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HERMAN KAHN: APPLYING HIS NUCLEAR STRATEGY PRECEPTS TODAY

In 1960 Hudson Institute co-founder Herman Kahn published *On Thermonuclear War*, a compendium of material from lectures delivered at Princeton University in 1959. The book sold 30,000 copies, reaching a public audience with in-depth analysis of nuclear strategy. The book caused a sensation, exposing the general public to topics familiar hitherto only to members of the strategic community and self-selected activists.

In 1962 Kahn published *Thinking about the Unthinkable*, a more compact effort to educate readers as to how to think about nuclear war in terms more readily accessible to the lay reader than his mammoth first volume.

In 1965's *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* Kahn developed, more fully for lay readers, his theories of bargaining via threats and responses that might take place in event of an intense crisis between the superpowers and (possibly) their allies.

Thinking About the Unthinkable in the 1980s (1984 posth.) updated Kahn's thinking after 15 years.

Kahn's writings yield a bonanza of incisive thinking about nuclear problems facing us today, a half-century after Kahn published his first work. Of particular utility are his powerful observations on five issues: (1) arms control and nuclear zero; (2) leaders and values; (3) accident and control; (4) missile defense; and (5) nuclear taboo.

ARMS CONTROL AND NUCLEAR ZERO

In Prague in August 2009, President Obama issued a clarion call for the elimination of all nuclear arsenals. While his declaratory policy puts the goal well into the future, his negotiators agreed to a new arms treaty with Russia, and are ready before the ink is dry on the parchment to seek further cuts that would put deployed American nuclear forces at only a few hundred more warheads than that estimated for China. Kahn counseled against rushing to nuclear zero, pointing out

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the benefits of later research and development. He has the lifetime of the agreement to work out his countermeasures.¹

This proved true with the 1972 SALT I agreement, the first major nuclear arms limitation treaty signed by the Cold War superpowers. The Soviet Union substituted the newer SS-19 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) for the antiquated SS-11. The agreement allowed substituting missiles in silos provided they were no more than 15 percent larger. The SS-19 was 15 percent wider in two dimensions, for an increase of more than 30 percent in volume; instead of a single warhead the larger SS-19 carried six multiple independently-targeted vehicles (MIRVs—vehicles means warheads), making it capable of placing large numbers of American ICBMs at first-strike risk.

He also predicted that little could be done after detection of cheating:

Even if it is picked up by the official inspection system there is likely to be some ambiguity involved. An ambiguity which the violator will exploit. If the evidence has been picked up by clandestine intelligence or by an unfriendly monitoring power, then of course the violator will accuse the accuser [*sic*] of fabricating the evidence for some nefarious purpose. Or the violator who is caught can always accuse the other side for having violated first Finally, and not all improbably, the violator can argue the absolute historical necessity for doing whatever he did.²

This was also proven prophetic. The ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty in SALT I limited each side to two ABM sites, one protecting the national capital and one protecting a missile base. Radars to be deployed were to be limited to local site defense, and not centrally located, from where battle management of a national missile defense system could be effected. The U.S. deployed its Safeguard system in fully operational mode for all of four months before shutting it down in January 1976. The Soviets built a monster radar facility near Krasnoyarsk, in the center of its territory. Our spy satellites easily detected the facility, which was the size of several football fields. Yet the Soviets brushed off our protests and simply denied everything, aided by ardent arms controllers in the U.S. who asserted that proof beyond a reasonable doubt had not been offered; such proof would have required on-site access denied by the Soviets. Only after the Cold War ended did the Russians concede that the former Soviet Union had indeed violated the ABM Treaty.

The New START Treaty promises more of the same. As with SALT I the adjudicatory mechanism for disputes is a commission composed solely of appointees from the two signing parties. Thus Russia can follow in the former Soviet Union's footsteps and baldly deny allegations of violations, secure in the knowledge that ardent New START supporters in the US will adopt any interpretation that denies violations over one that favors finding them, lest the agreement be scrapped by Moscow. Needless to say, no

outside party can coerce either party into accepting a non-party interpretation of the

The administration is committ
others will follow. Yet the U.

the Johnson administration unilaterally stopped increasing; Moscow continued to build until its arsenal peaked in 1986 at 45,000. Since then the superpowers in several rounds of agreements have halved their total arsenals, and reduced deployed warheads by far more—from 12,000 per side to 2,200. New START will further reduce American deployment, while Moscow, which for economic reasons is far below the current ceiling, will actually be able to *add* newer, far more modern ICBMs under New START.

