THE COLD WAR: STRATEGIES OF CONTAINMENT

CONTAINMENT MODIFIED: EISENHOWER AND NUCLEAR STRATEGY
Our Class Session Topics

1. Prelude to Containment: A Tense Partnership
2. Containment Begins: The Truman Administration and the late 1940s
3. Containment Implemented: Korea
5. Containment Challenged: Khrushchev and Cuba
6. Containment Punctured: Vietnam
7. Containment Revised and Victorious: Détente and Dissolution
President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961)

- Succeeded Truman after beating Democrat Adlai Stevenson in the general Presidential election of 1952
- Ran so “Asia first, liberation and isolationist oriented” Ohio Senator Robert Taft would not get the Republican nomination
- Campaigned on ending Korean War and reducing military expenditures and budget deficits
- Strategy: reduce conventional arms spending and increase nuclear reliance.
  - Results in “massive retaliation” brinkmanship strategy
Nuclear Brinkmanship: threatening with the Bomb

- Eisenhower signaled he would use tactical nuclear weapons in Korea and China if Korean negotiation stalemate did not end
- Tactical nuclear weapons were also considered at Dienbienphu, North Vietnam in 1954
- Nuclear signaling in Berlin crisis of 1948-1949
- In part, 1950-1960 a pessimistic time in US vis a vis Cold War despite success in Europe
Nuclear Weapons

"And what were they going to do with the Grail when they find it, Mr. Rossetti?“

Benjamin Jowett
Putin’s problems using tactical nuclear weapons
Use of threat
Escalation from use
Imbalance of response
Psychological horror
World reaction
Control of fall out
Precision
Deterrent effect
United States nuclear monopoly in 1945 – 1949

- “Only” about 100 US atomic bombs by 1950; 1 or 2 for Soviets by 1952

- Delivery with US B-29s, new B-36s and new B-50s (no missiles yet)

- Soviets had no reliable delivery system until ICBMs in 1957

- Took several weeks to ready the US plane and atomic bomb

- Stalin and Soviets bluffed “non-concern” to avoid providing US negotiating leverage
No explicit US nuclear doctrine before early 1949

- Atomic bomb seen as weapon that gave great “conventional weapons type” advantage – “more bang for the buck”

- US hesitant to use atom bomb against Soviets in late 1940s though
  - theory of war based on the necessity of “total war” and “total victory”
  - memory of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union
  - humanitarian impulses
  - lack of clarity about the world wide situation
  - US domestic and political restraints (unlike Soviet Union)
  - US dependent more and more on atom bomb
  - Berlin crisis threat set a precedent though
Strategic and Diplomatic problems with developing a nuclear use doctrine

Tactical use problems

- Nuclear weapons extremely destructive; hard to use “tactically”
  - Atomic bomb destroys everything in a 3-mile radius
  - Thermonuclear bomb (after 1954) destroys everything in a 10-mile radius
  - US policy makers had a WW II view (analogy) of strategic bombing (with inconclusive results) though tactical bombing was used also (see D-Day)
- Tactical targets (battlefield targets)
  - “collateral damage” presents the moral and psychological problem
  - Moving tactical targets
  - Own forces too close
  - Fall out
  - Effect on European Allies
Strategic use problems

- “No first strike” policy by US – remnant in part of Pearl Harbor
- Would be demonstrated by Kennedy in Cuba
- Extreme uncertainty re effect of a first strike
  - Hence, surviving retaliation strike capability of Soviets
- Effect on European Allies (the drawbacks of being a nuclear battlefield)
- Hence, need many nuclear weapons to increase % of survival from retaliatory strike and to hit many strategic targets
- US “solved” this with multiple domestic and foreign nuclear weapons and locations
- But this increased Soviets anxiety and tensions from surrounding US bases and US arsenal size; reinforced Soviet fears re US intentions
- Also gave rise to US public concern
- Containment strategy made nuclear weapons especially dangerous

  - Enormity of modern weapons made war repugnant, but US backing off gives Soviets a “blank check” for expansion.

