MASSIVE RETALIATION
AND GRADUATED DETERRENCE

By REAR ADMIRAL SIR ANTHONY W. BUZZARD,
ROYAL NAVY (RETIRED)

RELIABLE disarmament, particularly of nuclear weapons, requires inspection and control, which in turn require much mutual trust. None of this is yet in sight. Disarmament of nuclear weapons is therefore still a long way off, although a measure of conventional disarmament may be nearer.

Meanwhile, as we try to nourish the necessary mutual trust and negotiate the many issues between East and West, the main menace to peace surely is Communist subversion. But that is not all. Behind the forces of subversion stand strong local armies, designed to support the subversive elements, to negotiate from strength further Communist advances, and to engage in local aggression, if opportunity offers, on a minor or even quite large scale, probably with conventional weapons.

Still another menace is that of minor wars arising from local nationalistic quarrels, and caused more by third parties than by the main rivals in the East-West struggle. Deliberate, premeditated aggression on a world-wide, or even a continental, scale by the Communists is seemingly out of the question. World war is therefore likely to result only from these local Communist or nationalist menaces, aggravated by pride and miscalculation. If these conflicts should lead to a deadlock between East and West, a world war might then ensue, and might well be started by a surprise Communist attack on the style of Pearl Harbor.

The foreign policy of the West seems therefore to require a defense policy which, while continuing to maintain the deterrent against deliberate world war, can also provide the local tactical strength necessary to negotiate from local strength, to deter limited Communist aggression, and to deal with the local nationalistic quarrels of third parties. Yet our present policy of massive retaliation hardly seems to meet these requirements, for, in effect, it threatens to destroy civilization as a result of any aggression too powerful for our small conventional forces to handle. Thus, NATO states that it intends to use nuclear weapons in the event of an attack from the East; and at the same time we are told that there is no distinction between the tactical and strategic use of such weapons.

That we should, in fact, try to establish distinctions between the stra-
strategic and tactical use of nuclear weapons is the proposition which this article attempts to develop. The suggestion is that we work out and declare, without waiting for Communist agreement, distinctions of the following order. The tactical use of nuclear weapons, we might say, is to be confined to atomic weapons, and is to exclude even these from use against towns and cities. Their strategic use, we might further declare, is to include hydrogen weapons and the mass destruction of targets in towns and cities. We might also state generally that, in order to pursue the moral principle of never using more force than necessary, we would not resort to the strategic use of nuclear weapons unless their employment proved absolutely essential. Thus, without committing ourselves unalterably in advance, or showing our hand too clearly, we would have the option, when threatened with a limited aggression too great for our conventional forces to cope with, of saying to the prospective aggressor: "If you do attack, we will, if necessary, use atomic and perhaps chemical weapons against your armed forces. But we will not, on this issue, use hydrogen or bacteriological weapons at all, unless you do, and we will not use any mass destruction weapons against centers of population, unless you do deliberately." To this statement we might append certain exceptions, such as cities in the front line of the land fighting and those with airfields alongside.

By an announcement of this character we would be modifying our present policy of massive retaliation to one aptly named "graduated deterrence." The obvious practical difficulties of such a policy may be dealt with later. Assuming practicability for the moment, let us consider the moral, political, military, and economic merits of graduated deterrence.

I

MORAL CONSIDERATIONS

Morally the issue is, surely, quite clear. We should not cause, or threaten to cause, more destruction than is necessary. By this criterion, all our fighting should be limited (in weapons, targets, area, and time) to the minimum force necessary to deter and repel aggression, prevent any unnecessary extension of the conflict, and permit a return to negotiation at the earliest opportunity—without seeking total victory or unconditional surrender. The moral standards which we profess to defend, demand not only this action in the event of aggression, but the pursuance of long-term policies directed toward this end.
POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

So far, massive retaliation, despite its shortcomings and failure to halt aggression in Korea and Indo-China, has been a fairly effective deterrent because the Russians have been incapable of striking back massively, particularly at the United States. With this situation changing, massive retaliation, although still an effective deterrent against an all-out attack by the Communists, is no longer effective against the much more likely threat of local aggression by Soviet and satellite armies, because the Communists might well expect the United States to refrain from action which is becoming akin to suicide. Increasingly, therefore, our present policy is in danger of being interpreted as bluff—if indeed it does not prove to be one—for any aggression between an all-out war and a very minor one; and it leaves much room for misunderstanding and Communist exploitation.

Graduated deterrence, by providing an intermediate deterrent, guards against these dangers, and gives more latitude for our diplomacy, without reducing our deterrent against all-out attack. This option of intermediate action, together with the removal of the element of bluff, would not only improve our capacity to deter; it would also enhance our ability to negotiate from local tactical strength, an ability which becomes increasingly important as the strategic hydrogen stalemate approaches.

