

Nuclear Weapons in the Defence of Europe: Two Viewpoints

I: Towards A No-First-Use Policy

by
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My attitude to the debate over nuclear weapons and war in Europe rests on a number of propositions. The first is that war is meant to have a purpose. It should result in a state of peace better than that from which it erupted, at least from the point of view of one's own country. Of course, if an enemy attacks, one may have no choice other than fighting or surrendering to his demands. But this choice should be determined by an assessment of what the respective results are likely to be; and, if the choice is to fight, one should always be thinking, while one does so, of where it is leading one — assessing whether or not a continuation of the struggle is going to result in a better peace. That was the theme of the last of the eight volumes of Clausewitz's great work. In contrast to the picture painted by poets, artists, popular historians, military men and a host of others — certainly in days gone by and still today — the object of war is not to gain glory and honour, not to offer opportunities for self-sacrifice (perhaps gaining one a favoured position in the gallery of heroes or among the hours of paradise), nor is it — or should it be — to let off steam, to bash the man you do not like on the head, to release human frustration in an outburst of violence. All these motives play their part in inclining nations towards war, and in encouraging them to fight to the end when they have become engaged in one, but they should not be the determining factors in the choice of whether or not to fight. Nor should they determine how the war should be conducted, if the choice has gone that way. To enter war in a mood to sacrifice all one's interests for the sake of an ideal is all very well for the individual, who is entitled to his own ideas about priorities, but is not the act of a statesman responsible for his nation. That is my first proposition. If that were true in the pre-atomic age, how much more relevant is it to one in which the consequences of going to war could be so much more devastating than anything in previous times? That question leads me to my second proposition.

The nuclear weapon is of a different order of magnitude to weapons that have preceded it. It is not just that its explosive effect is so much greater, but, first, that the human and material destruction that it inflicts, happens in such a very short period of time, and, second, that it has or can have long-term genetic effects. There are people who say that this is an exaggeration. They argue that the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945 were no worse, in total

or in nature, than the massive air raids on places like Tokyo, Hamburg and Dresden and that, in any case, limitation of various kinds, which might exclude cities from attack, would significantly reduce the horrific effects of such weapons. However, we must not forget that the bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima — the only ones, thank God, used so far — were of low yield by present standards and airburst so that there was little fall-out, and that, as the (Conservative) United Kingdom Government 1957 Defence White Paper acknowledged, approximately ten megaton-range weapons dropped on the cities of Britain could effectively destroy that country. To do something, therefore, which exposed one's country to probable or possible attack by such weapons could not be called defending it. It would not be bringing about a better state of peace than that from which the war had erupted. It would be what Clausewitz called "divorcing war from political life." "When that happens in our thinking about war," he wrote, "the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense." So my second proposition is that the nuclear weapon is of a totally different order from previous weapons, and that its use, certainly if that might provoke its further use against one's country, would be "pointless and devoid of sense."

Yet, as I have already mentioned, there are those who maintain that the enemy's response to the limited use of nuclear weapons would not necessarily be nuclear, or, if nuclear, limited to the same level. That is, if one country limited its nuclear attacks to purely military targets in the battle area, to the enemy's own nuclear delivery systems, to a certain geographical area, or to a small number of cities or similar targets, then the enemy would be inclined to do the same. All sorts of ingenious theories, and some very simplistic ones, have been put forward on this theme, in order to try and escape from the paradox inherent in any theory of mutual nuclear deterrence. That paradox lies in the dilemma that, if one wishes to deter war by the fear that nuclear weapons will be used, then one has to appear to be prepared to use them in certain circumstances. However, if a country resorts to nuclear weaponry and the enemy responds in kind, one is very much worse off than if one had not done so — if indeed, one is there at all.

