

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE AS A FAILURE OF THE WESTERN WORLD – AMERICA AND THE END OF AN ERA

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Abstract : This short theoretical incursion into the topic of United States' nuclear doctrine is built upon two major pillars. A first one is considering a brief historical perspective upon Americas' nuclear strategy. It starts with the beginning of the nuclear age and stops at the end of the Cold War. The second one tries to see in which measure Americas' historically configured nuclear doctrine could be sustained in the present. The second perspective unveils the fact that contemporary international context is so dramatically different from the one of the Cold War and because of this is no longer possible to sustain the old nuclear doctrine of mutual deterrence between any two major powers.

The historical perspective offers a brief picture upon the concept of mutual deterrence as this concept was consolidated within the Americas' nuclear doctrine after Hiroshima and after the beginning of arms race with Soviet Union. Beyond the general presentation this historical description is also considering two fundamental factors which in our view were decisive for the United States nuclear doctrine at least until the end of the Cold War. The first one is unveiling the role of the nuclear submarine force (SSBN) within the ultimate concept of mutual nuclear deterrence. The second one is discussing the most sensitive concept from within US nuclear doctrine regarding the possibility of first strike made by the US. The NFU concept is being here also analyzed.

The contemporary approach is considering the actual international context by disclosing two of its new major risks. The one is the behavior of a rogue state like North Korea regarding the issue of developing nuclear weapons and the other one is discussing the new major risk, which could be in some forms a nuclear one raised by the danger of radical Islam. The Iran situation is also briefly discussed.

Conclusions are trying to indicate some possible evolutions in order to adapt the Americas' nuclear doctrine to the new international conditions.

Keywords: Nuclear Deterrence, Mutual Annihilation, Submarine Deterrence Fleet, First Strike



USS SSBN 736 West Virginia / Ohio class nuclear submarine – A Trident II D5 / MIRV Launching on March, 2016 (US Navy photo / Released)

Introduction To talk about nuclear deterrence in a historical time like is the one of today could be seen as a little inappropriate or, at least, obsolete. This is true for someone which understands that the Cold War has indeed ended and, regardless of the perspective you decide to adopt, the issue of nuclear deterrence is now much less present than it was two or three decades ago. We totally reject this point of view and because of this we will try to argue that the issue of nuclear deterrence but also the issue of having nuclear weapons is today one of the most sensitive and complicated reality of the international political context.

The entire approach will be centered on United States` nuclear doctrine as this was historically configured from the historical moment of Hiroshima until this moment.

America has the Button – Mutual Deterrence from Hiroshima to the end of Cold War.

From a strictly historical perspective, as it is known, the American nuclear doctrine, with all its aspects and sensitive issues, begins with Hiroshima. At that point the History, as we all very well know, was changed forever. It is not our purpose here to develop a deep analysis on the internal American political situation from the end of the Second World War, a situation which later determined America to use nuclear weapons against Japanese Empire. This is a task for historians and other analysts. What is sure and what is relevant to our short undertaking within the space of this paper is the fact that the historical moment of Hiroshima had placed America in the position of leader within an arms race even if United States did not intend to do so. And what it was followed is very well known. But the most important aspect regarding that original historical moment could be reduced in our view to the fact that America has sent a very powerful message, maybe the ultimate one, regarding the

way in which it considers to make war with nuclear weapons. And this is reduced to the essence of the fact that America, if necessary, *will always could use first its nuclear arsenal on its enemies regardless of who these enemies might be.*

Later developments within the arms race between United States and Soviet Union never had the power to change this ultimate principle of Americas` nuclear doctrine. Of course, as we know, the arms race has ended in that balance of terror between the two superpowers but it never questioned the possibility for United States to firstly use the nuclear weapon.

