Arms Race, International Tension Spurred By United States ‘Counterforce’ Strategy

By DEAN JAMISON

In the first part of this article, I presented figures indicating that the U.S. has a tremendous superiority over the Soviet Union in strategic weapons.

The reason for this imbalance is that the U.S. has adopted a "counterforce" strategy and the U.S. appears to have adopted a "finite deterrence" policy.

A FINITE DETERRENCE implies two things. First that one has the capability to absorb a first strike and hit back with devastating force. Second that one has lesser levels of force to meet lesser levels of aggression.

A counterforce policy implies that, in addition to having the capabilities associated with finite deterrence, one has the capability to fight and "win" an all-out nuclear war. I attempted to show that counterforce was of marginal value in deterring Soviet aggression because the bulk of the deterrent was supplied by the finite deterrence capabilities associated with it.

IN ADDITION to its value as a deterrent, advocates of counter force claim two other advantages for it which I will examine. I will also attempt to point out some of the disadvantages of counterforce, which, I feel argue decisively against it.

Two additional arguments put forth for counterforce are that it would save our cities from the effects of war and it could put the U.S. in a position for winning the war and preserving the fabric of our society.

The reason why counterforce would save our cities in the event of a war was that, hopefully, both sides would have and take the option of striking only the other's forces (hence the name counterforce).

UNfortunately, as Admiral Radford and other have testified, many counterforce targets are near cities. In addition, one would have to have excellent control of his forces to keep local commanders or individual pilots from destroying cities thereby provoking some form of massive retaliation.

The Kennedy administration admits the difficulty of keeping a "brushfire" war limited if nuclear weapons are used. It seems to hope that it can, somehow, keep a strategic war limited.

The final advantage claimed of counterforce is that a strategy of this nature could cause us to "prevail in a meaningful sense of the word" in the event of nuclear war.

SUPPOSING that the nuclear interchange posted by the administration were valid, the very fact that each side has surving forces is enough to insure either a stalemate or total annihilation.

This is because when one side or another begins to lose, it will blackmail the other side into accepting a reasonable truce by threatening that side's cities with his own remaining forces. If he is successful, stalemate—if not, mutual annihilation.

EVEN IF a large percentage of our wealth and people were to survive such a war, it appears doubly that democracy would, or that we could, in McNamara's words, "preserve the fabric of our society."

I have attempted to show that the advantages which counterforce is supposed to have, compared with finite deterrence, are largely spurious. I will now outline some disadvantages with counterforce which complete the case against it. They are:

1. IT TENDS to increase the chance of war occurring. This is partly due to a greater chance for accidents, but mainly due to its psychological effects upon the the Soviet Union. A strategy of this nature is bound to appear provocative to the Russians because of the increased advantage we would have by striking first.

In addition to causing crises to be more unstable, it could cause arms build-ups which would make future crises extremely unstable. Our IRBM's in Europe and the Soviet attempts to place IRBM's in Cuba are examples of arms buildups of this nature.

(For a mathematical analysis of the unstable crises I am describing, see Thomas Schelling’s classic paper, “The Reciprocal Fear of Surprise Attack.”)

2. BY VIRTUE of its potential provocativeness and requirements for tremendous force levels, counterforce tends to aggravate the arms race.

This is undesirable because it (a) increases the stockpile of weapons to be used in war, (b) causes tensions which make war more likely, (c) increases our economy’s dependence on defense spending, (d) creates a poor atmosphere for negotiation.

3. A POLICY of this nature tends to decrease the chance for effective arms control measures.

This is because such a policy tends to promote distrusts, it increases the number of weapons to be controlled, and it tends to create a psychological reliance (unwarranted, I have attempted to show) on modern weapons by the American people.

We have seen that a counterforce policy tends to aggravate the vicious circle of rising arms and tensions while providing little way of breaking out of it. In addition, it could possibly make the war it hopes to deter even more horrible, unless many doubtful suppositions prove true.

A policy of finite deterrence, on the other hand, would provide the same degree of military security while slowing down the arms race and setting a more fruitful stage for negotiation and arms control.