To escape from this, all sorts of theories about the possibility of conducting limited nuclear exchanges have been concocted. It is conceivable, I suppose, that any or all of them might in fact occur, but what is certain is that one could in no way control what the enemy's reaction would be. All the probabilities — if you assume that your opponent is the Soviet Union — are that his reaction would be to reply with a greater degree of force, including an all-out nuclear attack on the bases of all nuclear weapon delivery systems, in addition to whatever other targets might be attacked. All that the Soviet military and political authorities have said or written, the way that their armed forces have conducted conventional operations in the past, the general

character of the Russians and the Soviet system, and the way that we know military men and politicians of all countries are inclined to react in war (since 1914, at any rate) tends to reinforce the probability that a Soviet response to a limited nuclear attack would be much less limited, if not totally unlimited. My third proposition therefore, is that it would be criminally irresponsible for any western leader to initiate a nuclear strike on the assumption that the Soviet Union either would not answer back in kind, or would do so to such a limited degree that we could regard it as acceptable within our war aims, whatever they might be.

Yet even if they did respond in a limited fashion, equivalent to that which we ourselves had used, it would not do us any good. There are two reasons why NATO would finish up relatively worse off than the Warsaw Pact. The first is a very simple one, recognized as long ago as the early 1950s, when NATO first seriously examined how to fight a war in which tactical atomic weapons (as they were called in those days) were used by both sides. Assuming a more or less equivalent nuclear exchange, the side that started off the stronger in conventional forces would finish up the stronger and the balance in its favour would have been improved. So, contrary to the popular view, the hopes of the politicians and the self-deceiving myths of many of the military, if a country is likely to get involved in a nuclear exchange, it needs larger, not smaller, conventional forces. The second factor is a geographical one. NATO's armed forces and the civilian population of Western Europe depend upon a smaller number of more concentrated resources — cities, ports, air-fields, military storage and communication facilities, etc. — than do the armed forces and civilian populations of the Warsaw Pact countries. On the assumption of a more or less equivalent nuclear exchange, therefore, NATO, both in terms of the effect on its armed forces and on its civilian population, would finish up relatively worse off. So my fourth proposition is that, if you think that you could redress an unfavourable conventional military situation by resorting to the use of nuclear weapons, you are talking nonsense. You would only add a nuclear defeat to the prospect of a conventional one.

My conclusion from my four propositions, then, is that it would be madness for NATO to be the first to use nuclear weapons. At this stage many of my critics say: "But, of course, we don't intend to *use* them." Almost all senior military figures, including my predecessor as Chief of the UK Defence Staff, subsequently Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, Admiral of the Fleet Lord Hill-Norton, and one of my successors in the post, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Cameron of Balhousie, have said that it is senseless to talk of fighting a nuclear war. All we are doing, they say, is threatening to use such weapons, and that threat in itself should be enough to deter the Soviet Union from invading Western Europe; as long as that threat exists, they cannot afford to concentrate their armies and air forces to the degree necessary to be sure of success. Is it really sensible to threaten

to do something that you have acknowledged to yourself would be not just folly but probably totally disastrous? If your opponent calls your bluff, you are faced with the choice of either backing down, humiliated, or going ahead down the Gadarene slope. None of us like backing down, least of all politicians. There have certainly been occasions in the past when politicians have taken risks with a nation's security rather than commit personal political suicide, and they could do so again. That is why I have described NATO's present nuclear policy, which relies on the threat of first use, as being one of either bluff or suicide.

You will now, I hope, have begun to realize why it is that I have come round to the view that NATO should try and disentangle itself from that policy and regard its huge nuclear armoury as being required only for a retaliatory threat, to make certain that the Soviet Union should not think that it could use nuclear weapons of any kind against NATO without risking nuclear retaliation. Apart from avoiding the many disadvantages of a first-use doctrine, such a disentanglement would also bring a number of advantages. Perhaps the most important of these would be a reduction of the risk of serious disension within NATO in a period of crisis. If the Alliance's governments and peoples were faced with a situation which really looked as if it would precipitate a war in Europe, do you suppose that they would be firmly united in their resolve to threaten to be the first to use nuclear weapons, or, if that had failed to stop the war from starting, then united behind a decision to use them? How willingly would governments and peoples accept that the sort of exercises which NATO has been playing at over the last 30 years were about to become reality—exercises in which hundreds of nuclear warheads are fired off by NATO, many of them on or over Western Germany, and hundreds more are delivered by the other side? Would they be firmly united in acceptance of that? I am sure they would not. There would be fierce disagreement, certainly among the peoples and among different NATO governments, and probably also within the individual governments themselves. That would be no way in which to face a crisis of that magnitude. NATO needs a policy on which it would be united, not divided, in a crisis.

