

NUCLEAR THREATS FROM SMALL STATES

Jerome H. Kahan

June 13, 1994

The author is Director of Regional Studies at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA). The views expressed in this monograph are his own and do not necessarily represent those of CNA, the Department of the Navy, or the U.S. Government.

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050. Comments also may be conveyed directly to the Conference Organizer, Dr. Earl H. Tilmford, Jr., by calling commercial (717) 245-3234 or DSN 242-3234. Copies of this report may be obtained from the Publications and Production Office by calling commercial (717) 245-4133, DSN 242-4133, FAX (717) 245-3820, or via the internet at rummelr@carlisle-emh2.army.mil.

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) monographs are loaded on the Strategic Studies Institute Homepage for electronic dissemination. SSI's Homepage address is: <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usassi/>.

This study was originally presented at the U.S. Army War College Fifth Annual Strategy Conference held April 26-28, 1994, with the assistance of the Office of Net Assessment. The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to publish the paper as part of its Conference Series.

FOREWORD

What are the policy implications regarding proliferation and counterproliferation of nuclear weapons among Third World states? How does deterrence operate outside the parameters of superpower confrontation as defined by the cold war's elaborate system of constraints enforced by concepts like mutual assured destruction, and counter-value and counter-force targeting? How can U.S. policymakers devise contingencies for dealing with nuclear threats posed by countries like North Korea, Libya, Iraq, Iran, and Syria?

These are some of the unsettling but nevertheless important questions addressed by the author in this monograph. In his analysis, Mr. Jerome Kahan examines the likelihood that one or more of these countries will use nuclear weapons before the year 2000. He also offers a framework that policymakers and planners might use in assessing U.S. interests in preempting the use of nuclear weapons or in retaliating for their use.

Ironically, with the end of the cold war, it is imperative that defense strategists, policymakers, and military professionals think about the "unthinkable." In the interest of fostering debate on this important subject, the Strategic Studies Institute commends this insightful monograph to your attention.

JOHN W. MOUNTCASTLE
Colonel, U.S. Army
Director, Strategic Studies Institute

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

JEROME H. KAHAN is Director of Regional Studies at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA). He joined CNA in 1990 after retiring from the Senior Foreign Service with the rank of Minister-Counselor. During his State Department career, Mr. Kahan held positions as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research, Deputy Director of the Political- Military Affairs Bureau, Member of the Policy Planning Staff, and Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Turkey. In addition to experience in the private sector, Mr. Kahan also served in the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the Department of Defense. Between government assignments he was a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution where he authored or coauthored three books and a series of articles on strategic policy and arms control. Mr. Kahan is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Institute of Strategic Studies.

NUCLEAR THREATS FROM SMALL STATES

For decades, the United States has pursued nuclear nonproliferation as an important national security goal. At times, this objective was masked or even compromised by the overarching needs of managing the U.S.-Soviet nuclear balance and maintaining the Western Alliance. As the cold war faded, the problem of proliferation assumed an ever more prominent place in U.S. national security strategy. During the Bush administration, this issue was especially visible when the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War showed how close that nation was to having developed nuclear weapons. The Clinton administration's national security policy puts priority on nonproliferation and assigns to the Department of Defense the mission of "counterproliferation"—that is, the strategic means of dealing with new nations that cross the threshold and actually obtain weapons of mass destruction.¹

This monograph focuses on counterproliferation, with special attention to crises involving Third World states that, in the near term, may produce or acquire militarily usable nuclear weapons. It addresses four questions of interest to national security planners and policymakers:

- What is the likelihood of Third World nations obtaining and using nuclear weapons in ways that endanger U.S. interests?
- Under what circumstances might the United States turn to military force if faced with Third World nuclear crises?
- How might the United States apply its military capability in responding to nuclear crises in regional settings?
- What strategic and force structure guidelines should be followed in planning to deal with Third World nuclear proliferation?

NUCLEAR CHALLENGES

By the year 2000, seven so-called Third World countries along with Israel can be posited to have acquired potentially usable nuclear forces—weapons and delivery systems. These countries are India, Pakistan, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Some of these states may have already crossed the nuclear threshold, but none has declared that it has done so. All have a national interest in either obtaining nuclear forces or retaining and possibly improving nuclear forces they may presently possess.

