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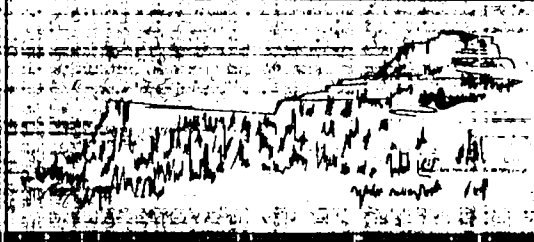
The Nuclear Future: Political and Social Considerations

Robert W. Tucker



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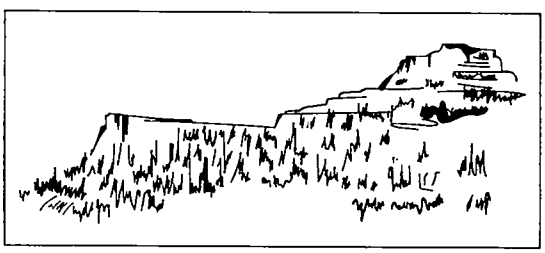

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THE NUCLEAR FUTURE: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Robert W. Tucker

SUMMARY

The author argues that past prophecies about the effect of nuclear weapons upon international politics have had a poor record. Neither the prophets of nuclear doom nor those of nuclear utopia have been proven correct. Continuity has prevailed in international politics. Nuclear weapons have made the great powers more cautious and prudent, but they have not fundamentally changed the character of international politics. He considers the record of the relationship between technology and international politics in the strategic sphere, and concludes that new technological developments in this sphere may be expected to unfold in a manner ultimately independent of the political and social environment, although conditioned by that environment as to rate or intensity of effort at particular periods. He considers how geopolitical considerations, and in particular nuclear proliferation, might affect the future, and concludes that only that proliferation which might come about in the wake of the collapse of the postwar alliance system—thus threatening the nuclearization of Germany or Japan—might be capable of producing a fundamental change in the structure of international politics. He notes a secular societal trend in the West toward the delegitimation of nuclear deterrence, argues that this trend may be seen both on the Left and on the Right, and speculates on its origins and prospects. The author concludes by noting the conflict between this trend and the broad technological determinism considered earlier.

ABSTRACT

This essay speculates about the nuclear future on the basis of the record of past prophecies about the effects of nuclear weapons, the broad relationship between technological development and international politics, the effects of further proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the implications of broad societal trends in the West tending toward the delegitimation of nuclear deterrence.

THE NUCLEAR FUTURE: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

by

Robert W. Tucker

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the dawn of the nuclear age there has been no shortage of prophets of the nuclear future. Their record has not been very impressive. At the very outset, there were confident prophecies about the equalizing effects of the new weapons. According to this view, once atomic weapons were the possession of most states, the age old distinctions of power would presumably change and radically so. The once small and weaker states, possessed of even a small stockpile of the new weapons, would be able to pursue a more independent policy than they had ever enjoyed before. Of course, this radical change in the international hierarchy also assumed that proliferation would occur in the not too distant future. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, there was a persistent and widespread concern over proliferation and its consequences. These consequences were seen by most to promise an ever greater instability and, along with this instability, an increasing probability of nuclear war. For a time, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was considerable concern about the prospect of catalytic war, a prospect that was also seen largely as a function of proliferation.

Pessimism over proliferation and its consequences reflected the views that the spread of nuclear weapons would come rather quickly and that the effects of the spread would be to raise the risks of nuclear war. Proliferation was expected to increase the prospects of nuclear conflict simply because these prospects were in part equated with the number of states possessing nuclear weapons. The greater the number, the greater the prospects. In turn, prophecies of general nuclear war resulting from proliferation were ultimately rooted in the proposition that nuclear weapons have imposed upon us a true community of fate. A nuclear peace, it was and indeed still is argued, is indivisible. The idea of a community of fate imposed by technological developments culminating in nuclear missile weapons has been very strong.

