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North Korea and the Issue of Nuclear Culture

Paul Rogers

Summary

With President Trump disavowing the Iran deal, about to visit South Korea and mulling a Nuclear Posture Review widely expected to introduce new lower yield warheads and a lowered threshold for use, the issue of nuclear weapons ‘usability’ looms larger than at any time since the 1980s. This briefing explores the persistence of ‘nuclear culture’, or the idea that a nuclear war can be survived and won. Despite the prevalence of talk of strategic deterrence and mutually assured destruction, the resurgence of nuclear culture is driving an interest in ‘usable’ nuclear weapons in several countries.

Introduction

When Scilla Elworthy founded Oxford Research Group in the early 1980s, the focus of the work was to understand how nuclear decision-making worked in the major nuclear powers and, wherever possible, to open up dialogue with them. In due course, and especially after the end of the Cold War, the concern with dialogue broadened out to encompass other issues of international security. A major element of this was, and remains, conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and this was also extended in the wake of the 9/11 attacks to have a particular emphasis on the war on terror and the many problems that have arisen with its conduct.

Within these areas of work in ORG, the issue of nuclear weapons remains, less at the level of the Cold War confrontation, even if relations with Russia are fractured, and more with the potential for the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and East Asia. The nuclear issue that has come to the fore in recent months has been the potential for Iran and North Korea to acquire a nuclear capability. Both these states are causing considerable concern for the Trump administration, which has signalled its intent to withdraw from the Iran deal negotiated by the Obama administration and insists that it will not allow North Korea to develop a nuclear capability that could target the continental United States.

Meanwhile there is serious talk of nuclear war amidst reports that the US Air Force may raise the alert status for its nuclear-armed strategic bombers. Furthermore, Mr Trump has just received details of his planned Nuclear Posture Review, which is [reported](#) to include the development of new nuclear weapons, including low yield ‘tactical’ warheads and the re-introduction of nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles, and the lowering of constraints on their use.

Nuclear Culture

It is in this context that this briefing examines the issue of nuclear culture – the belief in the usability of nuclear weapons extending to the potential to survive a nuclear war. One caveat is that the examples discussed here are drawn primarily from thinking in the United States but what applies here is an indication of more general attitudes among the eight other nuclear powers and, presumably, the five other NATO states that still host US tactical nuclear weapons.

Although security analysts may retain knowledge of the development of nuclear weapons policy, posture and targeting, knowledge in the public arena is far lower than thirty years ago, with nuclear weapons typically viewed in terms of a reliably stable state of deterrence through the risk of mutually assured destruction. At a general level there are two problems with this attitude that should cause concern. One is that since the start of the nuclear era, the nuclear posture has been much more about the potential use of nuclear weapons, including the idea of limited nuclear wars that do not escalate to global catastrophe. This was the subject of August's [briefing](#). The second is the history of nuclear accidents and crises, covered in a recent Open Democracy [article](#) and a more [extensive analysis](#) from Chatham House.

The Global 95 Wargame

Overlying all of this is the more general idea of usability. Back in July 1995, four years after the end of the Gulf War, the *Global 95 Wargame* at the US Naval War College was a “twin crisis” exercise centred on Korea and the Persian Gulf. Within the terms of the exercise both crises escalated to the use of chemical weapons against US forces, but a resurgent Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq went further, using biological weapons to devastating effect against US military forces and Saudi civilians. The United States responded with a nuclear attack on Baghdad, ending the war. The wargame was reported in the US military journal *Defense News*, (28 August 1995) as raising a number of critical issues:

“The United States has virtually no response to the use of such potentially devastating weapons other than threatening to use nuclear weapons, a Joint Staff official said Aug. 22. But it is unclear whether even nuclear weapons would provide a deterrent, unless the US was willing to take the difficult moral step of destroying a city, he said. On the other hand, if the United States did launch a nuclear attack in response, ‘no country would use those weapons for the next 100 years’ the official said.”

In practice, many independent analysts would argue otherwise, taking the view that any such nuclear use would make further nuclear attacks more likely. In particular, if the United States had used nuclear weapons against a country in the Middle East it would be wise to expect that at some time in the following years, or perhaps even a decade or more, a covert nuclear, chemical or biological assault would be mounted on Washington, New York or another major US city.