The means as well as the motivations shaping the nuclear ambitions of these states vary widely. Along with Israel, some Third World countries now have a substantial capacity to produce nuclear weapons themselves (Pakistan, India, and North Korea). By the end of the decade, these nations could develop relatively sophisticated nuclear forces consisting of dozens of weapons

capable of delivery by advanced aircraft and ballistic missiles of medium range. Others (Iran, Libya, and Syria) may be forced to purchase weapons or high-grade fissionable material from external sources. The nuclear arsenals of these states will tend to be relatively small and unsophisticated, consisting of a few weapons outfitted for delivery by aircraft or short-range missiles. In one case (Iraq), international restraints would have to be overcome for nuclear weapons to be obtained, whether through indigenous or external means. We assume that Iraq would be able to acquire a nuclear force of moderate capacity by the end of the decade.²

Israel, alone among the nations cited, is and will presumably remain a U.S. ally. Although a nuclear-armed Israel can complicate U.S. security interests, nuclear weapons in the hands of the seven other states can lead to more direct challenges. A few years ago, the list of potentially worrisome small nuclear powers would have included South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina, but these states have rolled back their programs. A number of the new nations formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union have inherited nuclear weapons. This analysis, however, deals with only Third World nuclear challenges.

Likelihood of Nuclear Use.

The likelihood that the eight nations listed above would actually use or threaten to use nuclear weapons is, in brief, significant enough for the United States to take this possibility seriously. Moreover, the chances of use are driven by a number of rational factors, not by the specter of irrational governments lurching out of control or the prospect of nuclear-armed terrorists. These factors can be identified as contributing singly or in combination to the likelihood of nuclear use by Third World states.

Latent Conflicts. Regional rivalries will inevitably lead to crises and armed conflicts between two small nuclear states or between a nuclear-armed nation and a nonnuclear adversary. Crises can turn into military conflict, and, at any point in such dynamic situations, nuclear threats and use may well become deliberate instruments of policy. This would be more likely to occur if a nuclear-armed state, embroiled in a conflict and deficient in conventional forces, starts to lose a conventional war and is facing a nonnuclear adversary.

Weakened Constraints. During the cold war era, the United States and the USSR were wary that regional conflicts might escalate into a full-blown nuclear confrontation. Washington and Moscow intervened to dampen local nuclear conflicts and offered security umbrellas to their allies and friends. But now that these constraints and connections are weak, small nuclear states may feel isolated and more prone to use whatever military means are necessary to protect their interests. Third World nuclear

states may not be inhibited from nuclear use for fear that the United States or Russia will retaliate against them or that the world community will punish them. President Clinton has threatened to respond with all means necessary against North Korea if that country uses nuclear weapons,³ but the credibility and effectiveness of this policy have yet to be tested.

Dynamics of Deterrence. The United States and the USSR spent decades developing a stable nuclear relationship based on an understanding of mutual deterrence that evolved through years of difficult dialogue and debate. An arcane set of doctrinal principles slowly emerged, and nuclear force postures on both sides were eventually guided, at least in theory, by these principles. But deterrence may not be seen the same way or work the same way with newly formed small nuclear states. Strategic discourse between two small nuclear-armed adversaries may be nonexistent, raising the prospect of a breakdown in deterrence at the regional level. New Third World nuclear states may not be inhibited from attacking nonnuclear states in their region if, as suggested above, extended deterrence flowing from the threat of superpower retaliation is not seen as credible.

Intelligence Gaps. Third World states tend to have imperfect and incomplete intelligence information about their relative positions in a conflict. Policymakers in these countries therefore assume the worst and may decide to launch nuclear weapons prematurely, based on the misperception that an opponent is about to conduct a preemptive strike against its nuclear arsenal. A situation along these lines almost developed in 1992 during a clash between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, with the United States stepping in to provide information and diffuse the crisis.⁴

Technical Deficiencies. Small nuclear forces, especially in the hands of technically unsophisticated countries, may well be deficient in command and control arrangements. These forces may also be vulnerable to attack, at least until relatively survivable launch platforms are acquired. These features increase the risk of accidental or unauthorized nuclear use. When combined with less-than-perfect information, the chances of nuclear use in a Third World setting increase further due to "the reciprocal fear of surprise attack"—a concept coined during the early days of the U.S.-USSR strategic balance when the superpower deterrent relationship was not yet stable.⁵

U.S. Interests and Stakes.

For purposes of analysis, it is assumed that none of the Third World nuclear states being considered will be capable of credibly attacking the U.S. homeland with long-range delivery systems by the year 2000. Nor is it assumed that these states will attempt to sneak a nuclear bomb into the United States by unconventional means (e.g., suitcase bombs in commercial aircraft

or ocean freighters carrying clandestine devices). Given these assumptions, why should the United States be concerned if Third World states in remote places use nuclear weapons?

Following is a review of U.S. interests that could be endangered if a Third World nuclear crisis arose. Not all these interests would necessarily be challenged in every particular Third World nuclear crisis, but the actions we take and the risks we run will be governed, in part, by the range of interests at stake and their relative importance.

