormous damage to the very prize the Soviets had sought to gain by resort to war. Any war that leads to the use of nuclear

*Strength of will at the moment of deep crisis
cannot be seen apart from the justice of the
one cause and the injustice of the other.*

weapons *by either side* on European soil would be fundamentally contrary to the interests of the Soviet state. For this reason alone the widespread assumption that the Soviet numerical superiority in theater nuclear forces has provided them with “escalation dominance” in a war of conquest appears fundamentally mistaken.

“Escalation dominance” and “strategic superiority” are ideas that should not be considered, as they often are, apart from the political objects of a war. Under conditions of nuclear parity, they inhere in the side maintaining a vital interest, not the side bent on a course of aggrandizement. The Russians enjoy escalation dominance if we contemplate a war launched by NATO to liberate Eastern Europe from the Soviet Empire. We enjoy strategic superiority in, and can therefore deter, a war launched by the Soviet Union to conquer Western Europe. Under conditions of mutual vulnerability, everything depends on political will, and the strength of that will at a moment of deep crisis or even in the face of war cannot be seen apart from the justice of the one cause and the injustice of the other—injustice being defined here in terms of the magnitude of the crime against the international order.

Nuclear deterrence—and the extension of deterrence on behalf of allies—has functioned successfully in the postwar era, and it promises to continue doing so for a long time to come because the will of the defender would be fortified by his knowledge that he is in the right and has no alternative but to resist. The potential aggressor inevitably fears this response. Because he covets what is not his own, he is drawn to the strategy of annihilation, which requires him to disarm the enemy and render him physically incapable of resistance. Under conditions of mutual vulnerability or “second strike survivability,” it is precisely this that he cannot do.

Put differently, there is a disjunction between Soviet strategic doctrine, with its emphasis on annihilation or forcible disarmament, and the nature of the world—between what the Soviets must do in order to win and what they can do in reality. So long as that disjunction exists, deterrence will almost certainly prove to be secure. Its successful functioning in the postwar era is not a fragile phenomenon; on the contrary, it is rooted in the very composition of man, which makes him recoil in fear from enterprises that carry absolute risks and that can promise, at most, only relative benefits.

For either of the superpowers to undertake this initial assault—knowing that it could not with any assurance control the ensuing dialectic of violence—is contrary to the very geometry of human nature.

The Allied Weights in the Balance

The significance of the nuclear revolution is not limited to the balance of power between the Soviet Union and the United States. Both Great Britain and France possess extensive nuclear arsenals and are engaged in substantial modernization programs—which, if completed, will provide Britain and France together with over 1000 nuclear warheads and ensure an arsenal capable of destroying every major city in the Soviet Union, as well as other targets, even after a Soviet first strike. The same logic that restrains the Soviet Union from attacking the United States restrains it also from attacking Britain and France. It therefore also serves to limit the plausible depth of a Soviet conventional attack in Central Europe to Germany and the Low Countries. It is customary to speak of a Soviet threat against “Western Europe,” but the existence of the British and French nuclear arsenals would almost certainly restrict the scope of a Soviet attack to the nonnuclear powers.

The ownership of nuclear arsenals by two of the European NATO members is reinforced by the absence of any nuclear capability among the non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact. The potential unreliability of non-Soviet Pact armies in an invasion of Central Europe is often stressed by defense analysts. That unreliability has many foundations. One is that Soviet rule in Eastern Europe continues to be—forty years after its imposition—of an unnatural character. The armies of Poland are utterly unreliable for the purposes of such an invasion; those of Czechoslovakia and Hungary are only marginally more reliable; and the leaders of East Germany, as of others, could be warned by the American government that if they were to participate in a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, American nuclear weapons might be employed on their territory. The unreliability of the East European divisions means not only that they are to be subtracted from the Soviet side in the bean-counts of forces. They are potentially agents of national liberation from the Soviet empire itself: if a Soviet attack against NATO were to go badly, the conditions would be far more favorable for an indigenous revolt in Eastern Europe than any which have existed over the whole of the postwar era—during which the Soviet Union has always succeeded in ruling by division and isolating the cancer of disobedience before it spread.

These factors are complemented by the difficulty the Soviet Union would have in efficiently organizing the productive capacity of the territory in Central Europe it sought to conquer. It would be all but impossible to do so if nuclear weapons were employed on a substantial scale on West German

territory. But even if one postulates simply a rapid conventional thrust to the Rhine, it is not easy to see how the Russians could channel the energies of the German people in a direction favorable to themselves in the aftermath of conquest. The digestion of Eastern Europe has been difficult enough. A prudent leadership will calculate that an adventure of this character might strip from Europe the veneer of civilization it has worn since 1945 and reawaken in the peoples of Central Europe their abundant reserves of black bile. Current circumstances make these peoples very unwarlike, but a Soviet invasion would fundamentally alter those circumstances, with wholly unpredictable consequences.

