The False Promise of Tactical Nuclear Weapons

John Mearsheimer

ChatGPT s*ubstantively cleaned English transcript*

Editorial note. *Timestamps, promotional fragments, filler words, false starts and repeated formulations have been removed. Recognition errors have been corrected and sentence structure clarified while preserving the argument, examples and qualifications.*

Introduction

John Mearsheimer

Hi, this is John Mearsheimer. What I would like to discuss today is nuclear weapons, particularly tactical nuclear weapons.

Why tactical nuclear weapons and why now

There have been many press reports that the United States is interested in expanding its options for nuclear use. In that context, there has been much discussion of relying more heavily on tactical nuclear weapons for deterrence and warfighting. I would like to examine what is driving this interest and whether it makes sense. I think, first of all, there's no question that the United States is very interested in having many options when it comes to employing its nuclear forces.

From massive retaliation to flexible options

You want to remember that when the United States first developed its nuclear arsenal after World War II, and especially in the 1950s, it employed a policy of massive retaliation. And there were not many options built in to the American doctrine for employing nuclear weapons. Again, the emphasis was on massive retaliation, not flexible response or flexible options. But as time went by, certainly starting in the late 1950s, early 1960s, we began to think long and hard about just having a lot more flexibility in terms of how we use those nuclear weapons. So I find it hardly surprising that the United States is interested in expanding its options from that perspective.

The real driver: weakened conventional forces

But I actually believe that's not the main driver. What really matters is that, as a consequence of the wars in Ukraine and especially Iran, we have discovered that our conventional forces are much weaker relative to our principal adversaries than we recognized a few years ago. I think what happened here is that during the unipolar moment, the United States basically allowed its industrial base to wither away. And we discovered in the Ukraine war that if you get involved in a conflict with a country like Russia, and this is true of China as well, you need a robust industrial base to produce the weaponry to wage that war.

One of the advantages that the Russians have over the Ukrainians, and even over the Europeans and the Americans, is that the Russians have a robust industrial base so they can produce weaponry over the long term for purposes of waging a protracted conflict. If the United States became involved in a war with China, it would face an adversary with a robust industrial base capable of sustaining the conflict for years. The United States would be in deep trouble after a few months because, again, it does not have a sufficient industrial base to wage a protracted conventional war.

Ukraine, Iran, and depleted munitions

And then, of course, if you go to the Iran war, it's very clear that we have run down our stockpile of critical munitions in that conflict. And the end result is that our conventional deterrence has been weakened.

Balancing conventional and nuclear deterrence

You always want to remember that if you're the United States or any other great power and you're thinking about deterring an adversary, you rely on both conventional deterrence and nuclear deterrence, and you pay careful attention to what the balance is between conventional deterrence and nuclear deterrence. And I'll talk more about that as we go along. But we're in a situation now, the United States, where our conventional forces have been greatly weakened as a result of the Iran war and as a result of supplying the Ukrainians with weaponry. And furthermore, as I said, we also realized that we do not have a robust industrial base, which would put us at a disadvantage in a protracted conventional war.

So, given that our conventional deterrence has been weakened, it's hardly surprising that people are now beginning to pay more attention to nuclear deterrence, because that is how the balance works.

The appeal of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield

Many people seem to think that if we emphasize nuclear deterrence, we should pay special attention to tactical nuclear weapons because they are supposedly well suited for battlefield use. If you get involved in a war, whether it's in Europe or in East Asia, and you don't feel that you have sufficient conventional forces, you can fight that war with tactical nuclear weapons.

Why that thinking is misguided

I believe this thinking is misguided, and I would like to explain why. The best way to do that is to examine our experience in the 1950s, when we emphasized tactical nuclear weapons, and focus on one particular operation. This was a war game called Carte Blanche that took place in June of 1955. It ran from June 20th, 1955 to June 28th, 1955.

Defending Europe in the 1950s

Before discussing Carte Blanche, I want to sketch the broader picture of how we thought about deterrence in Europe in the 1950s. The United States and its allies, of course, were interested in deterring the Soviet Union. And when you talk about deterrence, it's important to understand that you also have to be concerned with warfighting, because deterrence might not work. Deterrence might fail. And if deterrence fails, then you have to fight a war. So the United States throughout the 1950s thought long and hard about how to deter the Soviets from attacking into Western Europe. It also considered how to fight the Soviet Union should deterrence fail. Now, the problem that the Americans faced from their perspective was that the Soviet Union had a formidable conventional army.

