On NATO Strategy: Escalation and the Nuclear Allergy

WALLACE J. THIES

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It has become increasingly apparent in recent years that the strategy of flexible response has become a liability rather than an asset for the Atlantic Alliance. The gap between what NATO's formal strategy calls for and what the publics of the European members will support has widened considerably during the 1980s. Public opinion in many of the countries of Western Europe has reacted strongly against reliance on nuclear weapons for defense against a Soviet attack, and a broad consensus has emerged that the interests of all NATO members would be well served by a greater capability for conventional defense.[1] Yet neither of these goals—diminished reliance on nuclear weapons or stronger conventional forces—is likely to be attained in the absence of a thorough-going reassessment of the strategy that has guided NATO planning since the mid-1960s.

There have always been tensions and strains within NATO concerning the nature and location of any fighting that might be required. Each member has sought to ensure that it would not have to fight alone, yet each has also hoped that any fighting could be kept as far from its national territory as possible. Discussions of strategy and supporting plans have proven inherently divisive, because they inevitably bring to the fore two fractures in the core of common interests that has helped sustain the alliance for almost 40 years now: on the one hand, the cleavage between those who hope to confine any fighting to a limited area and those who fear their country will be the likely

battlefield; on the other, the cleavage between those who fear their country will be devastated by a nuclear exchange if NATO escalates too fast and those who fear their country will be overrun if NATO escalates too slowly.

For 40 years these cleavages have been papered over by vaguely worded compromises. Vagueness may be helpful for deterrence by keeping an adversary uncertain of how an aggressive move will be met, but it can also lead to unwarranted fears among the peoples the alliance is intended to reassure. Vagueness can also complicate the task of judging the adequacy of NATO's forces for the missions assigned to them. Instead of forces adequate for deterrence and defense, the alliance may be saddled with a force structure that is well-suited for neither. A more clearly defined strategy would make it easier to judge the adequacy of NATO's forces, identify areas of military weakness and excess, and establish priorities for needed improvements.[2]

The rest of this article proceeds in three steps. Part one considers the reasons why flexible response has become an inadequate basis for strategic collaboration in peacetime and for successful military operations in wartime. Part two considers the requirements that any new strategy will have to meet to be a viable replacement, while part three proposes an alternative approach based on the principle of symmetrical response.

I. Flexible Response: Erosion of a Strategy

Flexible response was formally adopted by the NATO allies in 1967, and it remains the officially approved strategy despite significant changes in the strategic environment over the past two decades.[3] The strategy calls for an initial defense with conventional forces followed by deliberate escalation across the nuclear threshold in the event that resistance with conventional forces alone proved unable to halt a Soviet advance. Pronouncements by NATO military commanders have been ambiguous about when and how the nuclear threshold would be crossed and the purposes that such a move would be intended to serve,[4] but it is nonetheless possible to infer two broad rationales from the arguments used to justify a willingness to engage in deliberate escalation.

Dr. Wallace J. Thies is a member of the Department of Politics at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. During 1979 and 1980 he worked in the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs in the State Department as an International Affairs Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations. He is a graduate of Marquette University and holds an M.A. in international relations and M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees in political science from Yale University. He is the author of *The Atlantic Alliance, Nuclear Weapons, and European Attitudes: Re-examining the Conventional Wisdom* (1983) and *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict* (1980).

The military rationale for deliberate escalation suggests that since Soviet forces would be required to concentrate in order to have a good chance of breaking through NATO's defenses, they would offer lucrative targets for the alliance's theater-based nuclear systems. Nuclear weapons, in this view, can serve as instruments of defense as well as of deterrence. Their role in the event deterrence failed would be to retard and ultimately to halt a Soviet advance by destroying Soviet formations, supply depots, and other militarily significant targets.

The military rationale for crossing the nuclear threshold has been prominent in discussions of NATO strategy ever since the alliance was formed, but it has also been recognized that deliberate escalation would be important not only for its effects on the military fortunes of the combatants in a European war but for the political signals that such a move would send. The deliberate introduction of nuclear weapons into a European conflict has been variously described as a powerful signal of the West's determination to compel a halt to a Soviet advance and/or a monumental gamble aimed at terrifying the Soviets into halting their advance by raising the specter of uncontrollable escalation leading to inestimable costs.[5] Regardless of which variant is deemed more plausible, the "compellent"[6] rationale suggests that deliberate escalation would be important less for the military effects such a move would produce than for its impact on the will of the Soviet leadership to continue fighting.

