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RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT: HOW NUCLEAR WEAPONS AFFECTED US AND SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY 1945-1962

CONOR MORRISSEY

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to answer the question of how the development of nuclear weapons changed the nature of warfare, diplomacy, and international relations. It frames the historical context in which these weapons were invented, how they were used to achieve military goals, and asks ethical and moralistic questions about how they changed the way global affairs were conducted. The focus of this paper begins with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and ends with the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. This seventeen-year period marks the era of the Cold War upon which nuclear weapons had the most pronounced and profound effect. Though their influence has never left the geopolitical landscape, the historical events and actors who lived through this initial phase were operating without guidelines or precedent to steer them, and thus their ability to navigate mankind out of this tumultuous time without engaging in an open nuclear conflict is somewhat remarkable. That unique achievement will be the central theme of this paper.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Most history papers make use of the Chicago Style of citations; this paper follows MLA instead.

I. RECKLESS ENDANGERMENT:

HOW NUCLEAR WEAPONS AFFECTED U.S AND SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY 1945-1962

On July 7th, 1962, Soviet chairman Nikita Khrushchev and Cuban president Fidel Castro reached a secret agreement to install strategic nuclear missile installations on the island of Cuba (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). When operational missile sites were discovered by US intelligence in October 1962, it was seen as a catastrophic national security failure on President Kennedy's part. The entire American strategy of the Cold War to this point had been continued possession of nuclear logistic superiority over the Soviet Union, which had just been neutralized by the planting of operational nuclear missile sites 90 miles from the coast of Florida. But primarily due to Kennedy's composure and diplomatic resilience, thermonuclear annihilation was narrowly avoided. Together he and Soviet chairman Nikita Khrushchev, through diplomatic means, were able to avoid what Kennedy astutely termed, the final failure. Those dramatic fourteen days in October 1962 marked the end of an era in US-Soviet nuclear relations, which began in 1945 when naïve and primitive understandings of nuclear weapons characterized all strategic war planning. When the atomic bomb was invented by the United States in 1945, the Soviet Union quickly responded by developing their own effective version of an atomic bomb to counter the American one in 1949 (Cirincione, 2007). What became known as the Cold War never resulted in open conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, because in order to wage such a war both nations would have to be willing to make sacrifices that would make all military endeavors to that point look inconsequential in comparison. Atomic weapons were very much developed in a historical moment in which the world's foremost military powers had been collectively traumatized and infrastructurally ruined by the two world wars, and were seeking a way to avert similar catastrophes in the future. In 1946 American military strategist Bernard

Brodie wrote, “Thus far the chief purpose of a military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them” (Brodie in Kennedy, 1991, p. 179). Professor Robert Jervis called a rational strategy for the employment of nuclear weapons “a contradiction in terms” (Jervis in Kennedy, 1991, p. 179). This was a war over ideology and conflicting ways of life, fought with weapons which could never be used. The central question this paper will seek to answer is: how was mankind forced to evolve in order to cope with its new, infinitely deadlier weapons technology? Even though the US and USSR never exchanged nuclear fire, both sides nonetheless used nuclear weapons indirectly as means to achieve their war aims. The war between capitalist democracy and revolutionary socialism was fought most significantly through nuclear brinkmanship and escalation dominance, which are defined as strategies for escalating the conflict to the maximum threshold of safety, in order to strong-arm the opponent into backing down. This paper will be about the ways in which military leaders on both sides of the Cold War used nuclear weapons in the initial phase of their existence, in profoundly reckless and dangerous ways. The goal will be to demonstrate the ways in which strategies such as escalation dominance permeated US-Soviet nuclear policy between 1945 and 1962.

The Cold War saw a world divided into two fundamentally different spheres, capitalist and communist, each of which thought of themselves as the righteous arbiters of justice, with a responsibility to enhance worldwide human happiness and prosperity through their own intrinsically different economic and philosophical systems. This conflict was waged over contradictory visions of the ideal society, and was motivated by a fear of foreign ideological encroachment and undermining of this ideal society. The Cold War can be divided into two distinct phases, according to Soviet historians Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov.