Risks to U.S. Citizens and Forces. Protecting U.S. nationals living abroad, as well as defending U.S. military forces stationed overseas, is a primary responsibility of our president. By the year 2000, thousands of U.S. nationals and substantial numbers of U.S. military forces will be in foreign lands and vulnerable to potential nuclear attack by nuclear-armed regional states. This is true when we look in Asia, South Korea and Japan, the Indian subcontinent, or the Middle East.

Risks to U.S. Allies. Whether dictated by formal treaties or not, the United States would place prevention of nuclear use against our allies or close friends very high on our list of national priorities. In some cases, the existence of U.S. bases on the soil of these countries would strengthen our determination. Examples of nonnuclear nations under a potential nuclear threat are Japan, South Korea, Egypt, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, and Italy.

Risks of Escalation. Even though the cold war is over, localized nuclear use could risk "horizontal" escalation, whereby adjacent countries would feel forced to use their nuclear weapons. There is also a risk of "vertical" escalation, where one of the larger nuclear powers could become involved. An example of the former might be an Iran-Iraq conflict with one or both sides nuclear-armed, forcing Israel to make a military move with its posited nuclear systems. An example of the latter is a Korean war where North Korean nuclear weapons might bring China's nuclear arsenal into the picture.

Humanitarian Concerns. Any nuclear use would create enormous devastation from blast and fallout effects in the target country and adjacent states. The Chernobyl incident, orders of magnitude less serious than a nuclear detonation, has not yet been forgotten, and its consequences linger. The United States has responded to natural disasters and human suffering abroad in such cases as Bangladesh and Somalia; it's difficult to believe we would not, as a nation, respond to a nuclear-use disaster.

Risk to Resources. A regional nuclear conflict could jeopardize our access to overseas resources or our ability to conduct trade in or near certain areas. Nuclear conflict in the Middle East, which would destroy oil fields or block shipping, is the example that springs to mind. The Gulf War, which did not

involve nuclear weapons, highlighted this problem. But nuclear use in Asia, whether on the Korean Peninsula or against Japan, could also have serious economic consequences.

Risk of Precedent. Nuclear weapons have not been used in anger since the raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States has sought to maintain the nuclear "firebreak" and to persuade existing or potential nuclear states that these weapons should not be used as military or diplomatic instruments. Although use of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict could strengthen the barriers against subsequent use, it could have the opposite effect in certain situations and stimulate interest in acquiring nuclear weapons.

Conclusion.

It might be useful to put the Third World nuclear danger in perspective. On the one hand, these dangers are *less severe* but *more likely* than nuclear risks in the context of the relatively stable East-West balance that characterized the last few decades of the cold war. On the other hand, the presence of nuclear weapons in the Third World makes future regional crises *more severe* but *less likely* than the conventional Third World crises we have expected and experienced thus far. If nothing else, U.S. planners and policymakers need to pay more attention to prospective Third World nuclear threats, lest we risk facing this new challenge unprepared.

PROPENSITY TO USE FORCE

Whether the United States would turn to the actual use of military force in dealing with a future Third World nuclear crisis is a complex issue. A highly specific but operationally significant question is whether we would decide to preemptively attack and attempt to destroy a hostile Third World country's nuclear force before it can be used, assuming that deterrence no longer seems to be working and that defenses cannot be relied upon to protect our interests. Whether and how U.S. military force is used would clearly depend on the details of each case, but we can develop guidelines before crises arise to assist in preparing contingency plans. The approach we will follow is to present plausible hypotheses about the propensity of U.S. leaders to use military force preemptively and then "test" these hypotheses against a range of representative scenarios involving the Third World nuclear states of interest.

Setting the Scenarios.

Seven scenarios are sketched below, posited to take place by the year 2000. They are all familiar crises, but with the crucial exception that one or more of the regional protagonists is now assumed to possess usable nuclear weapons. The scenarios deliberately stop short of actual nuclear use by a regional state

as a means of focusing on the role of U.S. military forces for purposes of deterrence and preemption. Each scenario can, of course, be "pushed" to the point where a regional protagonist uses nuclear weapons, thus raising the question of whether and how the United States might use military force for purposes of retaliation.

Scenario 1. In the midst of a leadership succession crisis, North Korea launches a massive conventional attack against South Korea, including an attack on U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. Republic of Korea (ROK) forces counterattack while an increasing number of U.S. military reinforcements enter the country. North Korea threatens to use its nuclear-tipped missiles against Japan as well as ROK and U.S. targets. The tide turns, and allied forces push the attacking army back across the Demilitarized Zone. U.S. intelligence sources detect North Korean missiles being placed on full alert, with associated arming and fuzing steps suggesting imminent launch...