Both the military and the compellent rationales were the product of circumstances very different from the present situation in Europe, yet both have proven tenaciously resistant to change. The military rationale for introducing tactical nuclear weapons into a European conflict was first formulated during the early 1950s, when it was generally believed in the West that the use of such weapons favored the defense and when the United States had a virtual monopoly on low-yield, short-range nuclear systems and overwhelming preponderance in strategic nuclear forces.[7] Theorizing about compellence reached its intellectual apogee during the mid-1960s, by which time the American monopoly on theater nuclear systems had disappeared, although the United States still possessed significant advantages in both the number and quality of strategic nuclear forces deployed.[8] A strategy that envisaged early and massive use of nuclear weapons against Soviet forces was in some respects an appropriate choice for an era in which European memories of the vulnerability of their countries during and after the Second World War contributed to their desire to be sheltered under the American nuclear umbrella and American superiority in strategic nuclear forces offered at least a hypothetical chance of escalation dominance in the event of war.[9] Changes in the strategic environment over the past two decades, however, leave little room for doubt that the deliberate escalation component of NATO's strategy is no longer a suitable basis for military planning in

peacetime and for employment of the alliance's forces in wartime. Three changes in particular suggest that the question of a new strategy for NATO cannot be deferred any longer.

First, the emergence of strategic parity between the United States and Soviet Union has eroded the credibility of threats of deliberate escalation, which detracts from NATO's ability to use nuclear threats both to deter non-nuclear attacks and to compel a halt to a Soviet advance in the event deterrence failed.[10] Strategic parity has eliminated even the hypothetical possibility of escalation dominance by NATO at higher levels of violence, with the result that the compellent rationale for deliberate escalation has become a two-edged sword. The risks associated with crossing the nuclear threshold would weigh heavily on both sides in a European war, but a strong case can be made that they would seem larger and more oppressive to the side that had to take upon itself the onus of crossing into such dangerous and unfamiliar territory.[11] Continued reliance on a strategy that envisages deliberate escalation despite the enormous risks involved is a prescription for paralysis and even defeatism rather than decisive action in an emergency.[12] Reasonable people can disagree as to whether there would be a significant compellent advantage associated with being the first to cross the nuclear threshold, but discussions of this sort beg the question of whether responsible democratic leaders could bring themselves to gamble the very existence of the societies they represent on the hope that the Soviets would not retaliate in kind. Viewed in this light, a commitment to deliberate escalation appears as a grave psychological handicap that very likely reduces the chances of successful resistance by the NATO countries in the event of war.

Second, the acquisition by both the United States and the Soviet Union of tens of thousands of nuclear warheads and the development by both sides of a spectrum of nuclear forces, ranging from battlefield nuclear systems to strategic nuclear forces, undermines both of the rationales used by NATO to justify the deliberate escalation component of the strategy of flexible response.[13] The plenitude of nuclear weapons makes it unlikely that there would be a military advantage to NATO from introducing nuclear weapons into a war started by the Warsaw Pact. The Soviets could use their knowledge that they were about to attack to disperse their forces and bring them to a higher alert status, which would limit NATO's ability to strike a blow that would halt a Soviet advance in its tracks.[14] While no one can say for sure how the Soviets would respond, it would seem likely in view of the number and variety of nuclear systems they have amassed that deliberate escalation by NATO would be met be extensive retaliation by the Soviets, which would result in heavy damage to the alliance's armed forces and to the societies it is pledged to protect.[15]

On the other hand, nuclear plenty undermines both the credibility and the efficacy of the compellent rationale for deliberate escalation. A

compellent campaign presumes an asymmetry in either the capabilities or the will of the combatants in favor of the party embarking on such a step.[16] The accumulation by both the United States and the Soviet Union of thousands of nuclear delivery vehicles, many of which can carry more than one warhead, makes it unlikely that either will be able to attain a meaningful numerical advantage over the other. More important, even if one side could achieve numerical preponderance in nuclear systems deployed, the existence of secure second-strike forces on both sides makes it unlikely that either could convert a numerical lead into a decisive psychological advantage.[17] The sheer number of nuclear weapons available to both sides has made it increasingly difficult for the NATO countries even to discuss openly how a compellent campaign might be conducted.[18] Khrushchev's rocket-rattling made it relatively easy for Western leaders to convince their electorates that it was necessary to fight fire with fire, but two decades of detente have eroded the ability of presidents and prime ministers to issue convincing threats of deliberate escalation while at the same time assuring their electorates that they are responsible enough to be trusted with control over the future of their societies.

Third and most important, the deliberate escalation component of NATO's strategy has undermined the cohesion and vitality of the alliance by suggesting to many in Western Europe that the alliance and its military plans are a source of danger rather than safety. Thirty years ago a strategy that threatened massive retaliation in response to an attack was reasonably in accord with the prevailing mood in Western Europe, in large part because the salience of issues having to do with military strategy and the role of nuclear weapons in defending Western Europe were much less than at present. Most Europeans felt that war was unlikely in the near term, and many were hopeful that the use of nuclear weapons could be avoided even if another world war did occur.[19] Confidence in American leadership was relatively high, and included in this confidence was a belief that the United States could be trusted not to act rashly when coming to the aid of its European allies.[20] It was this combination of indifference, optimism, and trust in the Americans that made it possible for the European allies to win the consent of their electorates to a strategy that threatened early resort to nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack.