Prophets and prophecies of doom in the nuclear era have had to coexist with prophets and prophecies of nuclear utopia. The latter have generally reflected the belief that war will disappear once its destructiveness promises to become sufficiently great. This belief, that war contains the means for achieving its own disappearance, is quite old. But prior to this century it never achieved widespread currency. The experience of the two World Wars, and the prospects held out by nuclear war, gave it unexpectedly wide persuasiveness. Thus the best known expression of this view comes not from a visionary but from one of the age's greatest statesmen, Winston Churchill, who remarked in the early 1950s, "...it may well be that we shall, by a process of sublime irony, have reached a state in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."

Churchill's optimism is not far different from the optimism that has characterized many of the true believers in deterrence, or, at any rate, in mutual and assured destruction. To the believers in deterrence through the threat of retaliation, technology is seen as compelling men to do what their moral and political inventiveness alone have never been able to do. Technology remains a despot presiding over the destinies of men and nations, but it is here transformed into a benevolent despot.

To the prophets of nuclear doom, technology may also be seen as a despot, but it is no benevolent despot. In fact, however, the prophets of nuclear doom have only infrequently attributed to technology the character of necessity as have the prophets of nuclear utopia. Instead, the former have regularly summoned men and nations to break out of the deadly ruts of arms races before disaster overtakes them, something that would be impossible if technology literally constituted a necessity in the affairs of state. More often than not, the prophets of doom have in fact been less than consistent in their outlook because they have reflected both a voluntarism and a determinism. While seeing an inevitability about the disaster toward which we are heading, given the persistence of our present ways, they are nevertheless insistent that we abandon these ways and, by so doing, escape disaster. This has been the theme of the nuclear pessimists from C. P. Snow to Jonathan Schell.

Anxiety over the kind of future held out by nuclear weapons has not been constant since the 1950s. Quite the contrary, this anxiety has varied markedly. It was on a rising curve in the latter part of the 1950s and reached a high point at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. In the years following that crisis it diminished quite considerably and for a sustained period. It is in the late 1970s that we can again see the rise of nuclear anxiety. By the early 1980s, this anxiety appeared to have achieved new heights and to have found expression in an antinuclear movement of unprecedented size. The movement stressed the ever-heightening perils of the arms race. Once again, a large number of prophets appeared, this time to warn of the ever greater danger of instability that must result from weapons of increasing accuracy and from ever more complex command and control systems. The result of these developments, it was urged, points to a time when technology would indeed "take over" and, in a crisis, push statesmen into disastrous courses.

Looking back on the record of nuclear prophets and prophecies, what does it suggest about how we should view prophecies of the nuclear future today? The answer, it would seem, is with considerable skepticism. On balance, the prophets appear to have a fairly poor record. Nuclear weapons have not revolutionized the structure and character of international politics. The hierarchical character of state relations has not been radically altered in the nuclear era. This is not to say that nuclear weapons have been without effects; only that the effects have been less radical than most prophets had forecast.

Still, there are two qualifications one must make when dealing with nuclear prophets and prophecies. One is that we cannot be sure of what effects the presence of nuclear weapons has had. To take the obvious example: were they critical in preventing the recurrence of war in Europe? A great deal of authority will support the view that they were. But we cannot be sure. It may well be, as not a few contend, that Europe would have experienced the peace it has even if nuclear weapons had not existed. The second qualification is that prophets are at an advantage when dealing with issues of nuclear war, so much so that a poor record does not appear to discredit them. When prophecies deal with an event that presumably cannot be repeated because its occurrence would be catastrophic, then the record of poor prophecies is less discrediting than it would be in the normal case. This is perhaps the explanation of why an unimpressive record has had little effect on the prophets and why after four decades they are as bold and assertive about the nuclear future as they have ever been.

These considerations apart, what may be learned from the past four decades that is useful in considering the future? One response is simply that continuity has prevailed over most forecasts of change. When we look at the international political picture, we see far more continuity than change. Nuclear weapons have not revolutionized world politics. This is not to say that they have been without effect, only that their effect to date has been much less than most forecasts would have led us to expect. Nuclear weapons have clearly made the great powers more cautious and prudent. But beyond this broad generalization it is extremely difficult to speak with confidence about their effects on international politics.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

A very significant part of the nuclear future concerns the relationship between technology and politics. What does the record of the recent past show about this relationship that might prove helpful in speculating about its future? The relationship of technology and politics is, of course, a much disputed one. Despite its importance, relatively little serious work seems to have been done on it. There is a striking absence of solid historical studies on this relationship since World War II. Yet, when one speculates about the nuclear future, the nature of the relationship between technology and politics constitutes almost a kind of "preliminary" question. Certainly it does so if one assumes that in the development of strategic weapons there has been a kind of determinism at work and that, in consequence, science and technology have prevailed over politics in shaping the nuclear past.