Scenario 2. Iraq convinces the world community that it has complied with the U.N. mandate, but manages to successfully pursue a clandestine nuclear weapons program and acquire a new arsenal of mobile missiles. Estimating that the United States is too preoccupied with domestic problems to intervene, Iraqi conventional forces once again invade Kuwaiti territory. Kuwaiti forces slow down the attack and the government requests U.S. military assistance. Saudi Arabia also requests U.S. assistance and offers the United States permission to use its ports and bases. Iraqi threats mount, and its mobile missiles are dispersed and put on alert...

Scenario 3. The peace process falls completely apart and Israel moves to annex the West Bank. An Arab coalition, including a nuclear-armed Syria, strikes back with massive conventional force against the invading Israeli army. The Arab coalition hopes that Syria's nuclear capability will deter Israeli nuclear use. Israel launches a massive conventional counterattack that pushes Arab forces out of the West Bank. Israeli conventional forces also attack Syria's nuclear capabilities, but fail to destroy all nuclear-armed delivery systems. Syria threatens to use its remaining nuclear weapons against massed Israeli armed forces. The United States detects the arming and fuzing of Syrian missiles...

Scenario 4. Iran, governed by Islamic Fundamentalists, acquires nuclear weapons from one of the former Soviet Republics. In the meantime, Iraq, having rebuilt its military forces to include its own nuclear arsenal, launches a surprise conventional attack into Iran to retake territory, overthrow the regime, destroy the army, and negate Iran's nuclear capability. The attack fails to destroy all of Iran's nuclear forces. Iran prepares for a massive counterattack. Both sides issue nuclear threats and move all available mobile missiles out of garrison...

Scenario 5. This scenario is a replay of the shipping war in the Gulf (Earnest Will), with Iran threatening to block the Straits of Hormuz but in possession of a small number of externally acquired nuclear weapons. U.S. naval forces escorting commercial ships are vulnerable to an Iranian nuclear strike. The United States continues its escort operations and moves additional forces into the area. Iran announces it is prepared to use nuclear weapons either against U.S. forces or countries in the region friendly to the United States...

Scenario 6. Pakistan launches a conventional strike into Kashmir but soon finds itself losing the war as superior Indian conventional forces counterattack. As part of this counterstrike, India attempts to de-nuclearize Pakistan by preemptively attacking Pakistani air bases and known missile sites. A few Pakistani nuclear-armed mobile missiles survive and the government of Pakistan threatens to destroy the massed Indian army unless India retreats. India returns the threat...

Scenario 7. Libya purchases a few nuclear weapons and supports another terrorist attack against U.S. nationals in Europe. This time, Libya threatens nuclear weapons use if the United States conducts military reprisals. The United States launches selected conventional strikes against Libyan headquarters and known nuclear sites, but a few Libyan mobile missiles survive. Libya directs a specific threat against the Italian government and U.S. bases in southern Italy...

Testing the Hypotheses.

As noted earlier, we assume that deterrence is about to fail in connection with each scenario. Given this assumption, we offer four hypotheses about the factors influencing U.S. decisions on whether to use our military power to preemptively destroy the Third World nuclear force in question:

- The higher the U.S. interests at stake, the stronger the desire to use force to prevent nuclear use.
- The greater the likelihood of imminent nuclear use by an adversary, the more pressure there will be for turning to military solutions.
- The more sophisticated a nuclear opponent, the less likely that U.S. decisionmakers will consider use of military force.
- The more domestic and international political opposition to the use of military force, the greater the chance that decisionmakers will rule out this option.

U.S. Interests. In all cases, the United States is concerned about preventing nuclear use for nonproliferation, stability, and humanitarian reasons, but the fundamental U.S. interests at stake

vary across the different scenarios.

U.S. interests are very high in the case of Korea. North Korea's nuclear capabilities threaten U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan, and endanger the populations of both these countries. Moreover, we are tied to South Korea and Japan by security alliances. We also want to prevent a Libyan nuclear strike against Italy, a NATO ally. U.S. interests are high in the case of a nuclear-armed Iraq for different reasons: to protect oil resources and the sovereignty of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

In the case of Syria and an Arab-Israeli war, we have a long-standing commitment to the Israeli nation, which, in this case, needs to be balanced against the high stakes we have in our relations with the Arab world and its oil resources. We might well consider counterforce strikes against Syrian nuclear forces, while restraining Israel from using its nuclear power—unless of course Israel destroys Syria's nuclear arsenal first.

U.S. interests in the case of Iran are moderate to high, partly to ensure that Gulf oil will keep flowing and partly to protect U.S. ships in the area. A nuclear replay of the Iran-Iraq War is of low to moderate interest to the United States, raising questions of whether oil resources will be endangered and of the risk of a wider war affecting Israel and Saudi Arabia. Finally, in the Indo-Pak case, U.S. interests are limited to preventing or containing nuclear use and protecting U.S. nationals that might not have been evacuated.