All these factors, it may be noted, have long characterized the European balance of power. They represent political and strategic considerations of the highest import. They are anterior, as it were, to assessments of the conventional balance of forces, because any conventional conflict would necessarily take place under the shadows they cast. Having marked the European balance of power for over a generation, they appear to have become permanent features of the strategic landscape. Their durability points to two aspects of the post-1945 order that distinguishes it sharply from the preceding half century of war and violence.

One is the absence in Europe of the kind of standing grievances that contributed so powerfully to the outbreak of war in 1914 and 1939. There has been, for the Soviet Union, no equivalent of Slavic nationalism or the Polish Corridor, no standing affront to the dignity of the Soviet state. The second difference is a far greater stability in the distribution of effective power. The years from the 1890s to the 1940s, by contrast, were characterized by extraordinarily rapid change in virtually all the indices of national power.

It was the instability arising from such change that underlay all the main developments in international relations from the 1890s to the end of the Second World War. It formed the central backdrop for the "new imperialism" at the end of the 19th century; the fears it generated contributed powerfully to war in 1914. And the disruptive instability caused by the unequal growth of power was of even greater consequence in the years that followed. "Nothing is so conducive to international violence," as F. H. Hinsley has written, "as the fears and appetites that breed on inequality and instability and on the knowledge that these things exist. There never were such fears and appetites, because there never was such instability between states, as prevailed between 1918 and 1945." Despite the widespread perception that we live in an age of rapid change, the historically minded observer will note that the most important features of the postwar balance of power have been distinguished by continuity and not change—a feature of the situation that seems likely to persist for a long time.³

The Need for Conventional Defense

This inquiry into the anatomy of deterrence should not be read as denigrating the value of conventional defenses. So long as the effort to build up such defenses is not accompanied by repeated expressions of nuclear self-denial, the prospective robustness of conventional defenses increases rather than decreases the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee and thus enhances the solidity of the postwar order. This is so because the capability of defending vigorously by conventional means reflects the same qualities of will and determination which are relevant in Soviet assessments of the probability of nuclear escalation. If deterrence fails, moreover, the ability to repel conventional aggression through conventional means would be manifestly superior to any strategy that required the use of nuclear weapons.

Whether NATO today enjoys the capacity to repel a Soviet conventional assault without recourse to nuclear weapons is a question to which there is no clear answer, for the relevant variables are large, and war, if it came, would be overwhelmed by "friction." NATO has three problems that are particularly worrisome. One is its vulnerability to strategic surprise, a difficulty likely to arise not from the absence of clear warning indicators of Soviet mobilization but rather from the unwillingness of Western statesmen to act upon indicators of potentially uncertain meaning for fear of actually bringing on the cataclysm they would be desperate to avoid.⁴ Another stems from the advantages that precision-guided munitions would afford the Soviet Union if, as we must suppose, it were to strike first in a European war. Whereas Soviet missiles and attack planes must strike primarily stationary targets, NATO's task is both to recover from such a Soviet strike and then to hit the moving targets of a Soviet blitzkrieg, a far more difficult undertaking.⁵ Finally, the line NATO must defend in Central Europe is characterized by a "disagreeable combination of frontal width and rearward constriction."⁶ Its forces lack substantial operational reserves to contend with Soviet breakthrough operations, and its lines of communication—running on the north-south line from the Channel ports to Germany—are vulnerable to Soviet interdiction.

These vulnerabilities do not mean that the Soviet Union enjoys overwhelming conventional superiority. Its forces are certainly more than adequate to repel an assault by NATO against the Pact: an offensive war against NATO, however, is quite another matter. It is doubtful that the 25 Soviet Category I divisions stationed in East Germany and Czechoslovakia have the numbers required for a decisive thrust to the Rhine. A successful standing-start attack would therefore require the use of Polish, Czechoslovakian, and East German units whose reliability under fire is doubtful, whereas the mobilization and movement into Eastern Europe of follow-on Soviet forces, most of which are undermanned reserve divisions, would be clearly observable to Western reconnaissance. In all probability,

*The Soviets face a clear choice
between surprise and mass. It would be
difficult for them to enjoy both.*

these divisions would require a long time to bring to combat readiness—far longer than the seven to 14 days allotted to them in many assessments. The Soviets face a clear choice, in other words, between *surprise* and *mass*. It would be difficult for them to enjoy both—despite the political obstacles NATO would face in mobilizing.

The most serious weakness of Soviet forces and one which the massive investment of resources is least capable of overcoming lies in the uncertain fighting ability and morale of the ordinary soldier. If these soldiers were to fight with the kind of commitment and skill that distinguished the Soviet military toward the end of the Great Patriotic War, the hordes would in all likelihood be unstoppable. But in an offensive war against NATO there would be no time for political indoctrination, and there are in any case limits to the lies that states can tell. If the initial offensives were not successful and the Soviets faced a grinding war of attrition, the reliability of the Soviet fighting man—an increasing number of which in coming years will be non-Russian—is by no means guaranteed. It appears likely that overt and unprovoked aggression against the West would make it difficult to maintain such morale in the event of reverses. This in part accounts for the extraordinary emphasis the Soviets place on achieving surprise and rapid victory. Moreover, Soviet forces in Eastern Europe—from the perspective of personnel management—are not well structured for a blitzkrieg-style attack against the West. The Soviet Category I divisions that would form the initial wave of an invading army are composed mostly of short-term conscripts with inadequate training and no experience with the sort of combat they would face in a war on the Central Front.