These phases are “first, bipolar brinkmanship, and second, multilateral permanent truce” (1996, p. 7). The former describes a time period dominated by nuclear brinkmanship, in which two nuclear superpowers continuously threatened one another with ever expanding destructive capabilities in an international situation heavily rooted in bluffing and game theory. This is the focus of this paper. The second era of this history, though not to be misconstrued as entirely peaceful, came into effect when it became clear that a tacit agreement existed between the US and the USSR to not engage in direct nuclear conflict, but rather wage an ideological war by supporting their cause on a global scale. This was achieved through proxy wars such as the conflict in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Grenada, and Panama, and selective provisioning of military supplies, training, and support to their ideological compatriots in these as well as in Cuba, Nicaragua, Cambodia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others. The dynamics involved in these conflicts deserve their own separate discussion, so the focus here will be on the initial phase of the Cold war from 1945-1962.

In order to ensure proper perspective, we must first establish some key distinctions between different kinds of nuclear weapons and we must fully understand the true destructive capability they possess. Atomic bombs (or fission bombs) are detonated by splitting highly unstable radioactive atoms which causes a chain reaction that releases massive amounts of destructive energy. A uranium-based atom bomb nicknamed Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima, and a plutonium-based atom bomb nicknamed Fat Man was dropped on Nagasaki, both in August 1945. (Cirincione, 2007). Hydrogen bombs (also called thermonuclear bombs) are detonated by initiating a fission reaction inside a chamber of radioactive hydrogen-based fusion material, so that the heat and energy produced set off a chemical fusion reaction, a process

which simulates reactions that power the sun. Hydrogen bombs are in fact much more powerful as well as much more complicated to create and difficult to deliver. The US successfully tested its first thermonuclear bomb in the early 1950s (Cirincione, 2007). The exact level of destruction a nuclear bomb can cause depends on the size of the bomb. Increases in the amount of radioactive material within a bomb exponentially raises the weapon's destructive capability. Because it would be disingenuous and misleading to discuss the destructive capability of bombs never actually used on enemy targets, we will use the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as reference points to comprehend the severity of these weapons. However, it is essential to understand that the bombs dropped in these instances were incredibly inefficient and the destruction they created is miniscule in contrast to the capabilities of modern nuclear weapons. According to the Hiroshima Day Committee, "There were approx. 76,000 buildings in the city at the time, and 92% of these were destroyed by the blast and fire...an area of 13 square kilometers was transformed into a wide stretch of A-Bomb affected ruins". Up to 1.6 kilometers away from the blast the fires were still strong enough to melt solid granite, a material that has a melting temperature nearly identical to that of steel. While virtually all the people close to the blast perished instantly, 56% of people within 20 kilometers of the blast still died either from building collapses caused by the shockwave, the fires, or from eventual radiation poisoning or radiation-related disease (Hiroshima Day Committee). The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, were rendered obsolete by advances in nuclear technology by 1950 (Cirincione, 2007).

Brinkmanship, also sometimes referred to as escalation dominance, is "the ability to threaten or coerce other nations by being capable of dominating the next level of escalation of

violence” (Kaku & Axelrod, 1987, p. 4). Initially the United States, but eventually the Soviet Union as well, sought to achieve their geopolitical and diplomatic objectives by dangerously escalating international situations without ever actually going over the brink into nuclear war. Daniel Ellsberg, who at this time was an analyst for the RAND Corporation, stated that, “Again and again, generally in secret from the American public, US nuclear weapons have been used...in the precise way that a gun is used when you point it at someone’s head in a direct confrontation, whether or not the trigger is pulled” (Kaku & Axelrod, 1987, p. 6). This exact strategy was utilized a number of different times throughout the period of nuclear brinkmanship of 1945-1962.