Imminent Use. This factor greatly depends on the details of the scenario, but some generic observations can be made. In situations where U.S. intelligence detects the arming and fuzing of nuclear warheads, and does so with great reliability, nuclear use would be considered imminent—as in the Korean and Arab-Israeli scenarios. At this "peak period" of decision, U.S. policymakers must recognize that deterrence is about to fail, and face a difficult choice between two risky actions:

- Launching a preemptive counterforce strike, which may not be successful and could cause both actual and political fallout, or

- Taking no offensive actions, and hoping that the adversary will not launch his missiles or that available missile defenses will intercept any such attacks.

In other scenarios, where there are nuclear threats and force deployments but no sign of imminent use, U.S. leaders can continue to try diplomatic and economic means to deter use. Military forces can be applied for this purpose by moving them to the area, putting them on alert, and conducting exercises. U.S. officials can also issue warnings of dire consequences if nuclear weapons are used.

Sophistication of Opponent. In considering military counterforce, U.S. policymakers must calculate the feasibility of success. This creates a prospective dilemma: Would we attack when our interests are seriously threatened in order to prevent localized nuclear use, even if we are not confident of success? Or would we use force aggressively only when we are sure of an effective outcome, even if this meant accepting the severe consequences of nuclear use by a Third World state?

Our interests are extremely high in the case of Korea, but our capacity to effectively preempt against a relatively large, hardened, and dispersed target set is low, which highlights the dilemma noted above. We would be more capable of conducting relatively effective attacks against a rejuvenated but moderately sophisticated Iraqi nuclear program, learning from our past experience and assuming our intelligence information is accurate. This could be an instance where high interest might be matched by usable military power.

In the case of Indo-Pak, where there is a coincidence of relatively low interests and high to moderately sophisticated arsenals, the decision would presumably go against preemption. Here is a situation where low interests and nonusable military force are aligned. The case of Libya threatening Italy, on the other hand, is characterized by relatively high U.S. interest and a relatively unsophisticated nuclear arsenal, suggesting a greater propensity to contemplate a U.S. preemptive move. This is also true in the case of Syria threatening Israel, although the Israelis may de-nuclearize their enemy before we act. In the Iran-Iraq missile war and the Iran "Earnest Will" case, we see moderate to low capabilities and moderate U.S. interest. Here the issue is whether the smaller risk of military action is worth taking, recognizing that the stakes involved are modest.

Political Acceptability. Military calculations and strategic assessments by themselves will not determine whether the United States initiates an action of such import as launching a preemptive attack in a time of nuclear crisis. Congressional attitudes and U.S. public opinion, as well as world opinion generally, will be very much taken into account by the President and his advisors.

In the Korean war and Iraqi invasion scenarios, U.S. domestic and international public opinion would probably support active military action. Both adversaries would undoubtedly be seen as rogue states which have flaunted U.N. mandates. In the case of Libya, support might also be high, given Libya's past record and the fact that a U.S. ally is under the nuclear gun.

Falling in the middle range of moderate or mixed support would be the cases of Iran in the Gulf and Syria in connection with an Arab-Israeli war. The former would raise the specter of an oil cutoff, but the situation would not necessarily be seen by the U.S. public and the world community as warranting such

drastic action. The latter situation would raise enormous debates in the United States over whether we should engage in a nuclear conflict to protect Israel, given that nation's own capabilities and the critical importance of preserving relations with the Arab states.

The Indo-Pak and Iran-Iraq scenarios would probably not engender strong political support for serious U.S. military actions. Diplomatic and economic instruments would be favored.

Striking the Balance. As suggested earlier, decisionmakers would have to balance the four countervailing factors in deciding whether to launch a preemptive military strike. Table 1 rates these factors in relationship to each of the scenarios.

Scenario	U.S. Interests	Imminence of Nuclear Use	Sophistication of Opponent	Political Acceptability
North Korean Invasion	Very High	High	High	High
Iraq (Gulf War)	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Syria (Arab-Israeli War)	High	High	Low*	Moderate
Iran-Iraq Missiles	Moderate to Low	Moderate	Low/Moderate	Low
Iran (EARNEST WILL)	Moderate to High	Low	Low	Moderate
Indo-Pak (Kashmir)	Low	Low	High/High	Low
Libya Threat	High	Low	Low	High

*Israeli capabilities are high, but it is assumed that the United States would not consider targeting this force.

Table 1. Propensity to Preempt.

MILITARY OPTIONS

In discussing the propensity to use force, we highlighted the particular question of whether U.S. leaders would consider preemptive strikes against small nuclear states under certain crisis conditions. We now explore more broadly and systematically the issue of what range of military options could further U.S. interests in dealing with regional nuclear crises before and after nuclear use by a Third World adversary.