A climate of opinion in which the overwhelming majority of Europeans are either supportive of or indifferent to the alliance's plans to rely on nuclear weapons as instruments of both deterrence and defense no longer prevails in Western Europe. Fear of war and especially of nuclear war has increased considerably since the early 1960s. Between 1963 and 1983 the percentage of British respondents believing that a nuclear war was likely someday more than tripled. Fears of nuclear war have also increased in West Germany, particularly among the young and well-educated activists in the German peace movement.[21]

Confidence in the United States has also declined considerably over the past two decades. European doubts about the wisdom of American policies are nothing new, but what is new is the sharp increase in the number of Europeans expressing little or no confidence in the United States—as many as 70 percent of British respondents in a January 1983 survey, compared with only 24 percent expressing considerable or great confidence. A similar drop has occurred in the confidence of West German respondents in the ability of the United States to deal responsibly with world problems. Interestingly, this lack of confidence does not extend to a fear of abandonment in the event of war—between 1975 and 1981, the percentage of British respondents expressing a great deal of trust in the United States to come to Britain's aid should war break out actually went up, from 45 to 62 percent.[22]

As a result of these changes, the characteristic willingness of Europeans to defer to their governments on questions of military strategy has been replaced by a climate of opinion increasingly skeptical of plans envisaging the deliberate introduction by NATO of nuclear weapons into a European conflict. Between 1954 and 1984, the percentage of West German respondents believing that NATO should not use nuclear weapons under any circumstances more than tripled, from 14 to 44 percent. Conversely, by 1984 the percentage of Europeans expressing support for first use by NATO of nuclear weapons in response to a conventional attack ranged from only seven percent in Denmark to 18 percent in Great Britain. As of the mid-1980s, European publics were for the most part not only unconcerned about the possibility of a Soviet invasion but confident that "the conventional deterrent is adequate and that NATO can successfully defend against a conventional attack without resorting to nuclear weapons."[23]

There is considerable irony in the way in which both the strategic environment and the climate of opinion in Europe have changed during the past three decades. It has long been taken as axiomatic in the West that the NATO countries were so outnumbered and outgunned in conventional forces that they had no choice but to rely on superior technology and greater firepower—most prominently in the form of theater-based nuclear weapons—to compensate for their numerical inferiority. But the weakest link in the chain of NATO strategy has proven to be the nuclear one. The combination of strategic parity and nuclear plenty has made the deliberate initiation of nuclear war neither credible nor sensible, since deliberate escalation promises neither a military nor a coercive advantage. Moreover, to the extent that the alliance's military authorities call attention to the deliberate escalation component in NATO's strategy, they run the risk of unleashing public outcries that threaten the cohesion of the alliance. The conventional wisdom of the early 1980s notwithstanding, sentiment in favor of leaving NATO remains relatively weak in Western Europe,[24] but it will very likely grow if the alliance should prove unable to adapt its strategy to the changed conditions of the 1980s and beyond.

II. Facing Up to the Nuclear Allergy

The foregoing suggests that a reorientation of NATO strategy is urgently needed and that such a reorientation should take as its starting point the need to replace the deliberate escalation component of flexible response with something more appropriate to the conditions of strategic parity and nuclear plenty, and to a climate of opinion in Europe grown increasingly sensitive to the dangers inherent in any crossing of the nuclear threshold. But if the threat of deliberate escalation is to be discarded, with what should the alliance replace it? Three considerations help clarify the direction that NATO should take in forging a new strategy.

First, for an alliance like NATO, which aspires to remain in existence for as many years as are required to overcome the division of Europe into a democratic West and a non-democratic East, the function of strategy must be more than an efficient marshalling of military power in pursuit of a few vital objectives. The principal function of strategy for an alliance of democratic states is to serve as a means of bridging the gap between the requirements of external security and the requirements of internal cohesion.[25] It cannot be assumed that a strategy and force posture that are well-suited to the former will automatically satisfy the latter. Nor can it be assumed that a strategic consensus that manages to reconcile these two at one point in time will automatically do so for the indefinite future. The need to cope with changes both in the external environment and in the internal climate of opinion suggests that continual strategic adjustments will be required to enable the alliance to function effectively. The combination of strategic parity, nuclear plenty, and public unease over the extent to which NATO has become dependent on nuclear weapons for defense suggests the need for just such an adjustment to bring the alliance's strategy more into line with what the publics of the European allies are willing to support.