As it was stated many time until now by numerous analysts the concept of the equilibrium of terror was fit for a western type rationality of making and winning or losing a *complete* war. The main factor placed at the foundation of this theoretical approach of making an eventually ultimate war with your deadly enemy was the idea that if the enemy strike at you first and by doing this it has the possibility to annihilate you, you also will have the possibility annihilate him. In this equation is guaranteed a mutual destruction and because of this, in theory, none of the opponents is expecting to strike the other one just because of the terrifying consequences. Of course, this is a resume of this concept but it worked, with very small conceptual changes, during the entire period of the Cold War. Maybe, in one sense at least, the perfect historical example for the concept of mutual deterrence was the Cuban Missile Crisis from 1962. At that historical moment president Kennedy, one of the most prominent American presidents and maybe the most important political figure of the 20th century, has stated very clearly, on October 22, 1962 that any attack from Cuba against American soil will be considered as an attack from the Soviet Union against United States. This moment was one from a very few in which the concept of mutual nuclear deterrence between United States and Soviet Union was politically public expressed. From that moment on any of these two parts has tried to consolidate its nuclear deterrence force. Technologically speaking the use of nuclear submarines was the only force able to guarantee a proper response in the eventuality that the other parts strikes first. This is the only practical reason for which nuclear submarine had become for the both parts the most advanced and deadly weapon ever conceived and ever built in the human history. The Ohio class nuclear submarine, on the American part, and Typhoon class on the Soviet part, were, and still are, the most lethal weapons of war ever produced by mankind. A single American *Ohio* class nuclear submarine, equipped with Trident II ballistic missile system, has today the capacity to wipe out from the face of the Earth entire nations in matter of minutes if necessary. Only one MIRV (Multiple Intercontinental Reentry Vehicle) is enough to put Europe out of History in less than 60 minutes. And an *Ohio* nuclear class submarine has more than one MIRV on board.

The concept of mutual nuclear deterrence was pushed to its limits during the last period of the Cold War. In that time the ultimate deterrence nuclear force was for the both superpowers, United States and Soviet Union their fleet of *nuclear submarines*. *Built and maintained with huge human and material sacrifices on both sides this nuclear force, from the perspective of a western rationality of an eventually making the final war, was the only asset able to guarantee a second thought from the enemy before a possible first nuclear strike from its part.* Even today both superpowers have at any moment somewhere deep into the planet`s oceans at least

one nuclear submarine ready to deliver the ultimate strike in the event of a final nuclear engagement between them. Of course, the tension and the fear from the Cold War are no longer present but speaking from a strictly technical and military point of view, regarding the ultimate task of a strategic nuclear submarine, *nothing has changed*. What is today different is only the way in which the concept of *permanent* mutual nuclear deterrence is used at political level between United States and Russia but not the military and technical aspects of this eventually final concept of mutual assured annihilation.

In addition to what has been said until this point it is also very important to mention that in the military equation of mutual and permanent nuclear deterrence a key role during the Cold War era was played also by the fleet of nuclear attack submarines of both superpower. These submarines has become today, with the new Virginia attack class nuclear submarine, a state of the art piece in terms of military power and deterrence upon the other side (Christley, 2007, pp. 5 – 32, 36 – 47) . Their main role was to track down the heavy nuclear equipped submarines of the opponent.



USS SSBN 732 Alaska – An Ohio nuclear class submarine

But the terrible balance of terror was effective and possible only within a western type rationality of conceiving a final war. It is not a clever action to strike first your opponent if these will destroy you later anyway!

The ideological confrontation of communism and capitalism during almost the entire period of the second half of the 20th century has ended officially in 1991, the year in which Soviet Union has ceased to exist. It does not matter too much for the

purpose of our study how the nuclear arsenal was distributed and managed by its successors. What counts is the fact that the balance of terror has nowadays lost its initial meaning even if it remains an *ultimate* element of deterrence between Russia and Western World. To consolidate this it is enough to remember here the reluctance of the United States to adopt a no first use nuclear policy (NFU).

Who is Today the Enemy? The Limits of Mutual Deterrence

The contemporary world is a one from which the balance of terror in terms of a nuclear final engagement is totally different from that of the Cold War era. We all know too well this thing but we should also realize that in the present the concept of having nuclear capabilities implies something different than only keeping your enemy away from doing harm to you.

