Going Beyond "Beyond Deterrence"

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In their richly detailed paper, Lebow and Stein provide many illustrations of the failure of deterrence. They then go beyond deterrence to suggest that under certain circumstances deterrence might well be supplemented with reassurance and under other circumstances the emphasis might even be on reassurance rather than on deterrence. Although I agree with what they have said about both deterrence and reassurance, and think that their cautions about reassurance are particularly important for psychologists, I believe they have not gone far enough beyond deterrence in their paper. Not having focused their paper on nuclear deterrence and not having centered their discussion on the relations between the superpowers, their paper has greater generality than had it done so. However, it lacks specific relevance to the problems and opportunities arising from the development of nuclear weapons, and hence it does not directly address the issue of avoiding nuclear war.

Many psychologists, including myself, have long been concerned about the strategic doctrine of nuclear deterrence because of our concerns about nuclear war. In a 1961 JSY paper (Deutsch, 1961) I wrote, "The 'hostile peace' of stabilized mutual terror and of institutionalized mutual suspicion is intrinsically vulnerable to the social and psychological maladies that breed in an atmosphere of tension and suspicion. We must begin to find roads to peace rooted in mutual interests and mutual respect" (p. 57).

In that paper, I examined the assumptions involved in the doctrine of "stable nuclear deterrence," and I indicated the instabilities and dilemmas that plague it. In their discussion of security dilemmas, Lebow and Stein also point to a type of dilemma that is particularly debilitating to the concept of nuclear deterrence. It needs highlighting in the nuclear context. The dilemma is this: If...

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one of the superpowers were to launch a nuclear first-strike against the other, but not use all of its nuclear weapons, it would not be rational for the attacked nation to retaliate since retaliation is likely to instigate a further attack by the initial aggressor, leaving the retaliator even worse off than after the first assault. Given these realities, the credibility of the threat to retaliate comes into question and so does nuclear deterrence.

The response of nuclear strategists to this dilemma has been to suggest that the retaliatory response should be automatic or preprogrammed so that it is not subject to human doubt or second thoughts: in other words, so that it is not a rational human decision. They have also suggested that the nuclear missiles should be so accurate that the retaliatory strike could, among other objectives, destroy the nuclear missiles that were not used in the first strike. But highly accurate weapons that can destroy the adversary’s weapons lead to a dangerous, unstable situation in which each side, during an international crisis, may be tempted to engage in a preemptive strike or to adopt the policy of “launch on warning.” Given the time limitations, the decision to launch on warning must be largely automated and not under the immediate rational control of the governing decision makers.

The theory of nuclear deterrence is ensnared in its inherent dilemmas and, in the attempt to elude these dilemmas, it has moved increasingly toward nonrational automated, preprogrammed decisions that have the potential of precipitating the catastrophe it seeks to deter. It postulates that the adversary is a rational decision maker and can be rationally deterred, but it does not attach to this rational decision maker sufficient reasonableness to recognize the vast uncertainties, unknowns, risks, and dangers associated with initiating a nuclear attack—realities that would deter any sensible decision maker from starting a nuclear assault.

The model of the rational decision maker underlying the doctrine of deterrence has been challenged by many social scientists. Psychologists have pointed to characteristic errors and biases that arise in individual decision making as a result of the nature of human information processing, cognition, motivation, and personality. Group and organizational theorists have exposed groupthink, bureaucratic inertia, distortions in communication within hierarchies, and many other processes resulting in nonrational group and organizational decision making. Similarly, political scientists who have examined the process of governmental decision making have found it useful to characterize it as a political struggle among various contending factions rather than as a rational process of choosing among the available alternatives in terms of their expected benefits and harms for the nation. Beyond all of this, it is evident that the theory of deterrence makes the dubious assumption that we can really know our adversary well enough to make sound, detailed judgments about what will serve as a deterrence influence.

My 1961 discussion of the dilemmas involved in nuclear deterrence led me to conclude the following:

There is no rational solution possible to our problems of security in a multinational world except to make the world more rational. We are in a type of institutional situation which is similar to that which led to a panic crowd in a theatre where there is a fire. By attempting to achieve individual safety without regard for the safety of others, a person enhances the danger for all. In such a situation, the only reasonable course of action will be to take the initiative in creating order by persuasively suggesting rules and procedures which will permit an organized exit from the situation before the last stage of chaos.