The second advantage of a No-First-Use policy is that it should make it easier to reduce the ridiculously huge arsenals of nuclear weapons on both sides. There are two categories of nuclear weapon which are really designed for first use. The first is the battlefield category: those delivered by gun, short-range missiles, like Lance, Pluton and Pershing I, or by fighter-bomber aircraft. These make no sense as retaliatory weapons. If the enemy has been the first to use nuclear weapons, and has used the battlefield category, one will not want to answer back at that level. If he thinks that that is what you will do, he might be tempted to take the risk, and so a process of forcing both sides to escalate would have begun. That is no more than the application to the other side of the argument that I have already

used against our first use. For retaliation you want to go right to the heart of the matter, up the scale. So, if you accept No-First-Use, it is possible to get rid of all the 6,000 or so battlefield weapons.

The second category comprises all those nuclear weapons connected with counterforce strategies, almost all of them land-based missiles, whether static or mobile, on both sides. They make no sense unless they are fired first. There is no point in firing at the enemy's nuclear delivery systems after they have been fired. If they are mobile, like the SS20s, and you do not, therefore, know where they are, then there is no point in firing at them before they have been fired either. Both sides have been mesmerized by their fear of the vulnerability of their land-based systems, missiles and air bases, especially the former. Both have sought to achieve a nuclear superiority which could guarantee them against losing the ability to strike at the enemy, while he held the threat of attack on one's cities over one's head. Yet every attempt to achieve that superiority, which to be usable must be based on a first strike against his systems, has provoked the other side to follow suit. That has been the main cause of escalation in the number of nuclear warheads on both sides. That is what multiple independently-targeted re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) are designed for and President Reagan's latest "star-wars," laser ABM system idea is just another step. It has been, and always will be, a case of chasing the "will o' the wisp" of nuclear superiority. Even if one could devise such a hyper-efficient system that it could guarantee to destroy in one stroke all of the enemy's land-based missile systems — and that is inconceivable — it would still leave, as retaliatory weapons, ballistic missile submarines and aircraft, airborne with cruise missiles or other means of delivery. This search for nuclear superiority in counterforce strategies is a hopeless quest, brought about by the vulnerability of land-based systems. The main reason for having them, as far as the United States is concerned, has, in my opinion, been interservice rivalry. A genuine acceptance of policies of No-First-Use by both the Soviet Union and the United States would make it possible for each to challenge the other across the arms control table about the purpose of the systems they proposed to retain. At present, if one asks the Russians how they reconcile their land-based missiles with a declaration of No-First-Use, they reply that, as long as the United States refuses to make such a declaration, they must assume that America is planning a first strike against them. They must therefore maintain their capability to preempt it, if they ever came to the conclusion that such a strike was imminent — in other words they would strike first themselves. A genuine acceptance of policies of No-First-Use would mean that nuclear forces could be reduced to those required only as a retaliatory threat. Eventually, I believe they could be reduced to quite small fleets of ballistic missile submarines.

Before I go on to discuss how one might reach that desirable state of affairs, let me mention one other advantage: the effect on public opinion. I am strongly opposed to the total abolition of nuclear