This is not to suggest that the adjustment process should work in one direction only. If it could be shown that continued reliance on threats of deliberate escalation offered substantial and otherwise unattainable advantages for NATO's effort to deter and if necessary defend against a Soviet attack, then a strong case could be made that the adjustments should take the form of renewed efforts to persuade those publics of the wisdom and necessity of continued reliance on the nuclear option. Under conditions of strategic parity and nuclear plenty, however, it seems unlikely that a strategy relying on increasingly incredible threats of deliberate escalation will be able to contribute much toward satisfying either of the two sets of requirements mentioned above, much less bridge the gap between them. Even a small number of nuclear explosions in the vicinity of populated areas would mean the loss of any semblance of proportionality between the objectives at stake in a European war and the means used to pursue them. More important, continued reliance on threats of deliberate escalation runs the risk of so alienating the

publics of Western Europe that they will grow reluctant to sanction any use of force on their behalf, lest resistance lead only to annihilation.

Second, a reorientation of NATO strategy should be based on a clear understanding of what it is that NATO, as a defensive alliance, is trying to prevent. The United States and the Soviet Union have been engaged in a struggle for the allegiance of Western Europe ever since the end of the Second World War, but the nature of this struggle has not always been well understood in the West, especially in the United States. The essence of the problem is not so much to prevent a Soviet invasion that would sweep over Western Europe in a few days or weeks as it is to reassure the Europeans that they can safely continue to rely on the United States to help balance the power that the Soviet Union could otherwise bring to bear against them. The consistent goal of Soviet policy these past 40 years has been to convince the peoples of Western Europe of their vulnerability to Soviet power and of their inability to find safety by aligning with the United States. Toward this end they have repeatedly sought to maneuver NATO in general and the United States in particular into politically untenable positions, such as threatening to initiate nuclear war in order to uphold the status quo, which is in effect a policy that threatens to destroy Western Europe in order to save it.

Discussions of NATO strategy by American officials have often begun from the premise that a Soviet invasion is the most demanding challenge facing the alliance and thus that invasion scenarios should be the benchmark against which the adequacy of the alliance's efforts are judged. This kind of reasoning neglects the political challenge posed by Soviet power, which is in many respects a far greater danger than that of an invasion. Deterring a Soviet invasion of Western Europe is relatively easy compared to the requirements the United States must satisfy in order to compete successfully in the political struggle with the Soviets. The Soviets can win the political struggle simply by encouraging the already widespread belief that the Americans are no better than they are: if a majority of Europeans should come to see the superpowers as indistinguishable, what then is the point of maintaining their alignment with the one that is far away and which plans to come to their aid by unleashing a nuclear war that would destroy their societies?

For the United States to compete successfully in the political struggle, it must be able to convince a majority of Europeans not only that it is different from and better than the Soviet Union but that continued alignment with it will not run an unacceptable risk of annihilation should resistance to Soviet demands be pressed to the point of war. Satisfying these requirements will not be easy—surveys taken during the first half of the 1980s suggest that there has been an increase in the proportion of European respondents who see the United States and the Soviet Union as essentially the same, in the sense that both intervene in the affairs of smaller states, both see war as a political

instrument, both neglect the interests of their allies, and both pose a threat to world peace.[26] This apparent trend toward equidistancing is not the result of any tendency on the part of Europeans to see the Soviet Union as becoming more benign or less threatening; rather, it is almost entirely the result of changes in European attitudes toward the United States.[27] These changes are especially noticeable in the tendency of Europeans to identify the United States with policies that increase the likelihood of war. The view that the United States is no different from the Soviet Union is held by only a minority of West Europeans, but their numbers have grown steadily during the 1980s, which can have only ominous implications for the future of the alliance.

Overcoming this tendency to see the superpowers as indistinguishable will require changes not only in declaratory policy but in the way in which Americans understand the struggle for Europe. The more that American officials speak of the need to engage the Soviets and their proxies in a variety of theaters and to prevail against them in either conventional or nuclear wars, the more they contribute to European fears of becoming pawns in a US-Soviet struggle to be fought out on and over the homelands of the European allies.[28] The more that American officials concentrate on finding ways to make nuclear weapons "usable" (enhanced radiation weapons, nuclear "demonstration shots") against an invasion that few Europeans believe will ever take place, the more they contribute to an impression the Soviets have long sought to foster—i.e. that of the Americans as outsiders who cannot be trusted and who are themselves the principal danger to the peace and tranquility which all Europeans, the Soviets included, have come to value so highly.[29] The more that American military officers insist on retaining the option of deliberate escalation across the nuclear threshold, the more they contribute to an unfortunate misconception of an America that is prepared to fight to the last European for the sake of destroying the Soviet Union.[30]

But what if there is no alternative to continued reliance on threats of deliberate escalation? For years NATO military commanders have warned of Soviet superiority in conventional forces, and prominent Europeans have

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argued against any renunciation of the option of deliberate escalation lest Europe thereby be rendered safe for conventional war.[31] Treatises on military strategy have traditionally counselled in favor of retaining the initiative so as to keep the opponent off balance and unable to concentrate his strength for a decisive blow. Thus the third point in our assessment of the possibilities for change in NATO's strategy must be a reappraisal of the prospects for conventional defense in Europe. We must determine whether the option of deliberate escalation can safely be dispensed with. The purpose of such a reappraisal is not to make the case that conventional defense has suddenly become much more feasible than in the past but to reinforce the arguments made earlier concerning the need for changes in the way Americans have traditionally thought about the military balance in Europe.