Estimates of the conventional balance have varied greatly in the postwar years. The widespread belief in the 1950s that the Soviet Union enjoyed overwhelming conventional superiority gave way in the 1960s to the more sanguine estimates of McNamara's whiz kids, who painted the Soviet military threat in far less ominous terms than had been customary. Another period of pessimism followed in the late 1970s with the collapse of detente, the extensive qualitative modernization and numerical buildup of Soviet forces stationed in Eastern Europe, and the dissipation of American conventional fighting strength in Vietnam. In the first half of the 1980s, the pendulum began to swing back again. Although it would be an exaggeration

to say that a sense of optimism about NATO's conventional prospects prevails among defense analysts, there is at least a greater appreciation of Western strengths and a more pervasive sense of inherent Soviet weaknesses.

Nor is the reevaluation of the conventional balance of power unrelated to events in the real world. The Polish crisis illustrated once again the precarious nature of the Soviet Union's hold over Eastern Europe, and Syria's crushing defeat by Israel in the air war over Lebanon cast doubt on the relative effectiveness of Soviet tactical air power. Of even greater importance has been the striking improvement in American forces committed to Europe. The US Seventh Army, badly afflicted in the late 1970s by the inadequacies of that era's All-Volunteer Force, is now a far more capable fighting force. The readiness and overall fighting capability of US air forces committed to Europe have also improved sharply. In truth, the Soviets face a formidable array of uncertainties in contemplating a war of aggression against NATO which they cannot with confidence overcome. They might lose badly, even if nuclear weapons were not employed.

In Sum, We Have Not Failed

Thus, there is little reason to accept the judgment that NATO is wedded to a force structure and strategy that are "doomed to be found wanting." The Russians lack both the opportunity and the motive to commit the crime of military aggression against Western Europe. The lack of motive, of course, is itself to be attributed partly to the absence of opportunity, which means that NATO must continue to modernize and keep ready the military forces—nuclear and conventional—that today render wholly unattractive the prospect of a Soviet invasion. The lack of motive, however, is also to be attributed to the fact that the political order which the Soviet Union would risk changing with a military invasion is one that by and large reflects its own interests. This order was not imposed on the Soviet Union, as the Treaty of Versailles was imposed upon Germany. On the contrary, it was the Soviet Union itself that imposed this settlement—an imposition bitterly opposed in the West because of its manifest injustice to the peoples of Eastern Europe. Russia's victory in the Second World War not only gave it a position in Europe unrivaled even in the days of the Czars. It also solved the security problem Russia traditionally faced on its western frontier from a united Germany—a fact of which the Soviets are well aware judging from all the absurdities in their press about German revanchism. To incur the colossal risks held out by an invasion of Central Europe in order to change what has by and large been a satisfactory arrangement simply doesn't add up.

The Soviet General Staff still cannot brief the Politburo, in Colin Gray's phrase, on a plausible theory of victory. It would have great difficulty doing so even if the assumption were made that the war would

remain conventional. The prospect that nuclear weapons might be employed by the United States, moreover, cannot fail to make the initial use of force appear deeply unattractive to even the most adventuresome leadership. From this one may deduce two tasks for Western policy: one is to recognize that the Russians wish to intimidate us; the other is not to be intimidated.

NOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 75-76. Compare Robert McNamara, "The Military Role of Nuclear Weapons: Perceptions and Misperceptions," *Foreign Affairs*, 62 (Fall 1983), 71-72.
2. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci, revised by E.R.P. Vincent, in *The Prince and The Discourses* (New York: Random House, Modern Library College Editions, 1950), p. 9.
3. See F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations Between States* (Cambridge, Eng.: University Press, 1967), p. 283. The most powerful recent statement of the underlying durability of the European balance is A. W. DePorte, *Europe Between the Superpowers: The Enduring Balance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).
4. See Richard K. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington: Brookings, 1982), esp. pp. 176-77. See also by Betts, "Conventional Deterrence: Predictive Uncertainty and Policy Confidence," *World Politics*, 37 (January 1985), 153-79.
5. See Neville Brown, "The Changing Face of Non-nuclear War," *Survival*, 24 (September/October 1982), 213.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
7. Samuel P. Huntington, "Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe," *International Security*, 8 (Winter 1983/84), 56.

Annual subscriptions to *Parameters* are available from the Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402. The current subscription cost is \$7.00 for domestic or APO addresses, \$8.75 for foreign addresses. Single copies are also available at a cost of \$4.50 for domestic addresses, \$5.63 for foreign addresses. Checks should be made payable to the Superintendent of Documents. Credit card orders may be placed by calling GPO at (202) 783-3238 during business hours.