Remember, the Soviet Union played the principal role in defeating the Wehrmacht in World War II. So throughout the 1950s, most Western defense experts or Western policymakers viewed the Soviet military and especially the Soviet army, as a formidable force. Furthermore, it's very important to understand that West Germany, which eventually became a key player in the NATO alliance, did not become a member of NATO until 1955, and it did not begin rearming until 1955. From 1950 to 1955, there was effectively no German army. Furthermore, the French were busy fighting against the Vietnamese in Indochina. You remember the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu, which put an end to the French position in Vietnam, took place in 1954. So France was distracted in a very important way.

There was no German military of any consequence, and the United States had limited forces in Europe, limited conventional forces.

NATO nuclear policy and no first use

In the 1950s, we therefore deployed large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons to Europe and relied on them both to deter a Soviet conventional attack and to fight if deterrence failed. This is why the United States has never had a no-first-use policy: it has always understood that it might have to use nuclear weapons to rescue the situation if it were losing a conventional war against the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, when NATO's conventional forces were not especially strong and the Soviet Union presented a formidable threat, we believed that if deterrence failed and the Soviets were to attack, we would have to turn to nuclear weapons very quickly, if not immediately. So it's just very important to understand that tactical nuclear weapons were seen for much of the 1950s as a magic weapon.

Carte Blanche: the June 1955 war game

A war game conducted in mid-June 1955 threw cold water on this line of thinking. In Carte Blanche, the Soviets attacked with conventional forces, NATO responded with tactical nuclear weapons, and the Soviets used nuclear weapons of their own. The war game involved about 3,000 NATO aircraft from 11 countries. Estimates range from 335 to 355 tactical nuclear weapons employed in the exercise, with the Soviets detonating slightly more than NATO. But let's say the total was about 335 nuclear weapons. And the war was fought almost exclusively on West German soil. Now, what was the end result? The result was 1.7 million West Germans killed and 3.5 million wounded. Moreover, these numbers don't take into account the subsequent deaths that would occur as a result of the radiation poisoning.

Consider what that means: an eight-day war game in 1955 ended with 1.7 million West Germans dead. What does this tell you? In effect, it tells you that you're destroying Germany to save Germany.

Destroying Germany to save Germany

This operation, this war game, was viewed as evidence that it was hard to see how you could defend West Germany with tactical nuclear weapons without destroying it as a functioning country. And it raised all sorts of concerns, unsurprisingly, in West Germany, about whether this was a viable strategy for defending Germany or defending Western Europe against a possible Soviet attack. When people calculated how much destruction had resulted from this war game, it became clear to many people that given this level of destruction, tactical nuclear weapons did not make much sense.

The escalation problem

There was another dimension that came into play here that really mattered. And that's the issue of escalation. In the war game itself, it became very clear that it was hard to control escalation. And there is no question that it's hard to draw a clear line between tactical nuclear weapons, intermediate range nuclear weapons and strategic nuclear weapons. And not only is it hard to draw that line, it's a slippery slope so that once you start using tactical nuclear weapons, you quickly find yourself in a situation where you're thinking about using intermediate range nuclear weapons or strategic nuclear weapons. Moreover, because we have thankfully never had a nuclear war, we have very little understanding of the dynamics of escalation in a nuclear war.

Command and control in a nuclear war

In the NATO scenario, limiting a nuclear war to West Germany would require excellent command and control. And that's true in any nuclear war, right? If you want to keep it limited, you have to have excellent command and control systems. And there's all sorts of evidence that it'll be very difficult, if not impossible, to maintain meaningful command and control as you go up the escalation ladder in a nuclear conflict. So what happens after Carte Blanche is we come to realize that tactical nuclear weapons really are not a viable way of defending West Germany because of the destruction that would be wrought on that country.