During the 1950s, it was standard practice within the alliance to base assessments of the military balance on simple division counts, a practice that led inexorably to the conclusion that NATO had no choice but to rely on nuclear threats since there did not seem to be any way that its 25 or so active divisions along the Central Front could hope to withstand for long an assault by the 175 divisions that were traditionally credited to the Soviet Union alone. The misleading nature of comparisons of this kind was effectively demonstrated by the systems analysts brought into the Defense Department during the Kennedy Administration. As described by two of the key participants:

> Eliminating paper divisions, using cost and firepower indexes, counts of combat personnel in available divisions, and numbers of artillery pieces, trucks, tanks, and the like, we ended up with the same conclusion: NATO and the Warsaw Pact had approximate equality on the ground. Where four years earlier it had appeared that a conventional option was impossible, it now began to appear that perhaps NATO could have had one all along.[32]

Since then, Soviet forces have increased in size and improved qualitatively, but a strong case can be made that the Soviet strategic position has deteriorated to such an extent that the prospects for conventional defense remain about as promising as they were in the 1960s when American analysts were discovering that NATO forces were not vastly outnumbered on the ground.[33] Roughly one-third of the Soviet Union's ground and tactical air forces are tied down astride the borders with China, Afghanistan, and Iran, and it seems unlikely that they could be withdrawn for use in Europe without causing undue concern in Moscow for the security of the Soviet Union's southern and eastern territories.[34] More important, even a cursory review of the often-troubled relations between the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe suggests that the forces of the non-Soviet members of the Warsaw Pact, with the possible exception of the East Germans, should be subtracted from rather than added to Soviet forces in estimating the size of

the threat that NATO faces. Developments in Poland during the 1980s suggest that Soviet lines of communication through that country could be secured in the event of war only by garrisoning the country with large numbers of Soviet troops to neutralize the Polish army and guard against sabotage. Large numbers of Soviet troops would also be required to assure the reliability of Czechoslovakia and Hungary.[35]

To suggest that the option of deliberate escalation can safely be dispensed with because the prospects for conventional defense are better than are generally realized is not to suggest that a conventional war in Europe would be either easy or desirable. Rather, it is an attempt to steer the focus of discussions of NATO strategy back to where it belongs, namely, the political contest between the United States and the Soviet Union for the allegiance of Western Europe. Military strategists are inherently conservative because of the well-known tendency of soldiers to anticipate the worst and prepare for it. But if the contest for Europe is in essence a political-psychological struggle in which military force serves mainly as an instrument of intimidation and reassurance, then exaggerating Soviet strength can be as dangerous for the West as underestimating it. To take the position that the West has no alternative but to rely on threats of deliberate escalation because Western Europe is indefensible by conventional means is in effect to strengthen the Soviets' hand in the political struggle, because such a position not only serves as a tacit reminder to the publics of Western Europe of their vulnerability to Soviet power but also makes it easier for the Soviets to portray Western statesmen as reckless and irresponsible persons who would lead the world over the edge of the nuclear abyss.

By the same token, the more that Western leaders insist on retaining the option of deliberate escalation to compensate for alleged conventional weaknesses, the more they invite renewed Soviet attempts to foster discord within the alliance by proposing additional "zero-zero" agreements to cover short-range nuclear missiles and projectiles and nuclear weapons delivered by aircraft. The Soviets have already accepted the Western zero option for intermediate-range nuclear missiles, and it is highly likely that they will propose additional such agreements, which will face Western leaders with a choice between appearing opposed to further reductions in nuclear arsenals (thereby adding credence to the Soviet claim that it is the Americans who are the real threat to peace in Europe) or admitting that the West has had a conventional option all along (thereby undermining the credibility of arguments in favor of increased defense spending).

In this situation, what the West needs is a strategy that strengthens rather than undermines its ability to compete with the Soviets in a political-psychological struggle that has been going on for more than four decades and seems likely to continue for at least that much longer. What form should such a strategy take?

III. From Flexible to Symmetrical Response

The preceding sections suggest that a reorientation of NATO strategy is both desirable and feasible, and that what is needed is an approach that aims to dissuade the Soviets from attempting to change the status quo in Europe by force but which is more sensitive than the current strategy of flexible response to concerns in Europe about the risks inherent in crossing the nuclear threshold. Alleviating those concerns will require more than just a change in declaratory policy ("no first use"); what is required is a new strategy that communicates clearly and persuasively the alliance's determination to maintain the tightest control possible over events should deterrence fail and to obtain the earliest termination of any fighting consistent with preserving the territorial integrity of the NATO countries. Since it is both unnecessary and dangerous to continue to rely on threats of deliberate escalation to deter non-nuclear attacks and to compel the Soviets to accept an early termination of whatever fighting might occur, NATO's current strategy of flexible response should be replaced by one that rests instead on the principle of symmetrical response.

