

# FORUM SPECIAL FEATURE

## Military Power: A Strategic View

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*During a visit to the Fletcher School, Paul H. Nitze addressed a Politics seminar on the problem of "Military Power and Political Influence." What follows are Mr. Nitze's remarks and his subsequent discussion with the students in that seminar. He emphasizes, like Karl von Clausewitz, that students should take "a strategic view" of international security which attempts to incorporate all the elements of international relations into a comprehensive problem-solving matrix.*

The subject of this seminar concerns the role of military power and how it affects political influence and foreign policy. Underlying that complexity, an important variable is the way a nation views peace and war. From the end of the Middle Ages to World War II Western Europeans viewed both peace and war as being natural. A war would last five or six years, and was followed by a period of peace. Soon another war would break out, and so on; the cycle went on continually. During war, attention focused on the question of how the outcome would bear upon the peace. During peace minds were fixed on the details of the military capabilities and alliance arrangements necessary to avoid or deal with war. If one could not avoid war, the aim was to end up on the winning side if it did come about.

This alternation between war and peace was considered normal. Neither was

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really abnormal, although obviously war was a dreadful thing, and peace was preferable. Caught in this situation, in war one thought about the conditions of the ensuing peace, and in peace one thought about the conditions of the coming war. It is in this context that Clausewitz's observation that "war is a continuation of political activity by other [military] means"<sup>1</sup> has its meaning.

The dominant attitude in the United States beginning in the 19th century and continuing into the post-World War II period has been different. The American attitude has been that peace is the norm and war is an abnormality. It is not difficult to trace the origin of this belief. Certainly, one of the influences which brought it about was the long century of peace from the War of 1812 through the First World War. Both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War settled the questions at hand: the colonial issue and the union of the country. The wars were fought, won and the particular issue was settled; nothing more was to be said. Then World War I came along; and this appeared as a gross abnormality. Its cause seemed clear — the militarism of the German General Staff, the stupidity of the Kaiser and the greediness of Germany in alliance politics. The war was fought to rid the world of these abnormalities and to return to that which was normal.

These same thoughts were present in World War II. Looked on as an abnormality, it could be argued that with the defeat of Hitler and Japan the object of policy should be a return to normalcy. The continuation of the wartime alliance into the post-war world would facilitate such a return. So would the creation of the U.N. When the Soviet threat appeared, containment, NATO and other measures were added. But the basic purpose has remained normalcy and peace.

What, on the other hand, is the Soviet perspective? Their doctrine also says that war is abnormal, but that peace is associated with the ultimate goal, the millennium after the transition from socialism to communism. When capitalism is eliminated from the world, it follows that the sources of war are eliminated. Therefore a world will exist ultimately which is without conflict and where peace is assured. But the means to this end (the installation of real communism) call for the use of all available tools, including that of military force. This is where the Soviets differ from the Europeans or Americans who do not explicitly believe that war, in the general sense, is a means to peace, or that a peace brought about by such means would be a peace worth having. That is, there is no reason why the object of policy should not be to maintain the current state of peace or at least not continue war indefinitely.

The implications of these positions must be clarified in light of the existence and possible use of nuclear weapons. This was the focus of that part of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey which dealt with the effects of the nuclear weapons

1. Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, ed. and trans., Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, Book One, Chapter One, Section 24.

dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>2</sup> We reached the conclusion that to achieve the same level of destruction with conventional high explosive weapons, would have required between 50 and 250 similar planes with a mix of conventional high explosive and incendiary loads. In other words, the use of nuclear weapons increased the destructiveness of an attack by 50 to 250-fold. Moreover the increase in average yield of warheads and also in the numbers of nuclear weapons which can be carried by a single bomber or missile since that time, has further increased 10 to 20 fold, in equivalent megatonnage, the damage potential of a single bomber or missile. That means today's nuclear weapons possess 500 to 5,000 times the destructive capacity of World War II conventional weapons. The question is whether that amounts to a difference in quantity or a difference in kind. How does one translate that kind of change in the dreadfulness of the potential destruction of weapons to a change in the dreadfulness of war? Does this somehow wipe clean all previous thought about military strategy and the impact of military force upon policy? Or does it not?