Before Nuclear Use.

During this phase, the U.S. objective would be to prevent nuclear use. Five strategies can support this objective.

Dissuading or deterring the adversary not to use nuclear weapons. Missions to accomplish this strategy primarily involve

posturing and positioning military forces to demonstrate resolve and imply that severe actions entailing the actual use of U.S. military force might be forthcoming. Forces and activities to be employed could include forward-basing strategic bombers and tactical aircraft, placing strategic missiles on alert, moving carrier battle groups closer to the country in question, flying reconnaissance aircraft over potential targets, and conducting joint and combined exercises in the region. Nuclear capable as well as conventional systems could be used, accompanied by appropriate high-level statements and warnings by senior officials.

Care should be taken, however, not to posture and threaten to the point that the opponent, fearing a U.S. preemptive attack, decides to launch his own nuclear weapons first. In the extreme, conventional forces such as cruise missiles could be used to attack high-value nonnuclear weapons targets in the adversary country to make our threats credible. But this is risky and can stimulate rather than deter nuclear use by the adversary.

Neutralizing the ability of a Third World country to use its nuclear weapons. In theory, this option would entail the use of externally based devices to remotely disable the nuclear-related command, control, and communications network in a target country or neutralize the arming and fuzing mechanism on the adversary's nuclear weapons. Theoretically, various techniques could be potentially useful in this regard, such as electronic warfare and long-distance lasers housed in satellites. In practice, these technologies do not exist, and it is not likely that reliable systems with such capabilities will be available within the next 10 to 15 years.⁶

Destroying enemy nuclear weapons before they are launched. This strategy involves a preemptive counterforce strike against all known nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems, both on-line and backup. Conventional forces would be preferable for this mission, because it would be politically difficult for the United States to justify striking first with nuclear weapons to prevent a smaller state from using its nuclear weapons. Moreover, nuclear weapons attacks would cause serious collateral damage and radioactive fallout. Depending on geography, base availability, and the size and sophistication of the target set, the United States could use a wide range of weapon systems to conduct a counterforce strike—strategic bombers, conventionally tipped strategic missiles, land- and sea-based tactical air, and cruise missiles.

Successful execution of such a mission is very demanding. Unless we faced an extremely small and unsophisticated force in a country where our intelligence was superb, we would almost surely not be able to identify and locate all nuclear targets—mobile, fixed, and hidden. Even if all targets were known by U.S. intelligence, destroying all of them simultaneously to avoid launchings under attack could not be guaranteed. Failure to fully

and effectively accomplish this mission raises the prospect of nuclear retaliation against U.S. forces or allies.

Capturing and disarming enemy nuclear forces before they can be used or deployed in more survivable modes. This strategy involves gaining physical control over the enemy's nuclear weapons, whether in storage or installed on delivery systems. Potentially, this is a job for U.S. special forces—inserting themselves clandestinely in enemy territory, finding all the nuclear weapons, and capturing or permanently disarming them. As a practical matter, the chances of successfully accomplishing such a mission are extremely low. Further, attempting the mission runs the risk of U.S. forces being discovered, captured, displayed publicly, or possibly executed. On balance, the risks seem to outweigh feasible gains.

Protecting U.S. forces and other endangered targets. If a Third World adversary is convinced that U.S. defensive systems can provide protection from nuclear attacks against U.S. forces, bases, or allies, deterrence would be strengthened. Moreover, both active and passive defenses can help make preemptive strikes more feasible by protecting targets against any adversary nuclear systems that survive a counterforce strike or those that are launched on warning of an impending U.S. attack. Passive defenses, such as shelters and radiation protection, are marginally useful, but active defenses—both air and missile defenses—are potentially capable of making a significant difference. Of these, ballistic missile defenses are the most important to deploy and the most challenging to develop, given the nature of the evolving Third World threat.

The United States is pursuing a number of theater missile defense programs, including land-based systems such as the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and sea-based systems such as the SM-2 deployed on Aegis cruisers.⁷ By the year 2000, some of these systems will be able to provide some protection for particular types of targets facing missile threats of various levels of sophistication, but it is unlikely that we will have high confidence in being able to intercept all incoming ballistic missiles that could be launched in the scenarios we postulated. Also, unless defensive systems had been predeployed at an earlier stage,⁸ the United States will have to solve the problem of moving enough of them into the appropriate theater in time to respond to a crisis.

After Nuclear Use.

If the United States fails to prevent or fully protect against nuclear use, policymakers will face the issue of how military forces should be applied after a Third World nation has actually used one or more nuclear weapons. It is important to recognize that even limited use of nuclear weapons is a unique event. Apart from political and policy implications, the

devastation that would be caused by small numbers of nuclear weapons used against forces or cities would be magnitudes greater than "normal" wartime damage.