Under this approach, the alliance would orient its military plans and supporting programs toward the goal of developing a force structure capable of denying the Soviets a political advantage in the peacetime struggle for the allegiance of Western Europe as well as a significant military advantage at whatever level of conflict they might choose in the event deterrence failed. In effect, a strategy of symmetrical response would be one of denial combined with tit-for-tat retaliation. A Soviet conventional attack would be met by a determined conventional defense, followed by a counterattack intended to restore the status quo ante. Soviet use of battlefield nuclear weapons would be answered by similar strikes on the first echelon of a Soviet attack. Soviet use of longer-range theater or strategic nuclear forces would also be answered in kind.

In view of the importance that has been attached to the deliberate escalation component of NATO's strategy, such a reorientation might appear as a radical departure for the alliance. However, a strategy that combines defensive preparations with a capability for tit-for-tat retaliation has already been tacitly accepted by the NATO allies as the means for dissuading the Soviets from resorting to chemical weapons in the event of another European war.[36] More important, a change from flexible to symmetrical response should be seen as a return to ideas developed by American strategists during the 1950s, when the rapid expansion of nuclear arsenals threatened to destroy any semblance of proportionality between the objectives at stake in a future conflict and the means used to pursue them.[37] A strategy of symmetrical response would also mark a return to the principles that guided the Kennedy Administration during the initial formulation of its ideas on flexible response.

As conceived within the Kennedy Administration, flexible response was a strategy that sought to maintain control over events should deterrence fail and to place the onus for crossing the nuclear threshold on the Soviets rather than on NATO.[38]

A "permanent" alliance of democratic states like NATO is likely to be conservative and cautious in its consideration of strategic issues, especially in view of the absence of war in Europe for more than 40 years now. A reorientation of NATO strategy along the lines proposed here will almost certainly encounter opposition, from both those reluctant to tamper with policies that appear to be working and those in Europe fearful of "decoupling" or even abandonment by the United States. There is an obvious trade-off between the goals of keeping the Soviets uncertain of how an aggressive move might be met and reassuring the publics of Western Europe, but of the two the latter would seem to take precedence. No alliance can endure if the means on which it relies frighten those it is intended to reassure more than those who are supposedly being warned off. There are, moreover, at least three reasons for believing that NATO's efforts to deter a Soviet attack would not be seriously affected by a switch from flexible to symmetrical response.

First, as noted earlier, threats of deliberate escalation have already lost most of whatever credibility they may have had in the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the combination of strategic parity and nuclear plenty. Second, the conventional balance is not nearly as unfavorable to NATO as is generally supposed. The prospect of a determined conventional defense, including counterattacks, can be a powerful force for dissuasion, suggesting that barely credible threats of deliberate escalation can safely be dispensed with.

Third and most important, it should not be taken for granted that a strategy of symmetrical response would remove all or even many of the uncertainties that the Soviets would face in contemplating an attack on Western Europe. A Soviet attack on Western Europe would be tantamount to starting World War III. Even if the NATO countries were publicly committed to a strategy of symmetrical response, could the Soviet leadership know with confidence what the outcome of such a war would be? Would they be willing to gamble the future existence of their society and their place in it on the belief that events would not slip out of their control? Could they be confident of their ability to maintain their grip on Eastern Europe in view of the turmoil that such a war would entail? NATO should at least be clear as to what the principal deterrent to war in Europe really is. It is not so much increasingly incredible threats of deliberate escalation that serve as the principal obstacle to such a war but rather fear of war itself, which is the product of uncertainty both as to the course that events would follow and as to what the outcome would be. Fear of war of any kind is the real deterrent, and this fear will continue to exert a powerful restraining effect on both sides even if NATO strategy is revised along the lines proposed here.[39]

European fears of being decoupled or even abandoned are real, but they are unlikely to be alleviated by a continuation of current policy. American strategic nuclear forces have already been decoupled from the defense of Western Europe as a result of strategic parity and nuclear plenty.[40] The solution to this problem is to offer assurances that are believable—namely, that the United States will continue to maintain roughly 300,000 American military personnel plus their dependents in Western Europe; that it is prepared to send large-scale reinforcements to Europe in the event of war; that it is prepared to contribute to the building of even stronger conventional defenses in Western Europe; and that it is prepared to stand with its European allies and to match any escalatory steps that might be taken by the Soviets.

