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# The Strategic Value of Conventional Forces

CARL E. VUONO

As the United States enters the decade of the 90s, we confront not only a revolution in the world order but also a proliferation of strategic thought. On television and in the columns of our major newspapers, new strategies seem to emerge daily, each professing to offer the final answer to the management of national security in this tumultuous era. Much of this debate rests on the assumption that the global strategy at the foundation of our nation's security for 40 years is no longer relevant to the times.

In this article, I want to lay out the lessons we should glean from our experiences of the past two generations and outline what I believe will be our single most significant national asset in preserving the peace and in shaping the future in the years ahead—our conventional forces. In this era of historic political ferment, we must approach the issues of national security with daring and imagination, as tempered by a realistic assessment of the nature of the community of nations in the years ahead.

## *The Lessons of the Past*

Forty years ago, with an implicit faith in the appeal of democracy, the United States set about the task of containing the expansion of the Soviet empire. In the beginning, we believed that the American nuclear arsenal was largely sufficient to deter Stalin from military adventurism on the continent of Europe. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the first use of nuclear weapons in war, conventional forces were thought to be relics of the past. Bernard Brodie, the dean of that early American school of nuclear deterrence, argued that “thus far, the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

As the Soviets acquired a nuclear capability of their own, however, ~~the equation became far more complex. It became less and less credible to~~ assume that the United States would seize the nuclear option as the sole and immediate response to aggression in Europe or anywhere else in the world. Indeed, soon after the advent of the nuclear age, Kim Il-sung's invasion of South Korea demonstrated the inability of strategic nuclear weapons to deter certain forms of aggression and reminded us of the enduring importance of maintaining capable, credible conventional forces to defend our interests and preserve the peace. In short, it became apparent that America's strategic nuclear umbrella would shelter us from only a portion of the deluge of challenges we would confront. Foes throughout the world doubted that the United States would use such weapons, and we proved them right.

Our task then became to extend the deterrent value of our military power—our conventional forces as well as our tactical and theater nuclear weapons—to regions of potential conflict where deterrence could not be assured by strategic nuclear forces alone. This concept of extended deterrence became embodied in the strategy of Flexible Response, a strategy that has been successful for nearly 30 years. Flexible Response moved away from an exclusive reliance on nuclear weapons. It recognized the necessity for powerful conventional forces to provide forward-deployed units with a genuine capacity to contain and defeat aggression without immediate and automatic escalation to nuclear war.

Ten years ago, Sir Michael Howard persuasively articulated this point. Referring to conventional forces, he said, "It is this warfighting capability that acts as the true deterrent to aggression and is the only one that is convertible into political influence."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Flexible Response has worked in Europe precisely because it has rested on the backs of American and allied soldiers on the ground, supported by air and naval forces, whose governments drew a line in the dirt and said, "No farther." These soldiers have constituted the steadily strengthening land forces that presented the Soviets with the prospect of protracted conventional war and the very real possibility of eventual defeat. It is this realization, more than the fear of nuclear war, that has served to temper and restrain aggressive Soviet designs.

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To be sure, deterrence has been buttressed by nuclear weapons—weapons that cover the spectrum from short-range systems that would instantly change the complexion of the battlefield to strategic weapons that would change the complexion of the world. But make no mistake, these weapons of mass destruction themselves depend upon conventional forces for their utility—for it is only at the top of an escalatory ladder that nuclear weapons achieve genuine credibility. And this ladder must rest on the solid foundation of capable conventional forces. As President Bush pointed out, “There are few lessons so clear in history as this—only the combination of conventional forces and nuclear forces has insured the long peace in Europe.”<sup>3</sup>