U.S. military objectives after Third World nuclear use could be shaped by the number and nature of the targets destroyed. For analytic purposes, three broad objectives can be identified: limiting damage, defeating the attacker militarily, and punishing the perpetrator.

Destroying any residual nuclear weapons to limit further damage. Unlike the situation before nuclear use, the United States might now contemplate using its own nuclear weapons to accomplish this task. Yet even if U.S. nuclear use made military sense, the broader question of whether we, as a superpower, should respond in kind to nuclear use is extremely controversial. Moral as well as political issues are involved. Even in strategic terms, it is unclear whether responding in kind would deter further nuclear use by graphically demonstrating the consequences of such an action or whether such a decision would show that we are prepared to use our nuclear might and thereby stimulate proliferation.

Defeating the aggressor militarily by attacking all military targets, conventional as well as nuclear. The purpose of this objective would be a combination of limiting damage and crippling the capacity of the attacker to make war, as in the case of Iraq in DESERT STORM. This approach might make sense if the attacker used nuclear weapons in a limited fashion against only military targets. It would send a message to other nations contemplating nuclear weapons programs or use of nuclear forces already in their possession. Conventional weapons would be the system of choice, because nuclear weapons would be neither technically necessary nor politically acceptable.

Punishing a perpetrator by retaliating against the enemy's basic infrastructure or possibly against urban-industrial centers. Such devastating actions would certainly send a strong message, but it is questionable whether they would be judged by world opinion as appropriate, or whether they would help deter further nuclear use by small states. A crucial issue here is whether the United States should use conventional or nuclear weapons to conduct large-scale retaliatory missions. Nuclear weapons would be more "cost-effective," but, for political reasons, no U.S. president would find it easy to order such acts. Perhaps such extreme U.S. reactions could be considered proper and proportionate if the Third World attacker had deliberately used nuclear weapons to destroy urban centers with enormous attendant civilian fatalities.

The Nuclear Hedge.

When facing a nuclear-armed Third World adversary, U.S.

forces would have to be prepared to operate in a nuclear environment. This would be the case during deterrent and preemptive phases and also after Third World nuclear use if any nuclear weapons remain on enemy soil.

Some of the military actions that U.S. forces might take to hedge against nuclear threats could dilute the effectiveness of the counterproliferation missions these same forces might be asked to conduct:

- Dispersal of units, such as naval groups at sea, would be prudent; but dispersal can weaken the capacity of our forces to project power and overcome defenses.

- U.S. seaborne and airborne forces should stay out of range when facing Third World nuclear threats; but not displaying our power could make deterrence less successful, and attacking from a distance would make counterforce strikes less effective.

- Active protection can prevent our forces from being completely vulnerable to nuclear attack; but this requires that offensive forces remain under the protection of theater ballistic missile defense (BMD) and could limit their freedom of action to execute counterproliferation missions.

- Passive defenses, such as "hardening" of systems, could limit the severity of Third World nuclear attacks; but such countermeasures could inhibit the effectiveness of offensive forces by reducing flexibility, increasing weight, and requiring specialized training.

Summary.

The option or combination of options that make sense would be decided on a case-by-case basis, but plans should be made to provide the full range of choices to U.S. policymakers. Among the criteria to be considered in selecting military options are the following:

- What would the action accomplish militarily?
- What would be the technical confidence of success?
- What military risks would be faced?
- What political goals would be served?
- What political constraints would have to be dealt with?
- What penalties would be incurred by taking "nuclear hedging" actions?

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Four conclusions for U.S. policymakers and planners can be drawn from the analysis presented.

Conclusion 1: The Problem Is Real.

Third World states are acquiring nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. Before the year 2000, the world might well see one or more of these states using nuclear weapons in a regional setting. It is difficult to assume otherwise, given the potential for conflict and the political instabilities surrounding these emerging nuclear states, combined with the technically unsophisticated characteristics of some small nuclear forces. The prospect of regional nuclear use creates risks to U.S. security interests. Our forces, citizens, and allies would be gravely endangered. Global stability also could be jeopardized once the barrier against nuclear use is penetrated.

Conclusion 2: Planning Is Essential.

U.S. policymakers need to focus on how to dissuade small nuclear states from actually using their weapons or threatening such use in an attempt to coerce others. Declaratory policies warning such states to eschew nuclear use need to be backed by concrete military planning to develop capabilities to deter, protect against, and, if necessary, destroy hostile Third World nuclear forces. Special counterproliferation strategies and force packages should be developed. Although we must retain powerful nuclear forces of our own, we should emphasize acquiring offensive conventional forces that have effective counterforce potential as well as developing credible theater missile defenses. It is not correct to assume that such capabilities would automatically be subsumed within a force structure designed to deter larger nuclear threats or to prevail in major regional contingencies facing conventionally armed opponents.⁹

Conclusion 3: Execution Is Difficult.