Graduated deterrence, by being at the same time less drastic than massive retaliation, would also help to reduce tension and build up trust. For example, in the disarmament discussions, an announcement of this new policy would constitute an assurance of our sincerity, since it would show that we genuinely wish to limit all possible use of nuclear weapons until their disarmament can be arranged. Conversely, such an announcement would be a test of the Communists’ sincerity in these negotiations, for their denunciation of it would demonstrate the intention to continue exploiting our present tactical weakness.

Further, by blocking Communist pressure politics and every form of aggression, we might get the Soviets to see that their vast armaments are useless. Indeed, experience in the limited use of armaments would also nourish the trust essential for limiting their possession. Finally, by relying more on tactical strength with which to match Communist tactical strength, we would convert our security requirements into terms more comparable to those of the Communists, and therefore more easily balanced and reduced, stage by stage. Thus, the surest road to ultimate disarmament probably leads through graduated deterrence.
MILITARY CONSIDERATIONS

Graduated deterrence certainly complies with the basic military principle of first concentrating on the enemy's armed forces, as opposed to his people. But would the proposal to bar hydrogen weapons and the mass destruction of cities pay the West or the Communists more? On the one hand, if we decided to adhere to such a policy, we should be unable to attack with any mass destruction weapons key points like headquarter cities, Russian industries, submarine bases, and communication centers. On the other hand, the Russians would be unable to use these weapons against similar targets, including the many ports on which the development and supply of so much of the Allied potential depend.

Thus, both sides would gain enormously on an absolute basis, and this would heavily outweigh the relative considerations. But, insofar as the relative considerations counted, the Western allies would surely gain in view of their great dependence on ports, which form such bottlenecks and such ideal targets for nuclear and chemical weapons. This advantage would be particularly important in the crucial early stages of a war, because the mobilization and deployment of the Allied forces are always likely to be much less advanced at the start than those of the Communists. Moreover, since targets in towns and cities could still be attacked with high-explosive weapons, the Allied superiority in technique and precision attack would represent an added advantage for the West. Submarine bases could still be effectively mined, and key industrial targets and bridges attacked efficiently with high-explosive guided missiles.

We would also gain in three other respects. First, the advantage to our morale of not having to initiate the strategic use of nuclear weapons would be great. Secondly, by making possible the limited employment of these weapons against local aggression, we could if necessary exploit our great atomic superiority, not only directly against the Communist armies, but also against their supporting airfields and ships. Thirdly, in trying to halt the Communist armies, we could also exploit the great defensive properties of atomic and chemical weapons (both of which are so much more effective in defense than on the attack) without provoking their use against our vulnerable ports.

Thus it seems that, militarily, the ability to impose the suggested limitations would be to our advantage relative to the Communists, as well as of tremendous absolute advantage to both sides. Such a policy would help particularly to redress the tactical balance of power and improve our ability to hold territory.
ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

At first sight, massive retaliation might seem to be the cheapest way of keeping the peace. But now that the Russians, too, are becoming able to retaliate massively, this policy by itself will not be an effective deterrent to limited aggression. Strong tactical land, sea, and air forces are therefore necessary in any case for deterring and repelling limited aggression. In providing this kind of strength, within the framework of a policy of graduated deterrence, the economies that we achieve by using tactical atomic weapons to help match the vast Communist conventional forces will be of real value. With our present policy, according to which an attack of any magnitude immediately provokes all-out hydrogen war, many of our tactical atomic preparations are a waste of money.

Moreover, with massive retaliation, a full scale of air and civil defense for our cities against every possible form of mass destruction is essential if our deterrent is to be convincing to the Communists. But this is becoming increasingly impracticable economically (except perhaps for the United States), and it is already quite beyond the means of the more exposed and less prosperous NATO countries. The meager air and civil defense measures which these countries can afford for their cities would be much more justifiable as part of a policy of graduated deterrence, both as an insurance against our deterrents failing to stop the Communists from initiating city destruction and as a reasonable defense against conventional weapons. Thus, although there would be no relief from our present defense expenditures, graduated deterrence would give us better security for our money. In sum, then, these moral, political, military, and economic considerations make graduated deterrence seem in principle far preferable to massive retaliation.

II

Objections to the practicability of such a policy seem formidable at first. But, when scrutinized, are they any worse than the many dangers and shortcomings of massive retaliation? Let us look at the three main objections to graduated deterrence.

(1) That it would reduce our deterrent and thus increase the chances of war. This, as we have seen, is becoming a fallacy now that Russia, too, is increasingly capable of retaliating massively. Indeed, graduated deterrence will decrease the chances of war, provided that we pay reasonable attention to our tactical strength, and do not renounce generally, and in advance, the initiation of strategic bombing with nuclear
weapons, regardless of the scale or theater of aggression. In other words, against the unlikely eventuality of deliberate all-out aggression, our deterrent would be unchanged. Against the eventuality of a dead-lock arising on some crucial issue, city destruction no longer being inevitable, we would have reduced the temptation for the Communists to attempt a "Pearl Harbor" against us.