And furthermore, we come to quickly understand that the threat of escalation is so great that you can't allow yourself to think that you can fight a limited nuclear war of the sort that played out in Carte Blanche and keep it limited. And indeed, there is a serious possibility that if you were in real life to engage in a war in West Germany and the NATO forces and the Soviet forces of the Warsaw Pact forces were to use significant numbers of nuclear weapons, it wasn't clear that you could keep it limited. In fact, there were all sorts of reasons to think it would escalate to a general thermonuclear war, which, of course, nobody wanted.

MC 14/2 and NATO nuclear doctrine in 1957

Returning to the 1950s, what happens is that in 1957, amazingly, two years after Carte Blanche, NATO formalizes a military doctrine. Known as MC 14/2, the doctrine called for the massive use of nuclear weapons to defend Europe and placed great emphasis on tactical nuclear weapons. NATO approved it in the spring of 1957, two years after Carte Blanche. But then what begins to happen over time is that NATO begins to rethink this issue, given what happened with Carte Blanche, and given all the studies that are subsequently done on the subject of escalation and nuclear flexibility, we begin to realize that a doctrine for defending Europe that relies on tactical nuclear weapons is not a good idea. In fact, it's a very bad idea. So two things happen here.

Shift one: rebuilding conventional deterrence

The first is that NATO decides that it's going to emphasize conventional deterrence much more in the future than it had in the past. Remember I said before that if you're a great power and you're thinking about how to deter an adversary, you have to think about the balance between conventional deterrence and nuclear deterrence. How much do you want to rely on conventional deterrence? How much do you want to rely on nuclear deterrence? There's no question, given that we live in a nuclear world, that nuclear deterrence and conventional deterrence are both going to be present all the time. But the question is, what does the balance look like between the two? And what I'm telling you is that during the 1950s, the balance was heavily skewed in favor of nuclear deterrence in Europe.

And this, of course, is seen in MC 14/2, which is the NATO doctrine that's put into place in the spring of 1957. But what happens over time is that NATO de-emphasised its reliance on nuclear deterrence, and it begins to build formidable conventional forces, and it begins to rely much more on conventional deterrence. And this is possible in good part because the German army comes online after 1955. Remember, Germany joins NATO in 1955 and West Germany began rearming in 1955. This is the same year, same time frame as Carte Blanche. Over the second half of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, the Germans developed a formidable conventional fighting force. Remember, the Germans did not have nuclear weapons at the time. The Germans, of course, still have no nuclear weapons. But the Germans had a very formidable conventional army.

And the United States commits to building more powerful conventional forces in Europe as well. We began to de-emphasize nuclear deterrence and, with it, tactical nuclear weapons. And we rely much more on conventional deterrence.

Shift two: nuclear weapons as coercion rather than warfighting

Now, the second thing that we do is that we fully understand that we want to continue to rely on nuclear deterrence. If conventional deterrence and nuclear deterrence fail to stop the Soviets from attacking and the Soviets attack, we will first try to stop them conventionally. This is what happens in the 1960s. We decide by then that if the Soviets attack into Western Europe, we will first try to stop them with the formidable conventional forces that NATO built up in the late 50s and in the early 1960s. By contrast, in the mid-1950s, at the time of Carte Blanche, a Soviet attack would have led us almost automatically to tactical nuclear weapons because there was no credible conventional defense. That all changes by the early 1960s. And of course, we're relying on conventional deterrence.

But everyone understood that NATO's conventional forces might fail to stop the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies from overrunning Western Europe. So the question that NATO then faces is, how should it think about using its

nuclear weapons? Carte Blanche had shown that there was no incentive to try to salvage a failed conventional war in West Germany with tactical nuclear weapons. There was therefore no incentive for the massive use of tactical nuclear weapons should NATO's conventional forces fail to stop those of the Warsaw Pact.

A handful of weapons and the slippery slope

NATO therefore developed a different doctrine. It says that should the Warsaw Pact begin to overrun NATO's conventional forces, what NATO will do is it will deploy a handful of nuclear weapons against targets, maybe in East Germany, maybe in Czechoslovakia, maybe in Poland, just a handful of nuclear weapons to convey to the Soviet Union that it was deadly serious about stopping the war and preventing the Warsaw Pact from overrunning all of Europe. In other words, what NATO planned to do was to launch a very limited nuclear attack thereby throwing both sides onto the slippery slope to oblivion. NATO was not interested in launching a handful of nuclear weapons to win the war in any military sense, NATO had figured out, as a result of Carte Blanche and the subsequent analysis that was done, that you could not win a war with nuclear weapons.