And how have the most dangerous nations responded to these serial rounds of reductions? North Korea and Pakistan clandestinely joined the nuclear club; Iran bids fair to do the same. The administration does not grasp that *the fewer warheads America keeps, the more valuable small arsenals become*

the point that if the President's anger abates long enough for him to consider the situation, he will realize that there is no way to undo the damage that is done and that *revenge may appear to make less sense than trying to make the best of a bad situation.*⁵

He saw that many leaders might shrink even from nuclear victory:

Even if military advantages were not to be had by deliberately limiting attack to counterforce targets, I suspect that most governments would still prefer to observe such limits. Almost nobody wants to go down in history as the first man to kill 100,000 people.⁶

Kahn thought little of Western officials regarding their nuclear thinking:

The capacity of Western governments to indulge in wishful thinking in the military and foreign policy fields whenever it is possible to do so is almost without limit.⁷

Western values virtually rule out calculated nuclear war:

It is very difficult for us in the West, with our abhorrence of force and the widely prevalent view of automatic mutual homicide, to believe that a situation could occur in which a perfectly sane but calculating, decisive or ruthless decision

is quite possible that there could be a large, mostly conventional war in which the use of nuclear weapons would be limited at most to air defense and naval actions.⁹

On the tendency to underestimate the risks of an outbreak of war, Kahn noted that in December 1938 Lloyds of London offered 32:1 odds (NOT a misprint) against war in 1939, and that 10 of 12 European reporters polled August 7, 1939 predicted there would be no war.¹⁰ (Hitler launched World War II by invading Poland on September 1, 1939.)

Nor is de-escalation always benign:

De-escalation is usually thought of as a “friendly” act, but it need not be so. Thus, after the Battle of France, Hitler deliberately avoided provoking the British in an attempt to decrease their willingness to continue the war.¹¹

A Hitler’s rage, ruthlessness and cunning create a huge negotiating edge:

Today, a Hitler of the type we picture now, one who is reckless, absolutely determined, and who is crazy or realistically simulates madness, would have an important negotiating edge. If anybody says to you, “One of us has to be reasonable and it is not going to be me, so it has to be you,” he has a very effective bargaining advantage, particularly if he is armed with thermonuclear weapons. If he can convince you he is stark, staring mad, and if he has enough destructive power, you will also be persuaded that deterrence alone will not work. You must then give in or accept the possibility of being annihilated.¹²

Gambles by leaders have been frequent in history:

We tend to forget that throughout history many decision-makers were delighted to accept “double or nothing” tactics if the odds looked sufficiently favorable.¹³

Joseph Stalin was as ruthless as Hitler, or anyone else in human history. But he was more cautious than Hitler, a caution less likely to have been present had the Soviet Union possessed a postwar nuclear monopoly. In 1949 Stalin told Walter Bedell Smith, then U.S. ambassador to the USSR:

We do not want war any more than the West does, but we are less interested in peace than the West, and therein, lies the strength of our position.¹⁴

Hitler and Stalin, both highly shrewd calculators of how civilized peoples usually shrink from avoidable confrontation, surely understood what Kahn later wrote, as to the desire for revenge versus desire to survive: “In most people’s value systems, revenge will have a lower priority than survival.”¹⁵

On use of power by strong nations against weaker ones, Kahn noted its recent rarity:

In all the colonial conflicts that have taken place in the decade and a half since World War II, there has hardly been one in which the colonial power did not have the physical power, or at least the potential physical power, to suppress indefinitely the nationalist movement or uprising.¹⁶

Kahn saw an emerging code of behavior for Western leaders in the nuclear age:

As courageous behavior, whatever personal fears may be felt, is expected from an officer or soldier as part of his professional standard, so coolness and rationality already have been established as part of the expectations the public has of its crisis leaders in the nuclear age. There is now a widespread hostility to defiant or rashly “brave” counsels of nuclear conflict or bargaining....

