

ILPI



Beating a dead horse?

The military utility of nuclear weapons

Introduction

- End of the Cold War pushed nuclear weapons and mutually assured destruction (MAD) out of the public consciousness
- A change in the political climate would not necessarily affect the military utility of nuclear weapons
- Some states and commentators implicitly argue that nuclear weapons are in fact **useful weapons**
- Others have argued 'if you cannot use them, lose them'
- Are nuclear weapons more or less useful than alternative means?

Military doctrines and use

- Anticipated operational application of nuclear weapons has changed from the Cold War era – but do not suggest that nuclear weapons are becoming obsolete
- **2010 US Nuclear Posture Review** reduces the circumstances in which the US will resort to use of nuclear weapons, yet continued reservation of the right of first use
- **2010 Russian doctrine** - whether a threat is conventional or unconventional, massive attacks against Russia or her allies may occasion resort to nuclear strikes
- Doctrines shaped on non-proliferation of WMDs, yet also suggest nuclear weapons' role in safeguarding national territory

Political role

- **Deterrence:** primary political function is nuclear weapons' deterrent effect: e.g. Berlin Crisis (1961) and Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)
- **'Game of chicken':** the more assertive nuclear power can get away with almost anything with impunity, as both the attacker and the attacked want to avoid nuclear war at all costs
- **Alliance cohesion:** nuclear weapons instrumental to alliance solidarity: e.g. NATO – reliant on perception that these weapons are useful
- **Non-proliferation and nuclear umbrellas:** states longing for nuclear weaponry are content with assurances of protection by a nuclear-armed friend ('nuclear umbrellas')
- Political utility in large part dependent on the weapons' military utility

Military utility

- Hiroshima and Nagasaki only examples of use – theoretical projections and assumptions form the basis for assessing military utility
- **Three scenarios** in which nuclear weapons supposedly offer a military advantage (compared to other weapons):
 - 1. Their ability to **destroy facilities buried deep in the ground** of hostile territory (e.g. WMD stockpiles)
 - 2. Their ability to **burn chemical and/or biological agents** before the enemy can deploy them
 - 3. The **last resort of destroying an invading foreign force** with tactical/short-range nuclear weapons

Bunker-buster

- Numerous countries, and possibly non-state actors, have dug deep and large caves underground
- **Bunkers may be used as operational centers**, control centers and storage and deployment facilities for WMDs – estimates put the number of bunkers and command centers at around 1400
- Bush administration: earth-penetrating nuclear weapons best option for destroying these facilities
- Questionable: studies show **limited penetration ability** and substantial damage on the surface, as well as problems with accuracy
- Conventional weapon systems with the same capabilities are being developed – may be **an equally effective alternative**, with less dire long-term effects

Neutralization

- Some estimates suggest **a dozen or more countries** may secretly possess nuclear, biological or chemical weapons
- Suggested that nuclear weapons could **neutralize the threat** of these weapons by instantly incinerating biological and chemical agents with its extreme, germicidal heat
- The immense heat of a nuclear explosion is instant, but destroying chemical agents require sustained high temperatures
- Hazardous substances can be spread over vast distances and missing by only some meters would have devastating effects
- Such use largely dismissed: **thermo baric or fuel explosives** a more appropriate alternative

Defending the home base

- 1954: NATO's Military Committee concluded that the Alliance would be unable to “prevent the rapid overrunning of Europe unless NATO immediately employed nuclear weapons”
- The doctrinal birth of the **nuclear umbrella**
- US nuclear weapons in stockpile in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Turkey
- This ‘**extended deterrence**’ has supposedly protected NATO from Soviet/Russian aggression
- Allegedly offering security benefits, but with no guidelines for how an umbrella state would be protected by these weapons

The Buffer Zone Effect

- Europe protected by the Atlantic Ocean in the West
- In the east, Scandinavia, Eastern and Southern Europe acts as a buffer zone stretching into the vast Eurasian landmass
- In the event that NATO used nuclear weapons to destroy an invading Russian force, nuclear weapons would be dropped on European territories in the buffer zone
- An obvious **unevenness in the military utility** of nuclear weapons for buffer states and non-buffer states
- Many Germans have questioned how the nuclear weapons in Europe could hit targets beyond friendly nations
- In a world without nuclear weapons, Russian aggression would be deterred by conventional means, and Russia does not enjoy conventional superiority

The Stockpile Effect

- Since the Cold War, American nuclear weapons stockpiled in a number of European countries
- The presence of nuclear weapons **may increase the likelihood** of an attack against certain European States
- If deterrence fails, nuclear weapons stockpiles in Europe would constitute **obvious targets for a Russian attack**
- German attempts for withdrawal of weapons – “stockpile effect”
- In the event of an attack, the US would have a **duty to respond**
- Raises important questions about the balance of risks and benefits that come with nuclear arsenals

A Dead Horse?

- Having nuclear weapons carries the inherent risk of **'nuclear escalation'**
- For less powerful military actors, nuclear weapons provide an effective way of being taken seriously in international affairs
- Using nuclear weapons, like any terror tactic, are **the means of the desperate**
- Nuclear weapons expensive to develop and maintain – resources that could be used for conventional capabilities
- Conventional technology with strategic value similar to nuclear weapons is under development

Conclusion

- The recasting of the case for a military utility for nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War setting proves far from convincing
- Nuclear weapons **do not seem to be appropriate tools** either for bunker busting or as neutralizers of other WMD
- Any utility of nuclear weapons in this scenario is equaled by less risky and less costly alternatives
- Neither does nuclear weapons appear particularly viable to halt an invading army
- NATO's member states should **contemplate effective measures** for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons in favor of more practically viable conventional weapons