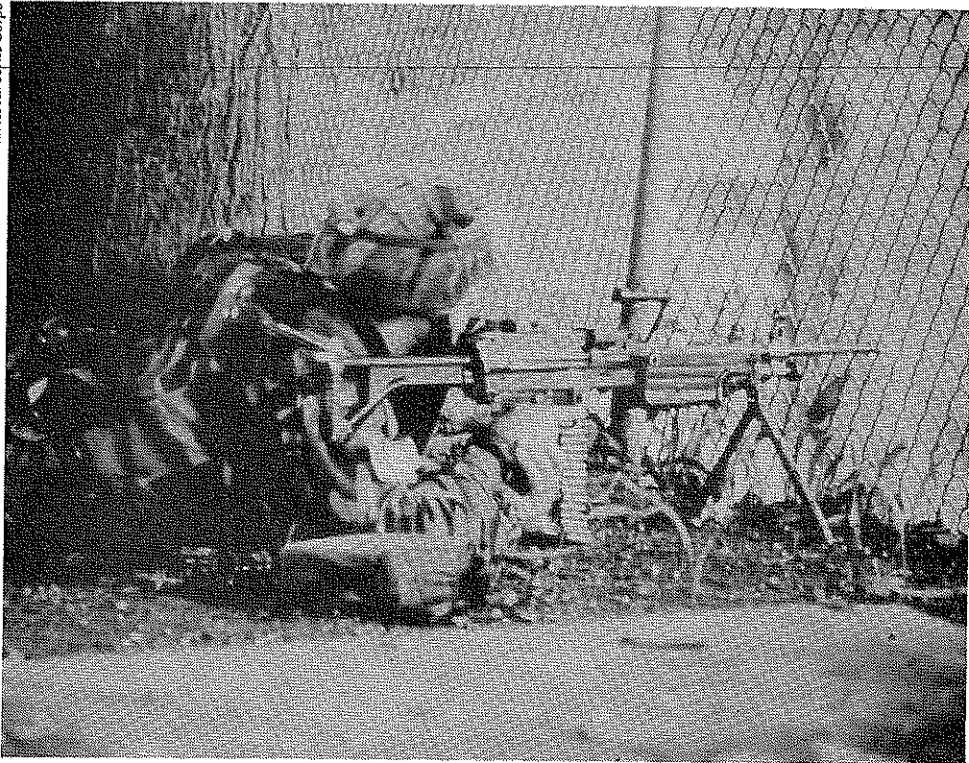
Through Flexible Response, the United States was successful in containing Soviet expansionism by making aggression a singularly unattractive alternative. Our conventional forces have thus been the basis for a seamless web of deterrence not only because of their linkage to our nuclear response but also because of their ability, in and of themselves, to punish an aggressor and to prevent him from achieving his objectives. And it has been our conventional forces that have bought the time necessary for the contradictions inherent in communism to bring the oppressive regimes of Eastern Europe to their knees.

The most important lessons of the postwar era can be summed up as follows. Since the advent of the nuclear age, the value of strategic nuclear forces has been limited to their passive ability to deter a Soviet attack. They are useful only when they are not used. It is equally apparent that the value of conventional forces has resided in our ability to employ them actively in a wide variety of peacetime tasks as well as in combat. They are useful when they are properly used. As we move into a new and uncertain future, neither theoreticians nor practitioners of national security can afford to ignore this fundamental difference.

### *Into the Future*

These lessons from the past are of more than academic interest. If we are to escape from the simplistic nuclear deterrence paradigm, then our salient experiences from history must now join hands with the emerging realities of the international environment to shape our vision for security in the 21st century and the ideal military force needed to realize that vision. For, despite the democratic resurgence in Eastern Europe, the world remains a dangerous place. As Paul Nitze recently pointed out, “We have won only a partial and uncertain victory.”<sup>4</sup>

We must remember that radical political change never occurs without great danger. Throughout history, we have seen that the collapse of mighty empires, the realignment of traditional power groupings, and the restructuring of individual nations are invariably accompanied by instability, armed conflict, and



**A soldier of the XVIII Airborne Corps provides a definition of “readiness” during Operation Just Cause in Panama, December 1989.**

human suffering. Events within the Soviet orbit reaffirm this lesson of history and show the potential for violence that lurks just beneath the surface as the Soviet empire struggles with cataclysmic change.

It may be that the turmoil can be confined to the Soviet interior and that it will not threaten the security of NATO. But we cannot operate under such an assumption. The United States must be prepared—politically and militarily—to defend our national and alliance interests by helping to anchor European security in what will surely be a time of enormous challenge.

At the same time, we must never forget that our security and, indeed, the very prospects for global peace depend upon factors extending far beyond the confines of Europe. Ongoing interstate rivalries, historic national conflicts, religious animosities, and the lust for economic and political power fester throughout the Third World. These potential sources of instability are fueled by the proliferation of sophisticated weapons—from modern tanks to poison gas to ballistic missiles—that can continue to threaten our vital interests.

Despite these mounting threats, and despite our experiences in two land wars in Asia, we have historically treated the developing world as politically marginal and militarily insignificant. Consciously or not, we have

kept the faith of Hilaire Belloc, who gloated at the turn of the century over the invention of the recoil-operated machine gun:

Whatever happens,  
We have got  
The Maxim gun  
And they have not.<sup>5</sup>

In the past 20 years, this time-honored boast has become obsolete; the “Maxim guns” of the 1990s are now in abundance throughout the world.