A preconditional development for the development of a rational order is the recognition by both superpowers that each has a positive interest in the other side’s military security as well as its own; national security can only be achieved through mutual security. The military forces of both sides should be viewed as having the common primary aim of preventing either side from starting a deliberate or accidental war. The attempt to achieve military superiority should be avoided by both sides. We must recognize that, just as military inferiority is dangerous, so is military superiority; we neither want to tempt nor to frighten a potential adversary into military action.

To get truly beyond deterrence, we must achieve the mutual recognition of the need for mutual security. We must consider the United States and the U.S.S.R. asking themselves “How can we make the other side more secure without decreasing our own security?” rather than “How can we increase our own security or decrease the other’s power to harm us?” There would be many obvious shifts in military policy and actions that would be reassuring to the other side. Such recognition could readily lead to informal security agreements, to continuing joint working groups of experts to minimize the possibilities of inadvertent war, to the establishment of mixed military units to inspect and verify arms control agreements, etc. How could such recognition be brought about, what are the internal resistances to developing such awareness, and how can they be overcome? Paradoxically, the recognition of the inescapable vulnerability of each side to the other’s nuclear weapons, and hence that a nuclear war is unwinnable, exists among the political and military leaders of both sides, and yet each side acts as though it must maintain the military posture of aiming to win such a war in order to convince the other side that it could not win a nuclear war. As 1 have pointed out elsewhere (Deutsch, 1983).

The danger and resulting anxiety from the vulnerability to the other’s nuclear weapons push policy makers in the superpowers to use what has been a good defense against danger and anxiety in the past—increasing power vis-à-vis the adversary. But this previously successful defense against insecurity now does the opposite. It increases insecurity. Overcoming this underlying pathological dynamic requires the recognition that the old defense is inappropriate to the new, revolutionary situation caused by nuclear weapons (Deutsch, 1983, p. 298).
What keeps this old defense, which is now so costly and so harmful, in place? Partly, it is difficult to face the fact of our inescapable vulnerability, and partly it is hard to give up old, well-established beliefs even when they have become dysfunctional until the new methods of reducing anxiety have been implemented and seen to work: the idea of "mutual security" has not yet been implemented so we have not yet had the chance to see it work. But even more importantly, both sides have made tremendous investments in support of their belief that one's own military forces are the best means of assuring national security.

The investment of hundreds of billions of dollars annually by each side in support of its military forces has created politically influential military-industrial complexes that each use the existence and actions of the other side's military-industrial complex as a justification for its own existence and even expansion. The military-industrial complexes of both sides form a dynamic, interacting, self-perpetuating dyad; each side unwittingly cooperates to enhance the other's political influence and budgetary allocations through their competitive nuclear war games and scenarios. This malignant dyadic process lures otherwise intelligent political leaders into the irrational quest for national security by the continued development and expansion of our nuclear arsenal.

How can this malignant dyad's dangerous appetites be curbed? I suggest that we must muster our political will to put our domestic military-industrial complex on a strict diet, even as we develop substitute reconversion programs to replace its current harmful and costly addictions. To do so, we shall have to formulate and propagate a healthier conception of national security that does not stimulate the appetite for military power. A healthier conception of national security would instead stimulate our appetites for economic development (domestically and internationally)—better education, prevention of diseases, elimination of poverty, better care for our children, a greater sense of community.

It is, I believe, becoming more evident to people in all strata of our society that an inordinate appetite for military power is harmful to their interests as well as a threat to their real security. There are more corporations, businesses, industries, occupations, states, regions, groups, families, and individuals who suffer rather than benefit from catering to the appetites of the military-industrial complex. If these people's political strength could be mustered, our domestic military-industrial complex would lose much of its influence. This, in turn, would lessen the stimulation of the other side's military-industrial complex, which is so dynamically linked to ours.

To go beyond nuclear deterrence, we must recognize that much of each side's problem is itself, and that any fundamental improvement in superpower relations will require domestic changes in each side to reduce the political influence of those who are invested in outmoded conceptions of national security.

References


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