Against major aggression by the Red armies, the Communists would know that our deterrent—not necessarily being suicidal—would be less likely to be bluff, and that we would be more united in our determination to retaliate. They would know that if we imposed the limitations of graduated deterrence, conditions would favor our great tactical atomic superiority, our atomic and chemical weapons used in defense, and our precision with high explosives. They would know, too, that there would still be a risk of hydrogen bombs being used, and of the mass destruction of cities.

Against minor aggression, our deterrent would be increased by the possibility of our using atomic and chemical weapons. We would be less likely to shrink from the prompt action required to prevent small wars from spreading; thus, we would be less likely to get into a position where a series of Communist nibbles forced us to take action leading to a major war. Finally, against the danger of war by mistake, or one brought on by a third party, there would be less scope for such misunderstandings as an intended minor aggression being taken for, and treated as, a major aggression.

(2) That the Communists would not agree to our limitations in peace, or conform to them in war, if we elected to try and impose them. It is true that, in peace, they probably would refuse to agree to our distinctions at first, arguing, as they do now, that the use of nuclear weapons must be abolished altogether, and knowing that this would leave the Red armies supreme. But, in war, it seems almost certain that the Communists would do their utmost to conform. They must appreciate the vast superiority of the United States in nuclear weapons, her skill in delivering them, and her advantage in having air bases, on land and sea, so much closer to Russia and China than the Communist bases are to America.

In weighing the relative advantages, the Communists might well conclude, as we have, that the limitations would often favor us in our efforts to hold territory. But the absolute disadvantage of having their cities pounded by hydrogen weapons would far outweigh such relative considerations. As hydrogen weapons become more plentiful, this
absolute consideration will surely weigh more heavily with the Com-
munists.

But even if this estimate should prove wrong in war, we would have
gained immeasurably in the unity and morale of the Allied nations
by having placed the onus for initiating the mass slaughter of people
on the enemy. Moreover, we would risk little, since to be a few hours
after the enemy in the destruction of cities would not matter. It is true
that the enemy could, if he dared to disregard our limitations, forestall
us by a short time with hydrogen bombs against, say, our airfields
while we were still attacking his with atomic weapons. But, if he did,
we would probably be no worse off than with a policy of massive re-
taliation, where the enemy would have every incentive thus to forestall
us with hydrogen weapons.

(3) That distinctions in the use of nuclear weapons are imprac-
ticable, that the tactical use of them would spread to unlimited use,
and that any such distinctions would therefore prove illusory. The
problems of making useful distinctions between hydrogen and atomic
weapons, and of defining centers of population and their geographic
limits, are certainly difficult ones. But provided they are thoroughly
studied beforehand, there is no reason to suppose that they are insu-
perable. The weapons to be classed as strategic, instead of being defined
as hydrogen, might be more appropriately characterized as those with
major fall-out effects, or those exceeding in power a certain number
of kilotons. Similarly, centers of population could be defined in a num-
ber of ways; but there is much to be said, where tactical operations are
concerned, for excluding mass destruction of all towns and cities over
a certain size, except those actually in the front line of the land fighting
not declared and proved “open.” The front line, in turn, might be de-
 fined as extending so many miles beyond the most advanced land
units of each side. Such a definition could then be adhered to regard-
less of the targets that the towns and cities contained, unless perhaps
offensive missiles were launched from them, or offensive aircraft took
off from airfields close alongside.

With some such distinctions established well in advance, the prob-
lem of limitations seems far from hopeless. For the difference between
a bombing policy intentionally designed to strike the middle of cities
with hydrogen bombs, and one designed to strike other targets with
atomic bombs, but occasionally near-missing a city by mistake, would
be obvious. Moreover, the Communists, like us, would be desperately
anxious for cities to be spared from mass destruction. Thus, both sides
would be eager—not reluctant—to overlook an occasional accidental
breach of the rules; and both sides would want to avoid doing anything that would give the other an opportunity to put the worst interpretation on its actions.

In sum, it is far from certain that we would not succeed in maintaining these limitations during at least the early stages of any nuclear war, which is really what matters. Moreover, once our distinctions were established, and thus could grow in the minds and plans of both sides, the risks of the limitations breaking down in war would gradually diminish as the years went by. Finally, even if our limitations should break down in war, would anything have been lost by making the attempt to uphold them? Little or nothing, surely, provided only that we never lose sight of the risk of this happening, and avoid becoming “trigger happy” with our tactical atomic weapons.