In 1946 Bernard Brodie took the view that it was an absolute change, that war in the nuclear age was *unthinkable* and that the whole purpose of policy must be solely and absolutely to avoid it.<sup>3</sup> Our view in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey was more complex. We thought it highly desirable and highly probable that a capability to use nuclear weapons would deter any future war. We stated so in our report. The origin of the policy of deterrence in the nuclear age thus goes right back to a few months after the use of the weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was clear to all of us who were working on the problem that deterrence would emerge as the important concept for policy-making. However, we qualified this concept on three different points: a) deterrence could not be wholly counted on to succeed; b) policy had to be prepared to deal with the contingency that deterrence might fail, and; c) the quality of deterrence depended upon one's ability to deal with the potential failure of deterrence. The vital factor is that one's ability to deal with the contingency of deterrence failing be understood by the other side.

In preparing contingency policies we thought that, while much had changed from the pre-nuclear era, the basic principles of military strategy were not entirely laid to waste. They were deeply modified, but they still should play a major role in the development of military strategy in the nuclear era.

This division between those who followed the Bernard Brodie point of view

2. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey was conducted by a team of specialists immediately after the collapse of Germany. The Survey hoped to apply its findings concerning the physical, economic, industrial and psychological damage of intensive high incendiary bombings on Europe to help end the war in Japan. Since the victory in Japan followed quickly, the Survey Group performed the same analysis, including that of the atomic attacks, on the targets which had been bombed during the Pacific war.
3. Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946.

and those who followed the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey point of view has continued unabated, and remains an unresolved issue. Again, to my mind, it is a question of degree. Those who say that there is a contrast and contradiction between deterrence and warfighting are missing the point. A warfighting capability is needed in order to have reliable deterrence. Some say that the Soviets don't believe in deterrence; indeed, they understand deterrence very well. They are sure that superior capabilities produce high quality deterrence. They are quite clear on that score. However, they don't understand all the talk in the United States about "mutually assured deterrence." They say they propose to deter us; whether we deter them is up to us; they do not feel called upon to help us.

From this point, another question arises: what should be our first priority in developing military forces? Should conventional or nuclear weapons receive primacy in our military preparations? U.S. policy has repeatedly alternated between one and the other. It was Dean Acheson's and my approach in 1949, after the first Soviet atomic weapons test, that clear necessity called for an increased emphasis upon conventional capabilities, because we would progressively lose our great nuclear advantage: the U.S. was no longer the only nuclear power. Therefore, the reliance placed on the nuclear component should, over the years, be reduced, while concomitantly the conventional forces should be built up.

When John Foster Dulles became Secretary of State, this policy was reversed. Dulles felt that we should rely mainly upon weapons and places of our own choosing. The policy of "massive retaliation" meant primary reliance upon nuclear weapons. In part, this policy was more declaratory than it was real. The U.S. did not abandon reliance upon conventional forces and in fact, came to realize with the later doctrine of "flexible response," that conventional weapons were more likely to be used, at least initially.

If one accepts the view that both the conventional and nuclear aspects of military capabilities must be taken into account — if possible placing the emphasis on conventional forces, because they are the initial cutting edge — strategic forces still cannot be forgotten. That is, in a strategic view of the situation in which each segment of the geographic field is seen as being related, it is the various combinations of potential theaters of conflict with the various combinations of potential modes of conflict, that make up the equation for aggregate relative strength. A strategic view of the situation takes into account all strengths and weaknesses and all tactical options and molds them into one grand and effective yet flexible game plan. We have yet to do this with much consistency or success. Soviet military and political doctrine calls upon them to plan in this manner. But they also have their difficulties.

If one studies the correlation between Soviet behavior and relative strategic nuclear capability, as T. K. Jones has done, one finds little direct correlation

between their earlier inferiority and their actions. In fact, the Soviets have been uniformly aggressive during the entire evolution of the strategic balance. The 1961-1962 period, when the strategic nuclear balance was greatly in our favor, is the same period in which they challenged us in Berlin and Cuba. Why should there be a lack of correlation between their relative position in the strategic nuclear balance and their behavior on the world scene?

I think the explanation for this is a simple one: the Soviets had fallen behind in the strategic balance and they were very conscious of that fact. They compensated for this by an increased willingness to take risks. Such a tactic helps to avoid the political losses which would otherwise come from the realization on both sides that the balance is unfavorable to one of the parties.

But if one adopts such a policy, then one really wants to be sure that there is a way out. In the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, the Soviets made sure there were paths of retreat to keep the situation from escalating to the point where they could be humiliated. Even though, as mentioned, there is no evident direct correlation between the state of the balance and the degree of aggressiveness expressed by the Soviets and even if these crises are caused by aggressive Soviet action, the knowledge of their strategic inferiority made them moderate their own behavior the moment they knew the West intended to call their bluff.