Our first hint of this new reality occurred in the Arab-Israeli conflicts of 1967 and 1973, during which we saw tank battles of a magnitude unparalleled since World War II and levels of destruction unprecedented in the developing world. Any lingering doubts about the military power of the Third World were erased by the Iran-Iraq War, characterized by large-scale tank engagements, heavy artillery duels, ballistic missile exchanges, poison gas attacks, and more than one million dead. Conflict in the developing world no longer presents us with business as usual. It is a new and expanding challenge that we must be prepared to confront. We also face the ongoing threat of insurgencies, guerrilla operations, international terrorism, and the trafficking in illicit drugs—collectively sometimes called low-intensity conflict. These can undermine peace and freedom as surely as more traditional sources of conflict.

Hence, even as we bask in the relaxation of East-West tensions, we must remain prepared to deal with the sizable military capabilities of a host of foes, both potential and acknowledged. We cannot ignore ten millennia of human experience on the basis of six months of revolutionary change. It is abundantly clear that the international environment of the 21st century will be no simpler, and possibly no safer, than the world of the Cold War. We cannot predict with certainty where or when the United States will be required to employ its forces in the future. But we can predict with certainty that if we ignore the lessons of history and fail to maintain forces to meet the challenges of tomorrow, future generations of Americans will pay for our irresponsibility with their treasure and possibly with their blood.

### *Strategic Conventional Forces*

In such an environment, we must recognize that the key to the defense of our vital interests in the next century will rest with our conventional forces—forces that can be adapted quickly to deal with the ever-widening range of challenges occasioned by an era of uncertainty and change of historic magnitude. The contributions to our national security provided by conventional forces are unique and cannot be replaced by our strategic nuclear arsenal, no matter how modern, how destructive, or how accurate it may be. To borrow from Herman Kahn, “thinking about the unthinkable” of nuclear war has become an art unto

itself—essential to the survival of the nation but of little practical utility in meeting the overwhelming preponderance of challenges that we will confront.

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As long as groups and nations continue to compete for land, resources, and political control of people, the words of historian T. R. Fehrenbach will continue to ring true:

You may fly over a land forever. You may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it, and wipe it clean of life. But if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did—by putting your young men into the mud.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, if the United States is to control the turmoil and exploit the opportunities that lie ahead, it must have powerful conventional forces and an Army that is second to none—a strategic Army with a global reach and a broad functional mandate.

Today, the expanding web of economic and political interdependence linking together the global community compels us to continue to exercise a leading role in that community. The archaic concept of Fortress America simply no longer has economic or military relevance for the United States. Indeed, we should have learned that bitter lesson from our nostalgic flirtation with isolationism in the interwar years. Our unwillingness to fulfill our role as a world power contributed directly to the largest war in history and cost humanity 50 million dead. In the 1990s and beyond, the United States must have the capacity to project land combat forces in the responsible exercise of power worldwide; we must be able to defend our interests wherever and whenever they are threatened.

More specifically, the United States must have conventional forces that can be tailored to respond to challenges across the operational spectrum ranging all the way from peacetime competition to major war. In peacetime, we must never lose sight of the fact that the American soldier—forward deployed or based in the United States—is our first echelon of strategic deterrence. When we put our forces on the ground, the power and prestige of our nation are fully committed. This is practical policy that has preserved peace in Europe and in Northeast Asia for two generations.

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The contributions of conventional forces during peacetime go far beyond deterrence. Our extensive cooperation with the armies of nearly 120 friendly nations, for example, is an effective and peaceful means of strengthening their capabilities to defend themselves. This is an option far preferable to deploying American Army units to protect our interests when a crisis is already underway. Security assistance programs—such as emergency supplies for Colombia to combat drug traffickers, medical aid for the Philippines, law enforcement equipment for Panama, and other efforts beyond number—are a sound investment in the future and often help to save lives.

Moreover, the Army participates actively in support of nationbuilding—assisting governments throughout the world to address common sources of internal conflict and instability. In developing nations, the US Army has worked alongside host armies to develop their abilities to build national infrastructures—the bridges, highways, schools, and clinics that are fundamental to alleviating human misery worldwide.

Furthermore, because of the political and social importance of armies in many countries, the US Army's professional contacts with them provide an important avenue of influence that might not otherwise be available. Indeed, the Army has helped scores of friendly governments to develop professional forces within the context of democratic values.