Subject to some qualification, we might accept this assumption. Or perhaps, we could do so if put in this form: Given the conflict relationship that exists between the United States and the Soviet Union, that has now persisted for more than four decades, governments (policy makers) have pursued, and may be expected to pursue, those technological opportunities that the scientific community certifies as falling within the limits of the possible, subject to the qualification that these opportunities do not appear to transgress some deeply held inhibition (taboo).*

It seems to me that our experience since World War II bears out this assumption or, looking at the future, expectation. Looking at the past four decades, we would conclude that the scientists have been the sorcerers and the policy makers the sorcerers' apprentices. This, at any rate, is the initial juxtaposition. Later, when the sorcerer's apprentice has been instructed as to what is possible, the relationship is reversed. The sorcerer's apprentice then takes over and the original tempter is in thrall to the apprentice. This seems to have been roughly the way matters have proceeded in the nuclear age, and there is no reason why they should now change. One may criticize this view by arguing that if there is a determinism at work here, it is not so much in the relationship between technology and politics as in the character and compulsions of conflict itself. Clearly there is merit in this criticism. The compulsion to do technologically what is possible, or appears to be possible, is rooted in the conflict that creates the "need" for weapons. Thus the proposition may be put in a still more general form that encompasses the Soviet-American conflict and goes beyond it. (Given the insecurity that characterizes the state of nature from which states have never emerged, governments will pursue those technological opportunities...).

As long as Soviet-American competition persists in anything that even roughly resembles its present form, or, if superseded by a competition that broadly resembles it, the proposition may be expected to hold. At least, it may be expected to do so subject to such qualification as is inherent in the nature of conflict. Since the proposition is ultimately rooted in, and justified by, a condition of conflict and insecurity, the *intensity of effort* directed at doing what is possible technologically will depend to a certain extent on the more specific conditions attending a conflict situation. Again, the history of the past 40 years or so would appear to bear this out. When we have pushed very hard on new weapons technology, we have done so either in conditions of war or in conditions when our relationship with the Soviet Union has been quite tense. The fear of some today that if there is another detente, marked by a series of arms control agreements, this will lead to the demise of the Strategic Defense Initiative illustrates the point. If recent history is a reliable guide here, the fear is not unfounded, only exaggerated.

Assuming the position taken here to be correct, what does it mean for the nuclear future? The broad answer would seem to be reasonably clear and simple. As far as new technological developments are concerned, they may be expected to unfold in a manner that is ultimately independent of the political and social environment. We say ultimately because it is apparent that this environment will affect the rate of technological development, the intensity of the effort made, etc. Whether at a faster or a slower pace, whether with a greater or a lesser degree of

* For instance, weapons that have a toxic effect—poison, gases, and biological weapons. Why these weapons should stand apart is very difficult to say. It is sufficient to note here that they have done so and still do.

effort, technological possibilities will be pursued so long as the Soviet-American conflict persists in anything that even roughly resembles its present form (which is quite compatible with periods of detente and of high tension).

THE ROLE OF PROLIFERATION

How might geopolitical developments bear on the nuclear future? One development would be a marked change in those who possess nuclear weapons. The prospects for nuclear proliferation remain about as uncertain and as controverted today as they were a generation ago. But there have been two significant changes since then. They are in the number of states having a capability of acquiring nuclear weapons and in the manner these weapons are likely to be acquired. Some 30 countries now have the technological capability of "going nuclear" should they so decide. Some of them are bound to do so. Those that will do so are likely to do so covertly. The covert route appears to be the favored one today. Strictly speaking, of course, what we call the covert route today is a misnomer. More accurate would be something like "unacknowledged" nuclear powers rather than covert nuclear powers. Truly covert nuclear states would be deprived of one of the prime reasons for acquiring nuclear weapons: their deterrent effect. The so-called covert nuclear power is really the unacknowledged nuclear power. Although generally known, or strongly suspected, to have nuclear weapons, it denies possession. The object is at once to escape the liability of transgressing the ban, formal and informal, on acquiring nuclear weapons while enjoying the deterrent asset that comes from their possession.

