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NUCLEAR STRATEGY IN THE BERLIN CRISIS

It is widely agreed that if the Berlin crisis leads to military action—particularly to military action that we initiate—nuclear weapons should not be used at the outset. This paper is about the role of nuclears in the event we should have to resort to them in Europe.

The thesis is that the role of nuclears in Europe should not be to win a grand nuclear campaign, but to pose a higher level of risk to the enemy. A large-scale regional nuclear campaign that would run its course without triggering general war is so unlikely that it should receive low priority in our planning. Either it would come to a pause, or it would blow up into general war. If the latter, the regional nuclear campaign serves little purpose, if any.

The important thing in limited nuclear war is to impress the Soviet leadership with the risk of general war—a war that may occur whether we or they intend it or not. If nuclear weapons are introduced the main consequence will not be on the battlefield; the main consequence will be the increased likelihood and expectation of general war. The state of the local battlefield will receive less attention than the state of our strategic forces and the enemy's. Nuclears should therefore be used—if they are used at all in Europe—not mainly to destroy tactical targets but to influence the Soviet command.

Nuclears should be used to impress the Soviets with the fact that they cannot win a regional war—that it is unlikely to remain regional if it is fought with nuclears on the scale that tactical military considerations would dictate. The purpose of nuclears is to convince the Soviets that the risk of general war is great enough to outweigh their original tactical objectives, but not so great as to make it prudent to initiate it pre-emptively.

Limited and localized nuclear war is not, therefore, a “tactical” war. However few the nuclears used, and however selectively they are used, their purpose should not be “tactical” because their consequences will not be tactical. With nuclears, it has become a war of nuclear risks and threats at the highest strategic level. It is a war of nuclear bargaining.

This is the way nuclears should be used if they must be used; this is therefore the way our plans should be drawn. [Page 171]
And our requirements for nuclear weapons in Europe—numbers of weapons, their location, state of readiness, and means of delivery—should be derived from this concept of their use.

We should plan for a war of nerve, of demonstration, and of bargaining, not of tactical target destruction. Destroying the target is incidental to the message the detonation conveys to the Soviet leadership. Targets should be picked with a view to what the Soviet leadership perceives about the character of the war and about our intent, not for tactical importance. A target inside the USSR is important because it is inside the USSR, not because of its tactical contribution to the European battlefield. A target in a city is important because a city is destroyed, not because it is a local supply or communication center. The difference between one weapon, a dozen, a hundred, or a thousand, is not in the number of targets destroyed but in the Soviet (and American) perception of risks, intent, precedent, and implied “proposal” for the conduct or termination of war.

Extra targets destroyed by additional weapons are not a local military “bonus”; they are noise that may drown the message. They are a “proposal” that must be responded to. And they are an added catalyst to general war. This is an argument for a selective and threatening use of nuclears rather than large-scale tactical use. (It is an argument for large-scale tactical use only if such use creates the level of risk we wish to create.) Success in the use of nuclears will be measured not by the targets destroyed but by how well we manage the level of risk. The Soviets must be persuaded that the war is getting out of hand but is not yet beyond the point of no return.

The implications for our immediate planning are these:

1. Requirements

The adequacy of our nuclear weapons in Europe is not determined by whether we could win a full-scale European nuclear campaign. We should not add nuclear weapons in Europe for that unlikely purpose; we or the Soviets, deliberately or inadvertently, will have shifted the level or locus of war before a regional nuclear war becomes decisive. We should add weapons only if what we have there is insufficient to appear likely to catalyze general war if fully used (or if fully destroyed). Their function is to make the triggering of inadvertent or pre-emptive war a frighteningly probable consequence of their large-scale use or of a massive nuclear effort to destroy them.

2. Character of Weapons

The same applies to their range, readiness, and vulnerability to attack. Readiness for instant front-line tactical use is less important if the use of nuclears is not going to be determined by battlefield criteria. Vulnerability of aircraft and [Page 172] medium-range missiles need not be urgently remedied if an attack sufficient to destroy them would almost certainly trigger a strategic response. Range of weapons and means of delivery need to meet the requirements of selective bargaining use, not of tactical support. Targets outside the theater may appear desirable; weapons outside the theater may be called on.

3. Control

Control over nuclear weapons in Europe must be tight and centralized. Physical safeguards, communications, release procedures, and indoctrination must be designed to permit deliberate, discriminating, selective use for dangerous nuclear bargaining. This means preventing any use, by anyone, not specifically authorized as part of the nuclear bargaining plan. In particular, it means preventing the misinterpretation of any initial bargaining use as authority for general tactical use. Commanders and custodians must be indoctrinated with the recognition that tactical considerations are not determining: This is a controlled strategic exchange.

4. Command

Procedures, communications, and plans must assure a capability for selective release, and for target selection, timing, coordination, and reconnaissance responsive to the needs of nuclear bargaining. Local commanders who may be called on to fire nuclear weapons must be able to comprehend instructions that reflect the strategic nature of the exchange.

5. Plans must be drawn

If nuclear weapons should be resorted to, particular weapons will be fired from particular locations to particular targets at particular times. Messages may need to accompany the weapons; if so, they must carry particular language. The concept of selective, strategic bargaining use is not enough; there must be plans for how to do this.

6. Soviet nuclear response must be anticipated

It is not likely that the Soviets would allow a precedent for U.S. unilateral use of nuclears. Because time will be short, there must be imaginative advance exploration of what Soviet responses, nuclear and verbal, to anticipate and how to interpret them. (The possibility of Soviet initial selective use in a bargaining strategy must also be explored, so that we can interpret it and respond appropriately.)

1. Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Germany, Berlin, General. No classification marking. The source text bears Bundy's notation: "Sent to H[yannis] P[ort] Weekend of 7/21." Bundy noted that the study had made a "deep impression" on the President.↵