

superpower thinks of itself as attacking only in retaliation against aggression and, at the same time, conceives that the other side's capacity for nuclear destruction could, in certain circumstances, be unleashed aggressively. As a rule the sense of comfort afforded to a nuclear possessor is more than offset by the fear engendered by the rival's nuclear arsenal.

- (2) What is really novel about the nuclear threat is the difficulty of carrying it out. In the past all threatening weapons were meant to be used, at least from time to time. To have weapons that exist *not* to be used would have seemed very strange (it seems strange now to many military planners). And yet to use them in any way holds out the prospect of national annihilation, given the inherent risks of chaotic escalation and uncontrollable violence.

These constraints pose problems for the preservation of peace. As Bernard Brodie, one of the most astute of the nuclear strategists, once observed, in the pre-nuclear age "the operation of deterrence was dynamic; it acquired relevance and strength from its failures as well as its successes."⁷ Earlier weapons were designed for both deterrence and combat use, and the effectiveness of dissuading attack was partly dependent on occasional battlefield performances. This connection is now obsolete. The nuclear threat must deter absolutely. Actually to make good on this threat is potentially suicidal. This tension between posture and action is nicely manifested in a remark by a French commentator. "Compared with other armaments," asserts André Fontaine, "atomic weapons have the advantage . . . that using them is so risky that those who have them are afraid to resort to them. The other weapons are intended to kill, these to intimidate."⁸ But can killing and intimidation be so readily dissociated? How can weapons effectively intimidate if it is widely believed that they cannot be effectively employed? How, in short, can this undeniable threat be rendered enforceable? Most of humanity has been taught to think of unenforced threats as bluffs. And bluffs almost always get called, sooner or later.

- (3) As a result of the creation of nuclear weapons, modern societies now confront and will continue to confront an extraordinary ambiguity in the notion of power. Power no longer means what it used to mean. As Henry Kissinger has remarked, "Until the beginning of the nuclear age it would have been inconceivable that a country could possess too much military strength for effective political use; every addi-

tion of power was—at least theoretically—politically useful. The nuclear age destroyed this traditional measure."⁹ For while we now have virtually unlimited power to destroy, this capacity implies very little power to get anyone to do anything. This remarkable power has been, in almost all respects, politically useless. Efforts continue to be made to show how it could be usable and to plan to employ it in traditionally coercive fashions, in the aid of foreign policy objectives; but these ventures in imagining nuclear war-fighting scenarios (such scenarios are central to the work of nuclear strategists) are still seen by most people who know anything about politics as naive, far-fetched, and incredible.

- (4) Because the nuclear threat is so difficult to execute as a rational political option, given the disproportionate relationship between limitless destructive means and finite human ends, this awesome power has become decidedly elusive and abstract and increasingly symbolic. Its significance has come to be located more in the realm of subjective than of objective reality. Thus Kissinger is able to assert, "the success of military policy depends on essentially psychological criteria."¹⁰ The policies of Washington are designed to influence the minds in Moscow—or, in Fontaine's words, "to intimidate." The notion of deterrence thus becomes largely if not entirely subjective. The 1983 report of the influential Scowcroft Commission followed this line: deterrence is there defined as "the set of beliefs in the minds of Soviet leaders, given their own values and attitudes, about our capabilities and our will. It requires us to determine, as best we can, what would deter them from considering aggression, even in a crisis—not to determine what would deter us."¹¹ The crucial ingredient in this psychological interaction is *will*: by demonstrating the will to use nuclear weapons, it is hoped to constrain the presumed hostile will of the other great power. What counts are perceptions. Kissinger put this view clearly: in the nuclear age "the assessment becomes more significant than the reality. Or rather, the assessment becomes the only reality." Until power "is actually used, it is what people think it is."¹²
- (5) The existence of this unused and probably unusable power leads, then, to highly psychological definitions of political rivalries, and these definitions are inherently pliable, imprecise, and easily stretched. Deterrence, from this perspective, is almost completely open-ended. It provides no way of knowing how much is