This current emphasis on coolness and calculation sharply contrasts with much in the Western tradition, which has inclined to a romantic or quixotic attitude toward war. The Soviets, unlike Westerners, have almost no tradition of chivalry or of war as a romantic occupation. They are more influenced by the Byzantine tradition of a cynical and instrumental use of force, waging war so as to maximize the gains.¹⁷

Small Nuclear Power Security. Kahn foresaw a growing potential for blackmail, revenge, accidental wars, Munichs in a world with small powers going nuclear:

When the small nations have acquired nuclear weapons, however, not only does the danger of accidental incidents go up sharply but the dangers of “arranged accidents” also increase.¹⁸

Of leverage applicable by small nuclear powers against larger ones:

It is likely that other nations with a relatively small number of megatons in their hands will be able to exert a disproportionate leverage on the distribution of political power.¹⁹

Rising Non-Western World Resentment. Kahn's prescient analysis of trends outside the Western world came without knowledge that at the turn of the 21st century militant Islam would launch what the Orientalist Bernard Lewis has called the third great assault of Islam against the West. (The first great advance encompassed the Arab conquests in Islam's first, tumultuous century, culminating in the subjugation of Spain in the early eighth century; Islam's original advance was stopped shortly thereafter in France. The second great push was that of the Ottomans, who toppled the Byzantine Empire in 1453 at Constantinople; that thrust ended two centuries later at the gates of Vienna. The decisive battle in the latter case was fought on September 11, 1683.)

Kahn saw rising anger directed at the West:

Rising nationalism, racism, envy, greed exacerbated by the population explosion, a partial frustration of the revolution of rising expectations, and the memory of

Kahn flagged the seductive temptations and assumptions about enemy attacks

Thus, in evaluating an enemy's capabilities, it is important to look beyond the conventional tactics that the standard assumptions lead one to expect, since a clever enemy might employ creative and unconventional methods. A defender should not assume what Albert Wohlstetter has called "defender-preferred attacks"—*i.e.*, those a potential defender feels most able to deal with and therefore would prefer. Instead, the focus should be on "attacker-preferred attacks," namely those a desperate or highly ideological aggressor may prefer.²²

ACCIDENT AND CONTROL

Command and control of nuclear weapons is coming to the forefront of problems in today's world. Newly minted and soon-to-emerge nuclear states are led by leaders whose grasp of the risk of accidental nuclear war appears highly problematic. There is the possibility that Pakistan's democratic government might fall to Islamists who thus gain control over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. North Korea's regime may stumble into nuclear war by excessive provocation. Iran's leaders may ignite a Mideast arms race upon crossing the nuclear threshold.

Kahn stressed the importance of sophisticated command and control systems and protocols to guard against accidental war and war by miscalculation. He set four categories of war: (1) *Inadvertent War*—accident; (2) War as a result of *Miscalculation*—misinterpretation; (3) *Calculated War*—first strike; (4) *Catalytic War*—started by a third party, as in World War I.²³

He stressed the importance of nuclear powers safeguarding against accidental war:

*It is important that all possessors of nuclear capability be fearful of starting an accidental war, so fearful that they will be willing to accept large peacetime, operating costs and substantial degradations of capability in order to decrease the possibility of accidents and to increase the likelihood of error-free behavior.*²⁴

Asked which they prefer, an invulnerable system with a one percent risk of accidental war versus a system vulnerable to a clever attack but secure against accident, most people chose the latter.²⁵

On command and control increasing incentives and ability to contain escalation:

Particularly, if most or all of the parties with nuclear weapons had also initiated procedures and equipment for reliable command and control, and the controlled-response tactics ... were well understood, it would not be likely that nations would automatically involve themselves in, or escalate, a conflict simply because a nuclear exchange had taken place. It is more likely that everyone would be extraordinarily cautious of the dangers of escalation, and would be most careful not to respond blindly or emotionally to either accidental or deliberate attack.²⁶

On arguments regarding nuclear deterrence and war made with sparse historical data:

Despite the fact that nuclear weapons have already been used twice, and the nuclear sword has been rattled many times, one can argue that for all practical purposes, nuclear war is still (and hopefully will remain) so far from our experience that it is difficult to reason from, or illustrate arguments by, analogies from history. Thus, many of our concepts and doctrines must be based upon abstract and analytical considerations.²⁷

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, one Soviet submarine commander was under siege by an American destroyer dropping depth charges, aiming to force the diesel sub to surface

Kahn's warning of 45 years ago
America ended the Second Wo

years after the widespread assumption, shared by many professional analysts, was that nuclear exchanges were more likely to occur than not. There were several close calls in the Cold War era. Most were accidental—radar blips that resembled attacking missiles. In such instances nuclear restraint was practiced by both superpowers, each possessing a large, widely dispersed deterrent force that permitted riding out a surprise first strike.

But one close call was no accident: the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Though both

America in World War II.

President Obama may well be resolved that soon he will order action to destroy Iran's facilities if all else fails, or Israel may do