Pentagon war papers declassified in the late 1980s and published by Michio Kaku and Daniel Axelrod detail nineteen separate instances between 1946 and 1962 which involved US nuclear threats, plans or maneuvers (1987). According to these papers, Truman threatened the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons for the first time in 1946 when they refused to remove their troops from Iran. The Joint Chiefs of Staff resolved in 1953 that nuclear weapons would be employed in Korea if the situation on the ground worsened. In 1954, President Eisenhower offered two nuclear weapons to the French in order to help them achieve victory at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, and in 1970 President Nixon drafted a contingency plan to drop nuclear weapons on Soviet and Chinese supply lines into Vietnam (Kaku & Axelrod, 1987). A number of threats were made during the penultimate instance of nuclear brinkmanship being employed in practice, the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although atomic bombs were never dropped on Korea, Vietnam, China, or Cuba their use was always a very real possibility. He was of course referring to a nuclear attack on the island. The nuclear option was a constant consideration throughout the

war especially among American leaders as they began to navigate the complexities of possessing this weapons technology. These specific instances comprise only a few of the times the threat of nuclear weapons was used by the US to meet its objectives, without them actually being detonated (Kaku & Axelrod, 1987, p. 6).

Conceptually, the practice of escalation dominance should never result in a nuclear catastrophe given that both nations wish to avoid it. The problem with this was the fact that many military leaders conceptualized nuclear weapons as simply more destructive versions of conventional bombs, not as weapons that deserved special considerations. In an interview with the New York Times, United Nations Supreme Commander in Korea General Douglas MacArthur famously stated that in order to end the Korean War he “would have dropped between 30 and 50 atomic bombs on..air bases and other depots strung across the neck of Manchuria...to the neighborhood of Hunchun (just north of the northeastern tip of Korea near the border of the U.S.S.R.)” (1954, p. 16). President Truman by contrast saw the bombs as inordinately devastating weapons only to be used in instances of total war. At a press conference when asked about the use of nuclear weapons in Korea, he said, “It is a terrible weapon, and it should not be used on innocent men, women, and children who have nothing whatever to do with this military aggression. That happens when it is used” (Truman, 1950). This dichotomy between MacArthur and Truman’s conceptualization of nuclear weapons set the stage for the United States’ two fundamentally different policies regarding the use of nuclear weapons during the period of 1945-1962, both of which still relied upon escalation of dominance for their continued success.

The United States' first official policy on nuclear weapons was one of deterrences, given the title "Massive Retaliation" in 1952 by President Eisenhower (Charles, 1987). This doctrine essentially stated that any Soviet aggression in Western Europe would be met with a nuclear response, even if the Soviets only employed conventional weapons. There was a real emphasis on the word massive, as the atomic stockpile the US possessed increased from 450 bombs in 1950, to 1,750 bombs in 1954 (Kaku & Axelrod, 1987, pp. x-xi). This doctrine was conceived in unison with the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which was created and primarily financed by the US, Britain and France, and which required all member nations to come to the defense of any other member nation that was attacked (Charles, 1987). NATO was (and arguably still is) an alliance of capitalist democratic countries, and the doctrine of Massive Retaliation was designed to protect all these signatory nations from any kind of preemptive strike on behalf of the Soviets. The Soviet's official nuclear policy went by the name "Peaceful Coexistence", a policy in which "The Soviet Union proclaimed itself to be in favor of the disenfranchised nations and peoples of the world" (Rice, 1991, p. 163). This was an appeal to the rest of the world to see the Soviets not as aggressors but as the proponents of a globally unified, egalitarian peace made up of common people. However, they "continued to see the international system -dominated by western capitalism- as fundamentally hostile" (Rice, 1991, p. 154). One of Khrushchev's closest advisors Vyacheslav Molotov remarked that a communist "should not speak about the destruction of world civilization or about the destruction of the human race, but about the need to prepare and mobilize all forces for the destruction of the bourgeoisie" (Zubok & Pleshakov, 1996, p. 168). The US policy was seen as necessary because European leaders had serious doubts about their own countries' ability to defend themselves

against an industrial superpower with a massive nuclear stockpile, using only conventional weapons and soldiers (Charles, 1987).