This risk, if not sufficiently clear for both sides to see, could easily be advertised, and if any atomic weapons ever were used tactically, the spectacle would serve as a potent reminder of the consequences of employing them against cities, or of using hydrogen weapons thousands of times more powerful. Thus, the argument that it would be a dangerous illusion to toy with limitations cannot be sustained; and to deny ourselves a policy based on sound principles all around, because we fear we shall be blind to its shortcomings, would be defeatist in the extreme.

III

The conclusion surely is that graduated deterrence, providing us with the option of imposing limitations on the use of nuclear weapons, is in principle fundamentally right from the moral point of view, and advantageous politically, militarily, and economically. In practice there is a major difficulty, that of establishing and imposing distinctions in nuclear weapons, and the targets attacked by them, which stand a good enough chance of being maintained in war.

Before coming to a final decision about the merits of graduated deterrence, one may wonder whether it is better to introduce such distinctions immediately, or withhold an announcement until the eleventh hour before the outbreak of certain forms of war. Surely the latter would be most unwise, for the Communists might become so committed in their plans and weapons to fighting us on the basis of massive retaliation that they would be incapable of conforming to the limitations that we attempted to impose. A delay, in fact, would increase the general risk of the limitation breaking down in war; it would
also increase the chances of an all-out war resulting from some misunderstanding. Indeed, by foregoing a peacetime declaration of our distinctions, we would also be denying ourselves the contribution that such a declaration would make toward redressing the tactical balance of power, helping our negotiations on disarmament and other issues, and strengthening the Western moral position both in our own eyes and in those of the uncommitted countries. What is more, an issue of this magnitude must surely be treated in the democracies as a national matter if it is to be properly prepared for in peace and acted upon with unity and restraint in war. In particular, it is only by showing the need for tactical strength that the effort will be made to provide it.

If the distinctions of graduated deterrence are not to be made at the eleventh hour, when then should they be established? Clearly, our tactical strength cannot at least for some time be such that we can afford to promise in advance never to initiate the strategic use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances. But there is every reason for establishing the necessary distinctions as soon as they can be worked out and agreed upon by the Western allies. For it will take some time thereafter for both sides to adjust to the idea of limited nuclear war. Indeed, the longer the delay, the more difficult these adjustments will become, and the longer we shall have to suffer from the shortcomings and dangers of our present policy.

The present circumstances seem particularly appropriate for introducing graduated deterrence on other grounds as well. It is becoming increasingly difficult to convince the peoples of the Allied nations that there is any point in continuing to build NATO and other forces with real tactical strength when our policy is to blow the world up in retaliation for any substantial aggression. Moreover, Western opinion seems to be under the delusion that a general stalemate is the military factor responsible for bringing the Russians hurrying to Geneva, and that we can therefore now afford to relax our defense preparations. In fact, only a strategic stalemate is about to be reached, and that thanks more to recent Russian progress than to ours. The tactical situation still remains substantially in the Communists' favor.

The establishment of the distinctions of graduated deterrence would both help to dispel these two doubts and, at the same time, indicate the need to enhance greatly our present tactical strength. In particular, it would convince the Germans, who are becoming increasingly impatient for reunification, of the need to press on with their contribution to NATO of twelve divisions, wherein lies the best hope of the
Russians agreeing to withdraw from East Germany. It might also encourage the United States, who alone can afford substantially increased defense expenditures, to continue building tactical strength.

In our dealings with the Communists, this juncture also seems appropriate, because they (unlike our public) labor under no delusions. Quickly, while we are still only able to negotiate from strategic strength, they hurry to Geneva to try and prevent us from gaining the tactical prizes in Germany which could redress our tactical inferiority, knowing that these become decisive once the impending strategic stalemate arrives. Graduated deterrence, by showing our determination to produce a tactical balance of power, might help to convince them that there will be no alternative but to negotiate settlements with us on Germany, disarmament, and other outstanding issues.

Finally, graduated deterrence would provide a complementary corollary to our recent proposals for ground and air inspection, which in themselves are also measures for limiting the use of armaments rather than for disarmament. If we should get the Communists to agree to these measures, the moment would then be ripe for exploiting such success with graduated deterrence. If they should refuse, or procrastinate, graduated deterrence would enable us to retain the initiative with further positive action in our continuing efforts to face the Communists with the "necessity for virtue."

Surely, then, there is much to be said on the side of graduated deterrence. Let us therefore fully investigate this proposal, and weigh it carefully against the shortcomings of our present policy. For if, in the years to come, the help of German forces, a measure of conventional disarmament, and improved relations with the Communists should ever enable us to feel we could keep the peace without the strategic use of nuclear weapons, we might even renounce in advance initiation of their use. Thus might graduated deterrence gradually lead toward the elimination of the hydrogen bomb's threat to civilization.