In addition to serving as a more realistic basis for planning the defense of Western Europe, a strategy of symmetrical response would offer three advantages over current NATO strategy. First, a renunciation of deliberate escalation would place the alliance in a stronger position to compete politically with the Soviets in peacetime by reducing Soviet opportunities to play on European fears of a trigger-happy United States and by encouraging the development of stronger conventional defenses in Western Europe. An important obstacle to progress toward stronger conventional defenses is the extent to which threats of deliberate escalation have come to serve as an excuse for avoiding improvements in conventional forces that are within reach of countries that are so much wealthier than their main opponent. Continued reliance on threats of deliberate escalation introduces an element of fatalism into discussions of conventional force improvements—if escalation is inevitable, why bother to try? But escalation may be inevitable only because of the self-fulfilling prophecy created by an unwillingness to recognize that a robust conventional defense is within reach.

Second, a strategy of symmetrical response would strengthen NATO's ability to dissuade the Soviets from embarking on a military adventure by increasing the credibility of the alliance's warnings about what it would do in response. Since NATO members would be threatening only to match what the Soviets had already done, the onus of crossing into the realm of the unknown would be removed from the West and placed squarely on the Soviets. The longer the alliance chooses to rely on threats of deliberate escalation, the greater the danger that the Soviets may someday be tempted to call the bluff in the expectation that Western leaders would cave in to their demands rather than accept the risks of starting a nuclear war. Conversely, the more certain it appears that an attack would be met by tenacious resistance, the more difficult it will be for the Soviets to convince themselves that there could be any profit in a resort to force.

Third and finally, a strategy of symmetrical response would contribute to a strengthening of the ties between the United States and its

European allies by reviving the idea of a US-European partnership to thwart Soviet efforts to expand the area under their control. That is what the Alliance was intended to be at the time it was founded, and that is what it should continue to be as it approaches its fifth decade.

NOTES

1. Henry Kissinger, "A Plan to Reshape NATO," *Time*, 5 March 1984, p. 20; Peter Langer, *Transatlantic Discord and NATO's Crisis of Cohesion* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1986), p. 47.

2. This point was suggested by Barry Posen and Stephen Van Evera, "Defense Policy: Departure from Containment," in *Eagle Resurgent*, ed. Kenneth Oye et al. (Boston: Little Brown, 1987), p. 76.

3. A concise description of the adoption of flexible response as official NATO strategy is provided by David Schwartz, "A Historical Perspective," in *Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question*, ed. John Steinbruner and Leon Sigal (Washington: Brookings, 1983), pp. 12-16.

4. The ambiguity in NATO pronouncements is discussed further in ibid., p. 16.

5. The former interpretation is found most often in official pronouncements by NATO military commanders or representatives of one of the alliance's nuclear-armed members. The latter has been advanced mainly by non-governmental observers skeptical of the ability of governments to use nuclear weapons in a controlled fashion. See, for example, Robert Jervis, *The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984); and Leon Sigal, *Nuclear Forces in Europe* (Washington: Brookings, 1984).

6. The term was coined by Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 69-91.

7. Three very useful accounts of the development of Western military thought concerning the role of nuclear weapons in compensating for Soviet superiority in manpower and tanks are those by Charles J. V. Murphy, "A New Strategy for NATO," *Fortune*, 47 (January 1953), 80ff.; Robert C. Richardson, "NATO Nuclear Strategy: A Look Back," *Strategic Review*, 9 (Spring 1981), 35-43; and André Beaufre, *NATO and Europe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), pp. 48-78. See also William Kaufmann, "Nuclear Deterrence in Central Europe," in *Alliance Security: NATO and the No- First-Use Question*, pp. 33-34.

8. See, for example, Schelling; Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965); and Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966).

9. Even in the 1950s there were plenty of doubts of the wisdom of basing NATO strategy on threats that seemed likely to diminish in credibility as Soviet strategic forces grew in number and quality. The definitive account of the emergence of those doubts remains Robert Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).

10. The erosive effect of strategic parity on the credibility of threats of deliberate escalation has been noted by analysts on both sides of the American political spectrum. See, for example, Irving Kristol, "What's Wrong With NATO," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 September 1983, pp. 64ff.; Kissinger, pp. 20, 23; Kaufmann, "Nuclear Deterrence...," pp. 28-32; and Richard Barnet, "The Four Pillars," *The New Yorker*, 9 March 1987, p. 80.

11. This point was conceded by Schelling, who discussed at length why being the first to cross the nuclear threshold would likely be more difficult than responding in kind, pp. 43-55. See also Kaufmann, "Nuclear Deterrence...," pp. 31-32.

12. Kissinger, p. 20.

13. For estimates of the total number of nuclear warheads in the arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union, see the following articles by Richard Halloran in *The New York Times*: "U.S. Atomic Arsenal Viewed as Growing to 29,000 Warheads," 8 January 1984, p.18; and "Soviets' Lead in Warheads Estimated by U.S. at 8,000," 18 June 1984, p. 4.