When these crises are examined more closely today, we find that we are divided as to the type of force which we believe tipped the balance in our favor. In the immediate area of Berlin we were far outnumbered in conventional forces. But we were able to count on our superior strategic force to back the Russians down. In Cuba, on the other hand, we were able to ring the island with our conventional naval forces, creating a blockade line which the Russians were not willing to cross. So my point concerning the effective maintenance of *both* conventional and strategic forces as a means to preserve the peace is demonstrated by the *flexibility* we exercised to gain accommodation by the Soviets to our demands in those two crises.

As we look into the future, I think it would be wise to exercise great care in avoiding a situation in which we had neither strategic nuclear superiority nor local conventional superiority. I think it would be ill-advised, in such cases, to put ourselves in a position where we didn't have a clear line of retreat.

On that note, perhaps we should open the floor for discussion:

*Student:* Given the Soviet threat you describe in your article in *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>4</sup> and given the vulnerability of our land-based missiles, and further recognizing the current weakness of our conventional forces in certain theaters, what do you propose as an effective balance between conventional forces and strategic nuclear forces in the budgeting for military spending in coming years?

*Nitze:* I would propose initially increasing the defense budget to approxi-

4. Paul H. Nitze, "Strategy in the 80s," *Foreign Affairs*, Fall 1980, pp. 82-101.

mately 6½ percent of the GNP as opposed to the 5 percent at which it was projected. Because the GNP has dropped, defense expenditures will be approximately 5½ percent rather than the 5 percent that we were projecting. But, turning to the *priorities* which should govern the way in which this money is budgeted, my view is that the highest priority should go towards repairing the deficiencies in our strategic nuclear forces. Unless there is an adequate strategic nuclear umbrella it is hazardous to use conventional forces *at all* in combat with the Soviet Union. The amounts involved in upgrading our nuclear forces are relatively small in comparison with the overall budget. What is required is a 50 percent increase in the allocation of funds to the strategic portion of the budget, recalling that the strategic budget is less than 15 percent of the overall defense budget.

Turning to conventional forces, in my view the manpower problems are at the core of the armed forces' present malady and this can not be corrected without both an increase in pay and the reestablishment of conscription. Very few people have the boldness to say that, but most of those who have carefully studied the problem agree. There is an enormous drive by the airlines to hire away skilled pilots who have been highly trained at the government's expense. Also, strategic nuclear submarine officers are in short supply, with some submarines (and surface ships as well) putting to sea with an insufficient number of men aboard. Because of the Three Mile Island episode, every public utility that has a nuclear power plant is worried about safety and wants to hire these men who have been so rigorously trained by Admiral Rickover.<sup>5</sup> They are offering recruiters a bonus of \$25,000 for every nuclear-trained submariner they can induce to leave the Navy and work for a power plant. Under these circumstances there really isn't much point in having additional weapons systems if you can't man them.

*Student:* You have mentioned in other forums that we shouldn't rely so heavily on public opinion in our formulation of foreign policy: this seems like a contradiction of the very freedom and democracy our policies aim to protect. I wonder if you would address this contradiction?

*Nitze:* It seems to me that the public spokesmen from the executive branch and the media are terribly important. In particular, television is the most important. But neither the executive branch nor the media have done much to alleviate the fundamental alienation of the middle class from the military. When we had the draft in World War II, and three-quarters of those who reached 18 years of age did, in fact, end up serving in one way or another, there was *not* an alienation of the country as a whole from the military. Today there is. Today people don't feel that they want to be part of it at all, they don't expect to be part of it, and they want to avoid being part of it.

5. Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, head of the Navy's nuclear propulsion program and founder of the nuclear navy.

Referring to public opinion and foreign policy, again I want to stress that we ought to take a strategic view, rather than having our policy made by the last television program. I feel, very strongly indeed, that to conduct foreign policy in the complex world of today, we must realize that none of our Founding Fathers thought that we should be a democracy in the sense that every decision would be made by popular vote. They understood that that would be a disaster. Nor did they believe that the public should vote on every executive decision. What they did believe is that the public should elect and choose leaders in whom they had confidence.

*Student:* In the 1950s the military told us there was a serious threat of an air strike by the Soviet Union. In response we built up our Air Force. In fact, there was never such a threat. The Kennedy Administration told us there was a missile gap, so we built up our land-based strategic missiles. In fact, there was no missile gap. Today the military tells us there is a dangerous strategic imbalance. Why should we believe them this time?