It is difficult, besides being of doubtful value, to speculate about proliferation in the abstract. The rate of proliferation will depend upon a number of conditions, the relative security or insecurity of states being the most significant. Should the conditions of security deteriorate over the next generation, we are quite likely to see the rate of proliferation markedly increase.

Yet it is not proliferation in general that is necessarily the most important prospect but the manner in which proliferation takes place and, above all, the identity of the new nuclear powers. The persuasion that the great prospect and danger must simply be equated with proliferation *per se* is rooted in those assumptions noted earlier: that the danger of nuclear war increases roughly in proportion to the number of states possessing nuclear weapons, that nuclear weapons have created the ultimate community of fate, etc. But if these familiar assumptions are once challenged, as they must be challenged, the problem of proliferation is a much more *discriminate* problem than it has commonly been seen.

Clearly, the prospects and implications of proliferation must be tied to the future of international security. At the same time, the most important condition of international security and order will continue to be the American presence and commitment. In turn, the most important manifestation of this presence and commitment is expressed today, as it was yesterday, by the Western Alliance (inclusive of Japan). The end of the alliance might well signal the single greatest change in the postwar order and thereby raise the critical issue that this order has successfully kept in abeyance for decades: the nuclearization of West Germany and Japan.

It should be pointed out that this is not of necessity the consequence which would follow the end of the alliance. Germany might accept and be satisfied with the nuclear protection of France, though this would seem rather doubtful. Still, it is possible and it might become more than just possible given the change through which French thinking and—though to a more modest degree—policy—seem to be going. The French are altering, though with considerable caution, their doctrine regarding the use of nuclear weapons and in the course of this reappraisal extending it in effect to Germany. Then too, the French stockpile is due to undergo considerable expansion in the 1990s. These developments might compensate for a gradual American withdrawal from the continent. They might satisfy the Germans. Then again, they might not. If they do not and the Germans increasingly demand becoming a nuclear power, the result will almost certainly be a first-class crisis.

The case of Japan is of course very different from that of Germany. Japan is not a divided country. It does not have a land border with communist states. It has even greater nuclear

inhibitions than does Germany. These differences also mean, and have always meant, that a nuclear guarantee of Japan is something quite different from a nuclear guarantee of Germany. The risks seen in the case of Germany are of a very different order from the risks seen in the case of Japan. This being the case, it may be that even if the nuclear guarantee of Germany one day comes to an end the guarantee of Japan will continue. If it does not, it will not be because of the risks run by virtue of such guarantee.

Amidst these uncertainties, what seems safe to say, though about all that seems safe to say, is that the prospects of nuclear arms for Germany and Japan hold out the most significant change in the prospective geopolitical environment. The coming of such change would almost certainly give rise to political crisis and a first-class crisis at that. Even so, the outcome of the crisis would in all likelihood take the form of an adjustment to an altered nuclear order comprising Germany and Japan.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, a few remarks should be made about what may be termed, somewhat pretentiously, societal trends in the West as these trends bear on nuclear issues and, therefore, on the nuclear future. Are there any discernible and persistent societal trends bearing on nuclear weapons that may be expected to alter the environment of nuclear weapons and, as a result, to affect the nuclear future? One such development in Western societies, though it seems only in Western societies, stands out: the steady movement toward the delegitimation of nuclear weapons. In the course of the past generation, there has been a marked shift of position with respect to the legitimacy of nuclear weapons.