However, the doctrine of Massive Retaliation restricted the variety of choices available to NATO leaders in the event of a crisis. In an emergency situation, when leaders had few choices regarding how to respond to provocations, there existed a possibility that repeated bluffs and gambles would eventually result in ruin. The promise of Massive Retaliation only allocated leaders the two options of plunging the world into nuclear war, or being unwilling to use these weapons, and thus showing their threats to be totally ineffective measures of deterrence. In 1962 at a meeting of NATO defense ministers, US Secretary of State Robert McNamara pointed out threats to the alliance would often be characterized by small scale conflicts with limited objectives, which required many escalations before justifying nuclear war. According to McNamara, “The threat to respond massively with nuclear weapons in such situations would not be very believable...and would continue to decline in credibility as the Soviet Union built up its ability to respond in kind” (Charles, 1987, p. 15). In the 1960s President John F. Kennedy shifted the American doctrine on nuclear weapons to what he called “Flexible Response”, a US Defense strategy which sought to employ all diplomatic, economic, political, and conventional military methods to meet its objectives before resorting to a nuclear strike. These different components of foreign affairs would later be given the acronym “DIME”, signifying diplomatic, information, military, and economic methods of achieving American goals.

The policy of Flexible Response served Kennedy especially well during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the first meeting of the emergency response group which would later be coined the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), Secretary of State Dean

Rusk presented President Kennedy with two possible responses to the situation. The first, a full-scale ground invasion of Cuba almost certain to plunge the US into a war with the Soviet Union. The second option, as Rusk put it, was that “we're going to decide that this is the time to eliminate the Cuban problem by actually eliminating the island” (Rusk, 1962). He was of course referring to a nuclear attack on the island. One of the key elements that made this situation so difficult was that initially, no one in the US government had any way of knowing if the missile sites were operational or not. Many of Kennedy’s advisors in the EXCOMM advised him that this uncertainty required a US preemptive strike, and the only debate they were having was whether that strike should be carried out by conventional airstrike, amphibious invasion, or nuclear assault. Because JFK was given the opportunity to weigh a wide variety of options, he was able to respond to Soviet provocation while minimizing threats of nuclear escalation. He ultimately chose to enact a blockade rather than respond with excessive aggression, and because of that choice catastrophe was averted in October 1962. The crisis ended when Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev extended an olive branch to Kennedy by writing an emotional and heartfelt letter at 2 AM local time in Moscow in which he offered to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for a guarantee from the US that it would never invade Cuba unprovoked, and on the condition that the US removed its own nuclear missiles from Turkey. Kennedy had actually wanted the missiles out of Turkey before the crisis even began. The added flexibility of Kennedy’s doctrine gave leaders many more choices during crises, which was precisely the freedom that allowed them to avoid nuclear conflict throughout the entirety of the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved the lunacy of a foreign policy formulated around nuclear brinkmanship, and thus marks the end of that period. Hereafter, nuclear weapons remained a

threat to global security, but were no longer used as primary means of achieving foreign policy goals. In short, an understanding of their power forced US and Soviet leaders to reserve them only for the most extreme of circumstances.

The shift that occurred after October 1962 was also precipitated by a changing geopolitical landscape, namely the creation of a rift between the two major communist powers of China and the USSR. When Stalin died in 1953, the situation with communist China was only worsening. Stalin and his regime “had undercut deep faith in Marxist-Leninist ideological universalism and killed its genuine advocates: he had reduced the party ideologues to propagandist pawns in his global schemes” (Zubok & Pleshakov, 1996, p. 139). In short, Stalin’s purges had killed many of the premier communist thinkers and orators from the Soviet Union, and replaced them with pragmatic political loyalists rather than communist ideologues. Mao-era China, prior to the Cultural Revolution, was still idealistic and disturbed by the Soviet’s lack of ideological purity (Rice, 1991). The world no longer experienced a bipolar split between two superpowers, but was now entangled in a complex diplomatic system of relationships and rivalries which drove global affairs. Brinkmanship had been exposed as an unnecessarily dangerous way of conducting diplomacy, and by the early 1960s with several other European nations attaining nuclear capabilities running parallel with a deepening rift between the USSR and China, the situation of the Cold War shifted. According to Zubok and Pleshakov, this initial phase “expired for two reasons: the Cuban Missile Crisis had proved the insanity of brinkmanship, and the Sino-Soviet schism had eliminated absolute bipolarity by 1962” (1996, p. 7).