But what you could do with nuclear weapons is use a small number of them to convince the other side that you were deadly serious about coercing them to stop their attack, and the threat of escalation was at the heart of the strategy. If a handful of nuclear strikes did not stop the Soviet conventional offensive against Western Europe, the United States might use a few more. No one could know where this would lead. Tactical, or small, nuclear weapons did not disappear. What happens is that NATO thinks about using those nuclear weapons in a much more limited way, in a way that has really nothing to do with warfighting.

MC 14/2 and MC 14/3

MC 14/2. This is the 1957 version of NATO strategy on the employment of nuclear weapons. MC 14/2 basically calls for warfighting with tactical nuclear weapons. If you look at MC 14/3, which is adopted by NATO in 1967, ten years later, it calls for using nuclear weapons in a very limited way for purposes of basically putting both sides out on the slippery slope to oblivion and convincing the Soviets or the Warsaw Pact in this case, that it should stop its offensive against Western Europe, because the United States will increase the number of its attacks with nuclear weapons if the Soviets don't stop, and at some point this could escalate into a general thermonuclear war that the Soviet Union certainly did not want. Now, there are many people who think that NATO strategy, as laid out in MC 14/3, makes no sense.

That's an issue for another day.

How NATO moved away from nuclear warfighting

The point that I'm trying to make here is that the United States of America, once upon a time, placed a great emphasis on nuclear deterrence and nuclear warfighting with tactical nuclear weapons. And the logic that was employed in that case had to do with the fact that we did not feel that we had sufficient conventional forces to deter or fight the Soviet Union. We did not have sufficient conventional deterrence, and therefore we had to rely on nuclear deterrence, which in effect meant employing tactical nuclear weapons. But it quickly became clear with Carte Blanche that was simply not a viable strategy. And we moved away from it. And again, we moved away from it in two ways. Both changes fell under the umbrella of flexible response.

First, we increased our conventional capabilities on the central front in Europe, shifting the balance away from nuclear deterrence. Second, we abandoned the idea that you could fight a nuclear war with tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Instead, to use Thomas Schelling's language, we adopted a policy of manipulating risk. We were using a handful of nuclear weapons to manipulate the Soviets by threatening the possibility of escalation to the general thermonuclear level.

What this means for the United States today

Now, what does this tell us about the situation that we're in today? It tells us that we're in a lot of trouble because our conventional forces have been weakened, and therefore there is powerful incentive to rely more on nuclear deterrence than we have in the past, or at least since the 1950s. And this is not a good thing. You want to have a deterrent posture that relies on conventional forces and nuclear forces, but you want the nuclear forces in the background. You want the conventional forces up front. But the problem we face, and this is certainly true in East Asia today, is that we are in a position where our conventional forces, our conventional deterrent, is nowhere near as formidable as it should be for a variety of reasons that are subject for another day.

And therefore we're relying or thinking about relying more on nuclear deterrence. And of course, this has pushed us to think about tactical nuclear weapons. But as Carte Blanche shows, this is not a viable strategy. There's no way the United States can fight a war with tactical nuclear weapons in Europe or in East Asia, and win that war in any meaningful way. Carte Blanche shows that very clearly, and nothing has changed since then. And furthermore, the threat of escalation is ever present.

So all of this is to say that what the United States should do moving forward, instead of relying on tactical nuclear weapons for warfighting purposes, is get back to the business of building up its conventional deterrent and thinking about using nuclear weapons, if need be, in a much more selective and coercive way of the kind that is embodied in MC 14/3, which, as I said, became NATO doctrine in 1967.

Conclusion

That concludes my episode for today. I'm quite confident that there'll be many more episodes down the road that deal with different aspects of the nuclear issue, because there's almost no question that given the way events are evolving in the world today, nuclear issues of all sorts will become much more important to talk about than has been the case in recent decades. Thank you very much for listening, and I look forward to our next episode.

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Joachim Gruber