Even with careful and high priority counterproliferation planning, U.S. policymakers would face difficult choices in dealing with Third World nuclear crises. It would be particularly difficult to judge whether to intervene and when to move beyond deterrence and actively apply U.S. military power in an attempt to disarm an enemy's nuclear force before it is used. U.S. leaders, under the pressure of a fast-breaking crisis, would experience "Hobson's choice" in balancing the failure to act early enough to head off nuclear use against the failure of acting too early and precipitating such use. Once nuclear use occurs, how to respond militarily would create a new set of uncertain and unpleasant choices. Whether available theater defensive systems can help resolve these dilemmas and offer acceptable policy options remains to be seen.

Conclusion 4: Think About the "New" Unthinkable.¹⁰

Solutions to the problem of dealing with Third World nuclear threats are not obvious, whether approached from diplomatic, economic, or military perspectives. To move towards a solution requires far more attention be paid to addressing this problem than has been the case in recent years. There needs to be a recognition that the challenges posed by Third World nuclear states create differences of degree, not simply differences in kind, compared with both traditional cold war nuclear challenges and the conventional contingencies currently driving our strategic planning. The stakes, risks, constraints, and uncertainties associated with this emerging nuclear problem are unique. Mistakes are costly and largely irreversible, even if limited nuclear use occurs in a distant regional setting. The United States should not face this challenge alone, but should exert leadership in organizing the industrialized democracies to coordinate counterproliferation strategies.

Notes:

1. Remarks by Honorable Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, to the National Academy of Sciences, Committee on International Security and Arms Control, December 7, 1993.

2. For information on the capabilities and intentions of present and potential Third World nuclear states, see Leonard Spector, *Nuclear Ambitions*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990; Lewis Dunn, *Containing Nuclear Proliferation*, Adelphi Papers 263, Winter 1991; and Gordon Oehler, Director, CIA Non-Proliferation Center, Testimony Before Governmental Affairs Committee, U.S. Senate, January 15, 1992.

3. "U.S. Warns North Korea on Nuclear Weapons," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 1993, p. A-19.

4. For a discussion of this incident, see Seymour Hirsh, "On the Nuclear Edge," *The New Yorker*, March 29, 1993, pp. 56-73.

5. See Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 207.

6. This judgment is based on the author's assessment of the technical difficulties of accomplishing this task. For a reference to the concept, see Earl Lane, "Way To Zap Terrorist N-Bomb?", *Long Island Newsday*, May 5, 1993, p. 17.

7. For background on U.S. theater antiballistic missile programs, see: Steven A. Hildreth, "Theater Missile Defense: Issues for the 103rd Congress," *CRS Issues Brief* (IB93064), August 26, 1993; "Theater Missile Defense Systems," *BMD Technical Information Center Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 2, July/August 1993; Tom Blau, "TMD in the Clinton Era," *Military Technology*, July 1993,

pp. 16-23; and Barbara Opall, "DOD Predicts Limited Missile Defense by 96," *Defense News*, May 17, 1993, p. 13.

8. In March 1994, the United States deployed Patriot defenses to South Korea to defend against Scud missiles. These systems were reasonably effective in defending against Scud missiles during the Gulf War, but have limited capability against longer-range ballistic missiles. See "Clinton Orders Patriot Missiles to South Korea," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 1994, p. A-1.

9. The Defense Department, however, has organized an effort to identify technologies and systems that can contribute to U.S. counterproliferation strategy. See "DOD Working Groups To Study Counterproliferation Technologies," *Inside the Pentagon*, January 20, 1994, p. 7.

10. With thanks to Herman Kahn, who coined the phrase "Thinking About the Unthinkable" in preparing ourselves to deal with the risk of a U.S.-USSR nuclear war. For a book well ahead of its time in thinking about the "new" unthinkable, see Rodney Jones, *Small Nuclear Forces and U.S. Security Policy*, Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984. For a recent assessment, see Robert Blackwill and Albert Carnesale, eds, *Coping with New Nuclear Nations*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994.

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

Major General William A. Stofft
Commandant

STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE

Director
Colonel John W. Mountcastle

Director of Research
and Conference Organizer
Dr. Earl H. Tilford, Jr.

Author
Mr. Jerome H. Kahan

Editor
Mrs. Marianne P. Cowling

Secretary
Ms. Rita A. Rummel

Composition
Mr. Daniel B. Barnett

Conference Cover Artist
Mr. Lawrence C. Miller

Cover Artist
Mr. James E. Kistler