  - Soviets would necessarily be the aggressors under US “strategy of containment” and would possess initiative for a nuclear first strike consistent with US fears (Pearl Harbor analogy)

  - Eisenhower’s answer to first strike was massive retaliation

  - Massive retaliation also became doctrine of deterrence for the Eisenhower Administration (reducing flexibility though)
Danger also in US view of how WW3 would begin

- US war doctrine not to engage in a “first strike” but would conduct military buildup while front line Allies held the line (e.g., WW2)

  ▪ Post WW2 US leaders expected WW3 to be like WW2

  ▪ USSR believed to have no qualms re: surprise attack

  ▪ With nuclear weapons of USSR, US could no longer count on Allies to hold a line while US assessed events and decided a threat has become unambiguous

  ▪ Pre-emptive strikes a hard sell politically
- “First strike” by Soviets may be too devastating

  ○ Resistance to aggression can no longer be coming into a battle long in progress to tilt the scales, e.g., World War I and World War II.

  ○ Now survival depends not only on US strength, but US ability to recognize aggression against hard to identify vital interests and react

  ○ In the nuclear age, by the time threat has become unambiguous it may be too late to resist it.
Historical Analogies inappropriate

- Nuclear technology made possible for the first time in history a shift in the balance of power solely through internal technological developments (see North Korea)
  - Results
    - constantly changing strategic environment requiring constant monitoring
    - constant weapons development to maintain status quo
  - Thermonuclear weapons by both sides changed balance of power and created avoidance of use of power (historical anomaly) of nuclear but also conventional weapons
Questions so far?
Conducting Diplomacy in the Nuclear Environment

What is Diplomacy? *The art of influencing the decisions and behavior of foreign governments through negotiation and other measures short of war or violence; art of controlling power, one’s own and others*

- Does not exclude **threat** of war or violence

- Any explicit or implied threat of war in negotiation must be **credible**
War historically served a purpose

- Not all past international settlements were brought about by reasonableness and negotiating skill

- Credibility created in part by past wars

- Even during period of harmony, it was understood that a negotiation which failed did not always return matters to their starting point but might call other pressures, such as war and/or sanctions, into play

- Motive behind international settlements always combination of the belief in the advantages of harmony and the fear of the consequences of proving obdurate.
Why current need for threat of war?

- Any harmony between Communism and Capitalism explicitly rejected by Soviet Marxist-Leninist doctrine
  
  - Both US and USSR saw the other as insatiable (agreements are only amnesties)
  
  - Soviets were a “revolutionary” power, not seeing the international capitalist system as legitimate, which produces aggressive opposition
  
- Any renunciation of war/force by West would create a vacuum which Soviets would fill – containment must be constant and credible
Problems in revolutionary period like Cold War

- “revolutionary” state gives priority to change over maintenance of status quo and/or harmony.
- This problem was manipulated by the Sino-Soviet bloc, determined to prevent the establishment of an equilibrium and organized to exploit all hopes and dissatisfactions for its own ends.
- To the extent that recourse to force has become impossible, the restraints of the international order (rule following) may disappear as well. The cost/benefit analysis is unbalanced

**The possible consequences of the renunciation of force**

- eliminates the penalty for intransigence
- places international order at the mercy of its most ruthless or most irresponsible members
However, nuclear weapons created a difficult coercive threat

- Creditability of use
  - Their use posed problems in morals, allies, practicality, and destructiveness of opponent and of US
  - Destruction of opponent’s resources in first strike left first striker without “hostages,” licensing opponent to “go for broke”
  - Destruction great, even for the first user (e.g., rebuilding of Europe after WWII)
- Also challenged creditability of conventional weapons due to escalation threat
- The big risk: would the opponent use them too?
Result: Nuclear technology created “tacit nonaggression treaty” (they ain’t all bad)
- However, lack of explicitness and trust created nerve wracking ambiguity (not the purpose of treaties)
- War no longer a conceivable instrument of policy
  o “Competent rationality” presumed but not certain
- Leads to international disputes being settled only by diplomacy
  - But if threat of war impossible or incredible, diplomacy may lose its efficacy.
- Other threats of force, e.g., sanctions, economic restrictions, not as powerful and can be countered with allies

- Instead of resolution of tensions, inability to use force may perpetuate all disputes, however trivial

- In an “international society” of “sovereign” states, power as last resort vindicates a state’s interpretation of justice and/or defends its “vital interests”

- Nuclear weapons produced ambiguity; however, did restrain total war between superpowers as it continues to do today.
  - World has not reached though a crisis that calls for their use
Questions?
Next Week: Containment
Challenged: Khrushchev and Cuba