Indications of this shift were apparent in the antinuclear movement that suddenly broke on the scene in the early 1980s. The most significant feature of this movement was the pronounced change it reflected toward the status of nuclear weapons. This change can perhaps be seen most clearly in what eventually stood out as the best-known expression of the movement: the statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops on nuclear war. The position taken by the bishops need only be compared with the position taken a generation ago by the second Vatican Council to show the change that has occurred. The perspective expressed in 1965 by the Vatican Council was one that condemned "total war" and any acts of war "aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population." By contrast, what the U.S. Catholic bishops condemn is virtually any and every form of nuclear war. The use of nuclear weapons is rejected, whether these weapons are used against military targets or against civilian centers of population, whether in a first strike or a retaliatory second strike, whether in a strategic or theater nuclear war. The rejection is almost complete. Nor does it matter that the bishops' position is based on the conviction that the use of nuclear weapons cannot be controlled and that the effects cannot be limited, considerations that are not very different from those emphasized earlier by Vatican Council II. What does matter is that the bishops invoke these considerations to condemn nuclear war almost without qualification, while Vatican II invoked them to form only a carefully qualified statement about the circumstances in which the use of nuclear weapons would be illegitimate.

This condemnation of nuclear war—any and every nuclear war—cannot but have a bearing on the moral assessment of deterrence. If the use of nuclear weapons must prove immoral because they cannot be controlled or their effects limited, deterrence structures that rest on the threat to use these weapons are also likely to be seen as illegitimate. What gives these structures their one and only saving grace is the promise that they will never have to be put to active use. The slightest lapse of faith in the reliability of deterrence must give rise to a growing sense of despair—moral and otherwise. The bishops' letter clearly points in this direction, as do the statements on nuclear weapons that have been made in recent years by a number of Protestant church groups. In the long term, the effect of these statements cannot but serve to weaken deterrence because the credibility of deterrence is not simply a matter of weapons and their capability. Nor is it taken care of by the posture of government. Ultimately, the credibility of

deterrence in a democratic polity must rest on the endorsement of society. There are persistent signs in the 1980s that this endorsement is eroding.

Nor is the erosion confined to any particular group or groups in society. Instead, it appears quite pervasive. It is true that the antinuclear movement of the early 1980s was made up, by and large, of the political center-left in this country. Yet it is not only the political left that has expressed its unhappiness with deterrence. The political right has done so as well. Indeed, it has done so in a way that has been deeper and more persistent. The support that the right has given the Strategic Defense Initiative does not reflect some sudden change toward a posture of deterrence that rests on the threat of mutual destruction. The right has long been unhappy with this deterrence. What is novel is not its unhappiness with deterrence but its confidence today that deterrence may be transcended, that the threat of nuclear destruction we have lived with for almost two generations may now be overcome.

The causes of the growing erosion of support for deterrence—an erosion that almost appears as a lapse of faith in the 1980s—are necessarily controversial. At one level, though, the rise of anxiety over nuclear weapons in this decade can be accounted for simply by the measurable worsening of Soviet-American relations. The collapse of detente at the end of the 1970s and the emergence of a new cold war of sorts must account in large part for the antinuclear movement of the early 1980s. A heightened fear of war awakened a sensitivity about the dangers held out by nuclear weapons that had remained surprisingly dormant in the preceding decade or so, despite developments in technology (e.g. MIRVing) that might have been expected to provide widespread apprehension. The antinuclear movement reflected this heightened fear of war with the Soviet Union, a fear that the Reagan administration only came to appreciate and respond to toward the end of the first term. Once it did, however, by a new and unexpected attention to arms control and to exploring new ways of decreasing Soviet-American tensions, the movement began to recede.

Even so, there were other deeper causes for the antinuclear weapons movement of this decade and the lapse of faith in deterrence that may be expected to persist and even to deepen. If nuclear weapons are increasingly seen as illegitimate, it is in part because force in general is increasingly seen as illegitimate. A changed attitude toward the use of armed force generally explains the changed attitude toward the use of nuclear force. This change may well reflect deeper changes occurring in American and Western society that militate against this most ancient activity of collectives. The view once propounded by a number of nineteenth century thinkers that liberal capitalist societies are inherently pacific, and even pacifist, is one that can no longer be readily dismissed.

These considerations are no more than speculative. What is not speculative is the steady movement toward the delegitimation of nuclear weapons, with all the implications this must also hold for deterrence. How far may this movement be expected to go in the next decade or two? No one can say with any real degree of assurance. What we can say is that there will be an increasing contradiction between what may be termed the technological imperative—which reflects, of course, a conflict (political) imperative—and the deeper attitudes characterizing advanced western societies. How this contradiction will ultimately be resolved remains quite unclear.