14. In view of the concentration of NATO's forces, both conventional and nuclear, on a relatively small number of well-defined and well-known military bases, there may be a military advantage to the Soviets from accompanying a conventional invasion with a preemptive nuclear strike. It is essential that the Soviets be denied any such advantage by continuing efforts to reduce the vulnerability of NATO's forces. This point is developed further by Kaufmann, "Nuclear Deterrence...," p. 33.

15. Ibid., pp. 34-35, provides a concise review of the evidence calling into question the belief that the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons into a European war would favor the defense. The recently signed US-Soviet treaty on intermediate nuclear forces seems unlikely to alter this situation, since the

Soviets will still have many thousands of nuclear warheads that can be delivered by a variety of means against NATO forces.

16. The requirements that must be satisfied to conduct a successful "compellent" campaign are described in Schelling, pp. 69-91. The difficulties involved in satisfying these requirements are elaborated upon in Wallace J. Thies, *When Governments Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), chapters 5-8.

17. This point is developed at greater length by Jervis, chapters 4-6.

18. Note in this regard the controversy generated in 1981 by the comment by then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig that NATO had developed plans for a nuclear "demonstration shot" in the event of a Soviet attack that could not be readily halted by conventional forces.

19. On these points, see the survey results presented in Richard Merritt and Donald Puchala, eds., *Western European Perspectives on International Affairs* (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 189-94, 338-39, 381; Elizabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann, eds., *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls, 1947-1966* (Allensbach and Bonn: Verlag für Demoskopie, 1967), pp. 516-17; and Anna and Richard Merritt, *Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 239-40.

20. Merritt and Puchala, p. 259; Anna and Richard Merritt, pp. 239-40.

21. David Capitanchik and Richard Eichenberg, *Defense and Public Opinion*, Chatham House Papers No. 20 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 21-22: Harald Mueller and Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Origins of Estrangement: The Peace Movement and the Changed Image of America in West Germany," *International Security*, 12 (Summer 1987), 81-84.

22. Capitanchik and Eichenberg, pp. 23, 65. See also R. W. Apple, Jr., "Deployment of U.S. Missiles a Key Issue for the British," *The New York Times*, 16 February 1983, p. 8; and Bruce Russett and Donald Deluca, "Theater Nuclear Forces: Public Opinion in Western Europe," *Political Science Quarterly*, 98 (Summer 1983), 184.

23. Anna and Richard Merritt, p. 240; Stephen Szabo, "European Opinion After the Missiles," *Atlantic Community Quarterly*, 24 (Spring 1986), 11, 13-14.

24. I have developed this point at greater length in *The Atlantic Alliance, Nuclear Weapons, and European Attitudes: Re-examining the Conventional Wisdom* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, Institute of International Studies, 1983), pp. 5-15. See also Capitanchik and Eichenberg, pp. 23-24, 32-33, 45-48, 54-56, 64-66; Russett and Deluca, pp. 185-88; Szabo, p. 15; and Mueller and Risse-Kappen, p. 56.

25. This point was suggested by Osgood, p. 2.

26. Szabo, p. 15; Mueller and Risse-Kappen, p. 58.

27. Szabo, p. 17.

28. The depth of these fears is discussed by Capitanchik and Eichenberg, pp. 22-25, 53-56, 61-68.

29. European expectations of the likelihood of a Soviet invasion are discussed in Szabo, pp. 11-12. In an October 1983 poll, 73 percent of British respondents said they believed that the American promise that Britain would have veto power over the firing of the ground-launched cruise missiles based there could not be trusted (Barnaby Feder, "Britons Shying Away From Missiles," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1983, p. 9).

30. European fears of American intentions are discussed in more detail in Mueller and Risse-Kappen, pp. 82-83.

31. See, for example, Karl Kaiser et al., "Nuclear Weapons and Preservation of Peace: A German Response," *Foreign Affairs*, 60 (Summer 1982), 1157-70.

32. Alain Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough?*(New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 140-41. See also Schwartz, p. 13.

33. See, for example, William Kaufmann, "Nonnuclear Deterrence," in *Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question*, pp. 43-90; William P. Mako, *U.S. Ground Forces and the Defense of Central Europe* (Washington: Brookings, 1983); Posen and Van Evera, pp. 83-85; and Benjamin Lambeth, "Conventional Forces for NATO," P-7311 (Santa Monica: The RAND Corp., February 1987).

34. Kaufmann, "Nonnuclear Deterrence...," p. 51.

35. Ibid., p. 55.

36. Ibid., p. 73.

37. See, for example, William Kaufmann, "Limited Warfare," in *Military Policy and National Security*, ed. William Kaufmann (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 123-24, 126.

38. Schwartz, p. 14.

39. The uncontrollability of a European war and the restraining effect that this is likely to exert on the Soviets is discussed in more detail by Jonathan Alford, "Perspectives on Strategy," in *Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question*, p. 93.

40. This point has been accepted by analysts on both sides of the American political spectrum. See, for example, Kristol, p. 65; and Kaufmann, "Nuclear Deterrence...," pp. 29, 32.