On yet another level, our conventional forces are among our most effective tools for enhancing political stability in the international order. US forces on the ground in Korea and elsewhere in Northeast Asia provide security and encourage stability, thus establishing the freedom to cooperate among such countries as Japan, China, and Korea, who have endured centuries of mutual antagonisms. And without our peacekeeping forces in the Sinai, the historic peace treaty between Egypt and Israel might never have come to pass. As we look to the future, American forces in Europe will continue to be essential in providing an anchor of stability as the winds of change rip through the continent—a reality recognized by Europeans of all political persuasions.

Finally, credible deterrence requires capable forces. Our forces must be trained and ready to fight and win as the ultimate guarantors of our nation's security on the battlefields of the future. As we consider the great issues of national security in this decade and beyond, we would be wise to heed the words of Plato, echoing over the span of 2500 years: "Only the dead have seen the end of war."

### ***Down the Road***

In the years ahead, our conventional forces will grow smaller as we adjust to a changing Soviet threat and steep budget reductions. Even as we respond to change, however, we must also maintain continuity—continuity of readiness and of capability that will protect the nation during an uncertain era.



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Regardless of their size, our conventional forces must possess three qualities that are essential to our security in the future: versatility, deployability, and lethality.

First, our conventional forces must be versatile—able to respond to a widening array of challenges, while drawing from the same reservoir of forces. For this nation, the key to versatility lies in our ability to orchestrate our conventional forces in joint operations—operations in which we exploit the unique capabilities of each of the services, pulling them together into force packages that are appropriate for the political purposes we are trying to achieve. In a complex world of multidimensional interests and multifaceted challenges, we can no longer deceive ourselves into believing that national security can be ensured by relying on any one service or any single military capability. Our conventional forces will fight jointly, or they will not fight at all.

Versatility also demands that we retain combat power in units forward-deployed in Europe, Asia, Central America, and in other areas where presence itself is appropriate to protect vital US interests. Moreover, we must have powerful forces based within the United States that are designed to respond to contingencies worldwide. And we must have the unquestioned capability to reinforce our forward-deployed units or our contingency forces with units from our active and reserve components. Finally, versatility requires that we maintain our active forces and our reserve forces in the proper proportion—a proportion driven by the missions we must execute, the timeliness requirements we must satisfy, and the quality we must maintain throughout the armed forces.

Second, our conventional forces must be deployable—able to project substantial combat power rapidly wherever our interests are threatened. Nathan Bedford Forrest is credited with reminding us that the Army that wins is the one that gets there “the fustest with the mostest.” In the last decade of the 20th century, this homely admonition remains as valid as it was more than 125 years ago.

Depending upon the threat, we may be required to deploy only a minor force, such as a carrier battlegroup or an AWACS detachment. Alternatively, it may demand a major joint operation, built around a contingency force of armored divisions to contend with an adversary that itself possesses a powerful arsenal of tanks.

It is no secret that our ability to project substantial land combat forces is decidedly inadequate—we simply do not have sufficient airlift or sealift to support our requirements under the quite conceivable contingencies that could realistically require US forces. But the solution to this dilemma does not lie in stripping our forces of their combat power; it would be folly to commit American forces to battle without giving them the wherewithal to fight and win. Instead, the deployability dilemma must be addressed in a comprehensive manner that looks at imaginative and affordable solutions to moving forces rapidly throughout the world. This must be the center of a major national defense effort.

Finally, our conventional forces must be lethal—lethal to bolster deterrence and lethal to ensure defense. Lethality demands modern weapons, tough, realistic training, and young Americans of character and ability who volunteer to fill our ranks. For if we are committed to battle, we will go to win, and we will do what we must to achieve victory. In the midst of our discussions about the future of our conventional forces, we must never lose sight of this single, overriding mission—to fight and win the wars of our nation.

### *To Conclude*

Forty-five years ago, the postwar nuclear thinkers broke new ground in the theory of the future of war. They had the intellectual courage to discard old dogma and look to an uncertain future with imagination and daring. Today, as we confront an equally uncertain era, we can be no less bold, no less imaginative, no less daring. We must have the courage to ask the tough questions and to reexamine the assumptions about deterrence and defense that we have inherited from past generations.

We must have the courage to see the world as it really is—a world abundant with opportunities, but also beset by challenges—a world in which conflict remains a way of life and the principles of freedom and democracy remain very much at risk. In this world, we must recognize the continued primacy of conventional forces, backed by the presence of a controlled nuclear arsenal, in the preservation of peace and in the shaping of a global order where freedom and democracy can take deep root and bloom with rich vitality. The nation and the world expect no less.

### NOTES

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2. Michael E. Howard, "On Fighting a Nuclear War," ACIS Working Paper No. 31 (University of California, Los Angeles, January 1981), p. 19.
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