In the present there are two new major source of risk. One of these is represented by the so called “rogue states” as are North Korea and Iran. In these situations we do not talk directly of a threat against the West in terms of a nuclear attack but rather of a totally different type of threat, a one which aims to obtain by these states the capacity of influencing some western policies in different parts of the world in a manner that limits the West to do whatever it wants in those regions. This thing was politically expressed, in 2015, in a dramatic way by the Israeli Prime Minister at a meeting at United Nations when he clearly stated that by getting the bomb, to use here his own words, Iran will change forever not only the ultimate actual nuclear stability on the planet but also the nonproliferation policy adopted until now by many states, both deeply analyzed by many commentators, with all the consequences from this (Harvey, 1997). Those 45 seconds of pure silence in front of the General Assembly of the United Nations were maybe the most powerful symbol from the history of facing the nuclear threat for the world in general since the Kennedy discourse to the American people in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Another dramatic change in the concept of mutual deterrence is coming from the fact that these rogue states are not part, so to speak, and do not act accordingly with a western type rationality of making an eventually so called final war against the enemy. This means that nuclear deterrence might not have upon these states the same effect of considering the consequences if they decide to use first nuclear weapons against the West. Outside the Western World it seems that war, in its most terrifying form, has a completely different meaning than it has for the West! And this is the most dangerous aspect of today nuclear issue on a global scale. Also, this aspect is maybe the major factor because of which the nuclear deterrence from United States, generally speaking, has almost no effect on them. In this way, and only in these conditions, the policy of nuclear deterrence might not have the slightest effect on the international policies that these states should decide to have in their relations with United States. The behavior of North Korea is maybe the most powerful example for this. Of course, the Iran Deal could be seen as a slightly different aspect of this topic but it preserves the concept of nonwestern type rationality regarding the *possibility* of using or not using nuclear weapons by these rogue states.

America was always fully aware about this type of situation and by the refusal from the United State to adopt in its nuclear doctrine the concept of *no first use* is one mode through which America understands to respond to *any* possible nuclear threat on a global scale policy.

But maybe the most terrifying possibility of a nuclear threat, against the West in general and not only against America, remains today the threat of radical Islam. Of course, in this eventuality the threat is not yet a conventional one, in terms of using nuclear weapons, but an *asymmetric* one. It is the possibility that at one moment those terrorists groups might use, in different forms, nuclear material, which can be not necessarily warheads or explosive nuclear devices in general, in order to attack the West. This horrifying scenario is today the most dangerous of all and the West has the tremendous responsibility to avoid this possibility regardless of any form of costs. Also, this dark scenario has the capacity to put into question the entire western approach of nuclear deterrence because those terrorists groups could not be convinced or discouraged by any possible retaliation if they decide to use nuclear material against the West. This is why America should take the lead in this fight and to enforce its defensive capabilities in order to avoid any leak of nuclear material to those groups. This is a fight of everyday and it should be done by all means necessary

From a theoretical point of view it is obvious that today, nor the so called rogue states, and here we refer especially to North Korea, nor the radical groups from the Middle East, could not make further viable for the United States the concept of nuclear deterrence as this concept was theoretically adopted and practically used in the time of the Cold War. What is needed now, even if from some points of views this is much harder than a traditional nuclear deterrence, is to determine, on one hand, those rogue states to renounce, in different forms, to their nuclear ambitions, and, on the other hand, to keep the level of operational vigilance in the field so high than those radical groups never get their hands on nuclear material. This last task it is today the most important responsibility of the Western World and at this stage it should be focused on prevention by using all necessary means, from the set of tools which is specific to intelligence services to black operations specific to special forces.

These two major lines of approach should be today in our view the necessary elements of adapting the Americas' nuclear doctrine to the conditions of contemporary world, conditions which are dominated, as been already disclosed by numerous leading analysts in the field, by the factor of uncertainty and instability (Delpech, 2012, p. 46 – 47).

Conclusions

It is obvious that today America needs a profound adaptation of its nuclear policy to the set of challenges of contemporary political international relations. Maybe one of these changes is the document adopted on April 6, 2010 by the United States regarding upon the so called policy of no first use the nuclear weapons. However, as it was widely observed by prestigious commentators, this document maintain for the United States the possibility of using first the nuclear armament, of course, in a relative diverse range of circumstances and after a serious analysis (Gerson, 2010). Briefly, today America, in its inner core of its nuclear doctrine, has adopted the

possibility of first using the nuclear weapons on every *ultimate* enemy if this proves to be unavoidable. Even if this is not something new for America it is, however, important to notice that at declarative level the role of nuclear weapons was refined to a specific set of extreme political and military conditions. The most important issue is to determine these conditions properly in the terrifying eventuality that some radical groups decide to use nuclear material against United States. And from this completely negative and undesirable possibility everybody knows now in the West that the possibility of using nuclear deterrence against radical groups has no chance to be effective. This is the most important reason because of which the nuclear deterrence, in its historically configured frame against new forms of contemporary threats it is today a form of specific *failure* not only for the United States but for the Western World in general.

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