

Retain First Use

By Josef Joffe *USA*

HAMBURG, West Germany — Nuclear weapons are full of horrible paradoxes. They are constantly being improved so that they may be rendered useless. For the sake of deference, we threaten to destroy the world in order to save it. The West has "resolved" these paradoxes by repressing them, by banishing the unthinkable to the innermost recesses of our minds and military bureaucracies.

Today, the key message of the peace movement in Europe and America is that repression no longer works. When nuclear strategy is suddenly thrashed out in the streets, there follows an inclination to do away with the paradoxes by wishing away weapons that cause them.

That wish forms the common denominator of two recent exercises as disparate as the Foreign Affairs article "NATO and the Atlantic Alliance," authored by McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara and Gerard C. Smith, and the program for disarmament of the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, headed by Sweden's former Prime Minister, Olof Palme.

The Foreign Affairs "gang of four" proposes that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization renounce the first use of nuclear weapons. The Palme commission recommends the "establishment of a battlefield-nuclear-weapon-free zone," starting with a 300-kilometer-wide stretch in the two Germanys.

If realized, such proposals would certainly mute the clamor of the European peace movement. Would they also mute NATO's security dilemmas in the 1980's? No.

The Palme proposal simply redefines, rather than solves, the problem. If battlefield nuclear weapons are merely withdrawn by 100 miles on either side, there is nothing to prevent their speedy reintroduction during political crises and in war. In a hair-trigger situation, such a move would be highly destabilizing. It would suggest that the other side was about to launch the weapons, thus provoking rapid counter-deployment and, worse, pre-emptive firing.

Then, there is the curse of geography. About 60 percent of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons have a range of under 15 miles. Launched in the hinterland rather than up front, they would devastate West German territory. To threaten an enemy with the prospect of national suicide amounts to a prescription for self-deterrence.

And self-deterrence through self-mutilating weapons is one of the dilemmas that inspired the Foreign Affairs authors. Yet their no-first-use rule raises as many problems as it purports to solve. It assumes that NATO's nuclear-armed foes would live (and fight) by the same principle of self-denial. How serious is Leonid I. Brezhnev's willingness, expressed in the United Nations yesterday, to renounce first use in any war? Given the abundance of nuclear arms in Europe, Moscow could

hardly base its own forbearance on a paper promise by NATO, no matter how solemnly consecrated. What would happen if the tide of conventional battle turned against the West? Would NATO accept defeat without launching its ultimate weapons? And if this is not certain, should not the Kremlin keep the advantage of nuclear pre-emption on its side?

Admittedly, the threat of first use of tactical weapons in a setting bristling with them does not look very credible. Yet even a minute chance of their use gives the West strategic and tactical advantages. Strategically, the specter of an early nuclear conflagration confronts the Kremlin with an immense, incalculable risk (this is the very essence of deterrence). Tactically, the prospect of a nuclear riposte would wreak havoc on the disposition of Soviet troops geared for a rapid, decisive breakthrough. Instead of concentrating their forces for a blitzkrieg, the Russians would have to disperse their troops so as not to offer lucrative targets for a nuclear counterattack. Ironically, such dispersion would make a conventional NATO holding action all the more promising.

The Foreign Affairs and Palme proposals essentially urge NATO to adopt a non-nuclear stance. Yet a purely conventional defense cut loose from the ultimate deterrent does

lower the threshold of war. An attack on Europe, previously fraught with incalculable risks, would suddenly look more "rational." How would we fight back if fight we must?

At its waist, the densely populated Federal Republic is only 140 miles wide. West Germany's membership in NATO rests on the assurance that the alliance will not trade West German space for time. Yet if West Germany is to be spared, the battle must be fought to the East of its 1,000-mile border with Warsaw Pact troops in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. It follows that NATO would have to carry the battle into enemy territory from the very beginning. This means adoption of a strategy involving highly mobile troops who would make a pre-emptive lunge —

something that can hardly reassure the East.

This is the ultimate irony of any strategy that would have the West shift toward a purely conventional defense. Inspired by dovish reasons, the Palme commission and Foreign Affairs proposals lead to hawkish consequences — toward an offensive rather than defensive doctrine, toward pre-emption rather than stability in a crisis. Would peace in Europe really become sturdier as a result?

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