weapons. If one achieved it, or thought one had, we should have returned to an era in which the major industrial nations could think of going to war with each other as an acceptable means of continuing their policies. The results of that in this century have been bad enough. A Third World or European War, even with conventional weapons only, would be even more destructive. But one would not in fact have returned to that age of "comparative innocence," for even a schoolboy these days knows the basic principles of how to make a nuclear weapon. Even if one were confident that all nuclear weapons had actually been abolished — and that is saying a good deal — it would not be long, once a war had started, before they reappeared, and one would have the worst of both worlds. The value of nuclear weapons as a general deterrent to war would have been lost, and one would still suffer from their use after war started. I have no doubt that the ability of both the United States and the Soviet Union to inflict terrible destruction on each other does act as a very strong deterrent to both nations against allowing their armed forces to become involved in direct hostilities with each other. If that initial deterrent were to fail, the threat of destruction would still act as a strong deterrent against their using nuclear weapons against each other. We should not underestimate the value of that to world peace. That is why I believe that the prevention of war in Europe depends upon the presence of the forces of both those great powers on either side of the Iron Curtain. If that presence were to be removed, on either side or on both, a grave temptation would be offered to those who might like to change the rigid and, in the case of Germany, artificial, pattern into which Europe was frozen by the way the war ended in 1945. Disaster to us all could result from attempts to alter that.

A large section of European public opinion, which is not pacifist or sympathetic to the Soviet Union, at present has grave doubts about NATO's reliance on nuclear weapons. As they see this as something inextricably linked to the American connection, they have doubts about that too, and the result is an anti-nuclear movement which is also very much an anti-American movement. I believe that the adoption of a No-First-Use policy by NATO would do a great deal to remove the doubts of this important body of moderate opinion and make it easier for them to accept both the presence of American forces and its connection with the overall nuclear deterrent to war which American possession of nuclear weapons provides.

If we are to retain the value of nuclear weapons as a general deterrent to war, but escape from a dangerous and self-deluding policy based on first use, and also reduce the fantastically excessive number of the beastly things, how should we set about it?

The first problem one faces is the concept of balance or equivalence. When one points out that most of these weapons have no military value — for instance, neither the Pershing II nor the Tomahawk cruise missile can knock out the SS-20, even in a first strike — one is told that, unless NATO, which means the United States,

maintains a balance in all types of warheads and delivery systems, we shall be subject to nuclear blackmail. In some way or another we shall be forced to do or to accept unpleasant things because the Soviet Union has a superiority in certain types of systems. But a blackmailer depends upon the fears of his victim. One who is not afraid cannot be blackmailed. If we could accept that it does not matter how many warheads and systems of delivery the other side has, as long as we have an invulnerable system which can be guaranteed to inflict an unacceptable degree of damage in retaliation, we can just regard it as folly on his part to waste his money on providing anything more than that himself. The demand for a verifiable equivalence in numbers and types of warheads is a serious obstacle to agreement to reduce them. At any rate it is one better than a demand for superiority.

Nevertheless, one has to take account of political realities. It would be a miracle if one could quickly achieve the revolution of thought necessary to move from NATO's current policy to the sort of thing I have outlined. The greatest problem would be to bring the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany round to accepting it. I believe that ideally one should take the easiest steps first. There seems to be a pretty wide consensus that short-range battlefield weapons could be dispensed with. Most soldiers think that they would never get authority to use them in time to strike the targets for which they had been requested and, therefore, their military effect would not be worth the risk of enemy response in kind. So I would get rid of the shortest range ones — artillery shells — now, and I would not complicate it by demanding that the Russians must reciprocate and accept verification. The next step should be to try and distinguish between those systems which are intended to deliver nuclear warheads and those intended for conventional weapons: in other words, abolish "dual-capable" systems. Again I do not believe that verification is essential. Apart from the arms control aspects, there is a clear advantage in trying to avoid the possibility of the other side thinking that one was using, or about to use, a nuclear weapon, when one was not. The next step (and there is no reason why they should not all run together) would be to bring the different nuclear arms control talks together. Gromyko has complained that the Americans at the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces talks in Geneva will not take into account other systems based in Europe which can strike at targets in the Soviet Union, and the American representative at the START talks, Mr. Rowny, has expressed his view that the whole subject is "a seamless web." Talks covering all systems could avoid the sort of gamesmanship which is now an undoubted obstacle to agreement. Attempts to reduce nuclear armaments should be combined with greater efforts to reach agreements, and to establish procedures to confirm and monitor them in the field of confidence-building measures and balanced forces.