The point here is that the attitude represented by that report suggests something different and is indicative of a wider culture that extends to long-term thinking going back right to the start of the Cold War. By the 1950s the United States and the Soviet Union already had nuclear arsenals and there were complex plans for fighting nuclear wars. Planners on both sides argued that it might be possible to strike first in an escalating crisis and nuclear targeting analysts were tasked with target selection. In essence, these were people within a wider system that saw nuclear weapons as just one part of a much wider arsenal of essentially usable weapons. There are worrying signs that this view extends to elements of the current Trump administration specifically in relation to North Korea.

The Bureaucratization of Homicide

Some indication of thinking at a lower level of organisation was given nearly forty years ago in a hugely informative article, "[The Bureaucratization of Homicide](#)" published in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (April 1980) and written by Henry T. Nash. For most of his career Nash was a professor of political science at a liberal arts college but before that he was an analyst with private companies contracted to the Pentagon. Part of his time was spent in a nuclear target analysis centre in Washington and he describes in detail the culture of the place and the motivation of those whose job it was to advise on the importance of military, political and other targets in the Soviet Union.

Part of this was down to routine bureaucracy, hence the title. Take, for example, an analyst working to assess the political and economic importance of a major communist party headquarters in a regional capital. The task might have involved utilising information from open and classified sources to rank the significance of the centre in relation to other such sites across the Soviet Union. If there was evidence that the centre could be of importance in an attempt by the Soviet Union to recover from a major nuclear exchange, then the recommendation might have been that it should be assigned two intercontinental ballistic missiles with their H-bomb warheads instead of just one. If the recommendation from the targeting analyst was accepted, then it might have been an occasion for a celebratory drink with other analysts after work. More importantly, such success might have led to a higher level of security clearance and the possibility of promotion.

In a sense this is similar to just about any organisation, whether it is the armed forces, police, civil service, retail outlet, school, university or other. However, Nash argues that this is not enough to explain why people in that nuclear analysis cell were prepared to work on a system that promised millions of deaths. His assessment is that it was a combination of patriotism and the sense that there were people on the other side who were doing exactly the same thing and were the enemy. What is perhaps the most valuable aspect of Nash's article is that it combines this overall sense of need with the routine behaviour of bureaucracies.

Protect and Survive

This also comes through in the UK government's [Protect and Survive](#) pamphlet of May 1980 which seriously promoted the idea that an all-out nuclear attack on the UK was survivable. In practise this was subject to much ridicule, not least in E. P. Thompson's campaigning booklet [Protest and Survive](#), published later that year which served as a powerful catalyst for the emerging anti-nuclear campaigning of the early 1980s. Many years later government sources did show that UK post-nuclear war planning was based on the probability of 40 million people killed out of the population at the time of 56 million.

In Robert Scheer's 1982 book, *With Enough Shovels*, about the nuclear attitudes of the Ronald Reagan era, the author cites a conversation with a senior Pentagon official who believed strongly that, provided civil defence systems were adequate, the United States would survive a central nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union, recovering within two to four years "with enough shovels".

For its part, the [Soviet Union](#) also seems to have believed not only that nuclear warfare in Europe was survivable but that it was a near inevitable phase of initial combat which could be absorbed and overcome by a rapid conventional forces offensive. From Napoleon's retreat from Moscow to the Battle of Stalingrad, this deeply engrained idea that Russia can absorb more damage than other countries and emerge victorious is a particularly worrying counter-weight to the idea of strategic deterrence in Europe.

Conclusion

Cause for concern over the risk of a crisis with North Korea or, indeed, Iran, stems basically from the outlook of President Donald Trump and his administration, especially towards North Korea, which is already a nuclear-armed state. This must be seen in the wider context of a long-lasting nuclear culture which goes far beyond the public perception of the function of nuclear weapons solely as a means of deterring war. Add Nash's analysis to the persistent idea that limited nuclear wars can be fought, with all the experience of mistakes, accidents and untoward crisis escalation and we see added reasons for arguing as forcefully as possible that alternative approaches to the North Korea confrontation should be sought as a matter of urgency.

About the Author

*Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His ['Monthly Global Security Briefings'](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.*

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