*Nitze:* Let me touch on each of these. I'm not aware that there ever was such an issue of a bomber gap. There has been a lot of talk about it. I know that the Proxmire Committee reports talks about a bomber gap, but I have no recollection of the Air Force ever saying there was a bomber gap. There was talk about a missile gap when Kennedy campaigned in 1960; that was primarily due to a lack of information on the subject. We hadn't had sufficient U-2 flights; we didn't have enough intelligence coverage, and we needed evidence as to how many missiles they had and how many they didn't have. Gradually, as those intelligence reports came in, it became more and more probable that all their missiles were within a certain distance from the railroad lines and that we had an adequate sampling of photographs of that area to form a judgment. However, there were still those who maintained that our coverage was insufficient even after these reports were received. But as soon as the hard evidence came in, in February or March of 1961, McNamara called a press conference and reported this intelligence to the American public.

So, the missile gap *was* an error the Soviets had concentrated their initial effort on intermediate range missiles rather than intercontinental missiles. But there have been errors in both directions in intelligence. There have been a lot of cases in which the intelligence has greatly underestimated what the Soviets were doing. In fact, I think the errors in underestimation have exceeded the frequency of errors in overestimation.

There is another factor involved: the defense issue comes up particularly in election years because it is an important political issue. But that is not to say there isn't a real problem. The fact that it is an election year does not bear upon the existence of a real problem. It's tangential to that. We are currently in a state of strategic imbalance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union: that is, there is a

discrepancy in relative throwweight of strategic missiles. That this point should be raised in an election year makes it no less true.

*Student:* Do you see any breakthroughs in technology which may alter the nuclear balance in the world today?

*Nitze:* In the 1950s, the conventional wisdom was that military technology was accelerating exponentially. Even at the time this was manifestly untrue. The rate of technological breakthrough was, even in the fifties, going down, not up; and it appeared that it would continue to go down, not up. Everything that has happened since that time has confirmed this judgment.

Take, for example, the power of individual weapons. After you reach a level of destructiveness of 60 to 100 megatons, there is no point in going beyond that. In fact, both sides have *reduced* the megatonnage of their weapons since the middle fifties. Regarding range, beyond a radius of action of 8,000 miles there isn't any further point in increasing your range. Also, while higher initial velocities are achievable, there is no point in higher velocity for missiles than that necessary to carry them to their targets successfully. Beyond that point they go into orbit. Moreover, we are gradually approaching the limits of the possible in such fields as accuracy. What really counts, then, is the degree to which weapons are reliable and maintainable, and the way in which they are deployed. At the margin, what counts more than technological breakthrough is the way in which the technology is organized, deployed and used. This must be taken seriously.

*Student:* Was there any time during your tenure in Washington, or even now, that we could have persuaded the Russians there was no reason to fear a U.S. first-strike capability?

*Nitze:* I don't believe that is the correct statement of the problem. When we were negotiating on the SALT treaty my Soviet counterpart once said to me, "We know all about your new Minuteman IIIs, and we're not really concerned about them." And quite correctly, he was not concerned about them. They know all about this business. They even know what accuracies we've got. But the idea that they are so concerned about a U.S. first-strike capability has nothing to do with the real problem. They *are* concerned about the destructiveness of nuclear weapons. And they are concerned about what might happen to their cities and their population in the event of a nuclear war. But from the standpoint of a first-strike capability, they are not seriously concerned. The Soviets are much more sophisticated than they are often portrayed.

Even though the origin of our conflict with the Russians is deeply rooted in the beginnings of the Soviet state, we thought that the wartime cooperation could go forward after the end of World War II. Despite the unhappy experiences we had with them during the latter years of the war, and particularly the episodes in Eastern Europe such as Poland and Rumania, it was President

Roosevelt's view, and also Walter Lippmann's view, that it was essential to continue into peacetime the wartime alliance between the USSR, England, France, China and ourselves. The whole U.N. structure was based upon this hypothesis. As Walter Lippmann explained very carefully in his book,<sup>6</sup> it was highly unlikely that such a continuation of the alliance would work. The wartime alliance came about because of the common interest in defeating Hitler, who was a threat to us all. Once that threat was gone there was nothing really to hold that alliance together. Yet, it was felt that the consequences of confrontation between the Eastern and Western world were so great that one ought to operate on the hopeful hypothesis that one could continue the alliance into the peace. This was not only the view of President Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins, but also that of General Eisenhower, General Marshall, and other leaders of the military establishment, and of James Byrnes, who was Secretary of State under Truman. It was also President Truman's view.