It is important to understand that many of the scientists and intellectuals who designed the bombs later regretted their involvement and strongly advocated against their use. These scientists had gotten involved solely because they believed Nazi Germany would develop the bomb, and they believed the US needed its own bomb to deter German use (Cirincione, 2007). In a memorandum released to the public nuclear physicists Otto Frisch and Rudolph Peierls wrote, “this bomb could probably not be used without killing large numbers of civilians, and this may make it unsuitable for use by this country” (Cirincione, 2007, p. 3). Once they realized the naivety of this sentiment, most of the physicists who developed the atom bomb became advocates for an international organization that would govern their use and proliferation. In 1945, they warned that “the United States could not rely on its current advantage in atomic weaponry. Nuclear research could not be an American monopoly for long, and secrecy would not mean protection” (Cirincione, 2007, p. 15). When the focus shifted to the development of the exponentially deadlier hydrogen bomb in the mid 1950s, scientists on both sides were appalled. The heads of the Soviet Atomic Project wrote that the development of thermonuclear weapons “opens a limitless potential for increasing the explosive power of the Bomb, which makes defense from this weapon virtually impossible. It is clear that the use of atomic arms on a massive scale will lead to the devastation of combatant countries” (Zubok & Pleshakov, 1996, p. 167). J. Robert Oppenheimer, perhaps the most famous nuclear physicist of the era, remarked about the hydrogen bomb, “The program in 1951 was technically so sweet that you could not argue about that. The issues became purely the military, the political and the humane problems of what you were going to do about it once you had it” (Polenberg, 2002, pp. 110-111). On October 26th, at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis Nikita Khrushchev wrote in a telegram to

President Kennedy the following words, which are a powerful reminder of the stakes under which the era of nuclear brinkmanship operated. He wrote,

If you did this as the first step towards the unleashing of war, well then, it is evident that nothing else is left to us but to accept this challenge of yours. If, however, you have not lost your self-control and sensibly conceive what this might lead to, then, Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose. (1962)

In his assessment of the quality of American Grand Strategy Paul Kennedy asserts that “If Truman, Marshall, Acheson and their advisors had been asked to describe what sort of world order they hoped would be in place forty years later, the broad outlines might look very close to what exists today” (Kennedy, 1991, p. 172). Economically, the war-ravaged states in Europe as well as Japan were returned to relative prosperity, mainly through Marshall aid and international free trade. In the realms of popular culture and intellectual discourses Marxist-communism has had few if any significant breakthroughs or advancements since 1991. And the United States remains today the foremost military power in the world, with regards to both conventional weapons and nuclear weapons. But there is a convincing argument to be made that these victories were not even the most significant of the Cold War. Mankind has successfully adapted its institutions, militaries, and wartime strategies to cope with an infinitely more dangerous set of circumstances and possibilities is the true victory of the Cold War. Regardless of desires for expansion, ideology, or economic systems, men and women from a variety of cultures and backgrounds understood the stakes of the nuclear age and were able to avoid it. An informed

observer in 1946 operating without the benefit of hindsight, may not have predicted such a success. Certainly, many of the nuclear physicists of the time did not. However, our collective ability thus far to avoid nuclear Armageddon serves as no guarantee that this will continue to be the case. Historians and policy makers alike must be aware of the forces acting upon us and the knots being tied around us, which guide us down the path to our own destruction. On some level, our successful navigation of an era in which several different nations have the power to almost instantly destroy the world, has been a miracle.

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