The coalition began to come apart with the Azerbaijan crisis in 1946 when Soviet troops refused to leave Iran. This was the first case brought before the U.N. Security Council. Prior to that time it had been thought that the U.N. was not a proper forum in which to take up conflicts between the five major powers — that those should be taken up between themselves and not referred to in the U.N. at all. With agreement among the five major powers, the U.N. could then be the apparatus through which they maintained order and discipline in the rest of the world. It was kind of an oligarchical system of organization in the international field. But when the Azerbaijan crisis came up, the Russians would not respond to bilateral discussion. This left no choice but to raise the matter in the U.N.

Prior to the crisis, Dean Acheson was one of the greatest supporters of the maintenance of the wartime alliance. At that time he became disillusioned with it, not so much over Iran but as a result of the Russian refusal to consider modifying the Supreme Allied Agreement with respect to Japan. It was stated in that Supreme Allied Agreement that the Allies agreed to fix very low levels of industry in Japan. For instance, one provision was that Japan should not be permitted more than three million tons of steel production per annum, and that all Japanese steel mills in excess of that capacity were to be dismantled and the machinery turned over as reparations, primarily to the USSR and to some degree to China. Here we were, carrying the occupation burden amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars a year, with no hope of getting Japan on her feet or reducing those occupation costs unless there was a higher level of industry in Japan, which would require more steel production. But we couldn't get the Russians to agree to that. It was at that point that Acheson began to think there was really a problem here which had to be addressed. The Greek-Turkish incident the next year confirmed his view.

6. Walter Lippmann, *Foreign Policy, Shield of the Republic*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1943.

The effort to try to mitigate the conflict with the Soviet Union has involved every President since F.D.R. The first thing Roosevelt did in 1932 was to recognize the Soviet Union. He appointed William Bullitt, who was a great friend of the Russians in those days, as Ambassador to the USSR, in the hope that he could alleviate part of this problem.

President Eisenhower delivered a speech called "The Chances for Peace." But it laid out what we thought was the best approach to trying to improve the climate of relations. As a matter of fact, it did have some effect. I thought it laid the foundation for the Austrian Peace Treaty. But it succeeded only during the transition period after Stalin's death.

So, the short answer to your question is that the issue is not primarily Soviet fear of a U.S. first-strike capability. Rather it is the American vision, that the purpose of military strength is not to prepare for a nuclear war but to maintain stability and security while the diplomats attempt to reduce the threat through negotiation and treaties. I don't know of a case where we could have alleviated the problem through negotiation and that avenue wasn't explored.

*Student:* What is the current U.S. position in the Persian Gulf with regard to the Soviet Union?

*Nitze:* Paul Wolfowitz's report<sup>7</sup> expresses the view that our military capabilities in the Gulf are quite real and useful. I would point out that he is part of the Executive Branch, and certainly the Executive Branch would like to have this point of view accepted. On the other hand, the rest of the testimony does not seem to me to be wholly in conformity therewith. General Kelley, for instance, the commander of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, has not quite put it the same way in his testimony before the Senate. Others that I have talked to would be much more skeptical about our capabilities than the Wolfowitz report would suggest. It's very hard to prove these things, but I don't think that the Wolfowitz report really goes so far as to say that in the event of direct and *sustained* military confrontation with Soviet forces in the Middle East that we could be effective against them.

The test, you see, is not whether you can intervene with certain forces, but whether you can intervene *effectively* with forces, maintain them and come out ahead after sustained combat. That is the most important factor. The other major test is whether you are prepared for the danger of escalation. I would suggest that we are not prepared for the danger of escalation with tactical theater nuclear weapons in that area. That would be wholly disastrous for us. Nor do I think we are prepared for the danger of escalation to a strategic nuclear war. So I repeat my judgment that the Middle East is an area in which we should act

7. The Wolfowitz report is a classified Department of Defense study which examines the relative U.S.-Soviet capabilities in the Persian Gulf. It has been cited in the *New York Times* as well as *Foreign Policy* (Fall 1980, "Over-arming and Underwhelming," by Barry R. Poesen and Steven W. Van Evera).

with prudence. We must be sure that we have a line of retreat before we get ourselves locked into deadly combat with Soviet forces. But this is only one element of the strategic view we must assume if we are to revitalize our military and restore American strength in the world today.