

THE PRESENT DANGER

by Noam Chomsky

The recent growth of concern over the danger of nuclear war has been dramatic and impressive. It is also eminently realistic. Any sane and rational person who considers the scale and character of contemporary military power, the current vast expansion of the military arsenals of the superpowers, and the proliferation of armaments throughout the world would surely have to conclude that the likelihood of a global catastrophe is not small.

One might argue, in fact, that it is a miracle that the catastrophe has not yet occurred. According to a Brookings Institutions study by Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, from November, 1946, to October, 1973, there were nineteen incidents in which U.S. strategic nuclear forces were involved (we do not have the record since, nor the record for the USSR and other powers). That means, to put it plainly, that every U.S. president regarded the use of nuclear weapons as a live policy option. The examples are instructive. Here are a few:

1. In February, 1947, long-range bombers assigned to the Strategic Air Command (SAC) were flown to Uruguay in a show of force at the time of the inauguration of the president of Uruguay.

2. In May, 1954, SAC bombers were flown to Nicaragua as part of the background planning for the successful CIA coup in Guatemala in June.

3. In 1958, U.S. strategic nuclear forces were involved in the U.S. intervention in Lebanon. According to the report of Wilbur C. Eveland, who was present as a mediator under CIA auspices, the use of nuclear weapons was threatened if the Lebanese army attempted to resist. Rockets with nuclear warheads were available had fighting developed.

4. In 1962, according to memoirs of participants, the "best and brightest" estimated the probability of nuclear war at one-third to one-half at the peak of the Cuban missile crisis, but were unwilling at that point to accept a settlement that would have resolved the crisis peaceably, with complete withdrawal of Russian missiles from Cuba. The barrier to this settlement in the view of administration planners was that it entailed simultaneous withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey—obsolete missiles, for which a withdrawal order had already been issued (but not implemented) before the crisis erupted, since they were being replaced by Polaris submarines.

We can learn a good deal by studying these nineteen cases in detail—and they are not the only ones when the use of

nuclear weapons was seriously considered and possibly threatened. Other powers have also issued nuclear threats, for example, the USSR at the time of the Israeli-French-British invasion of Egypt in 1956, and apparently Israel in the early stages of the October, 1973, war, when Egypt and Syria attacked the Israeli occupying army in the Sinai and Golan Heights. Furthermore, there have been numerous occasions when radar misidentifications, computer failures, or programming errors have produced false alarms of Soviet nuclear attack and only human intervention aborted the programmed reaction. It is reasonable to assume that the same (or worse) is true for the Soviet Union and that the future will be even more hazardous than the past in these respects, as the time span for human intervention is reduced. Those who speak of the likelihood of nuclear war are hardly alarmists. To reduce this likelihood is imperative. The question is: What directions should such efforts take? How should energies be distributed if they are to be maximally effective in averting this catastrophe?

We may realistically assume that any military conflict between the superpowers (and others, in the not-too-distant future) will quickly become a nuclear conflict, and an unlimited one. While there are elaborate scenarios assuming the contrary, they hardly can be taken very seriously. The central questions, then, reduce to these: What are the likely sources of superpower conflict? What can be done to reduce the likelihood of such conflict?

Some years ago it was perhaps realistic to suppose that Europe was "the tinderbox," but such a judgment hardly appears accurate today. Brutal repression will no doubt continue under Soviet rule, but it is extremely unlikely that it will lead to Western intervention; the day is long past when the U.S. was actively supporting guerrilla armies established by Hitler in the Carpathian mountains or attempting to carry out coups in Albania as part of its "rollback strategy," though it may be that the Reagan administration harbors dangerous fantasies on this score. It is also hardly likely that the USSR would intervene within Western domains, even at or near its borders, any more than it has in the past: e.g., when the U.S. was engaged in destroying the former anti-Nazi resistance in Greece in the late 1940s, or backing the restoration of fascism in Greece in 1967, or supporting a ruthless military dictatorship in Turkey since 1980. Nor is it likely that either superpower will attack the other directly. Judgments necessarily must be speculative, but prospects such as these appear to be highly remote contingencies.

But war may very well break out elsewhere, engaging the superpowers. Possible examples, by no means remote eventualities, are all too numerous:

1. Secretary of the Navy John Lehman recently observed that a U.S. attempt to impose a blockade on Cuba and Nicaragua

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might lead to a U.S.-Soviet naval war. The Navy "cannot conceive that a naval conflict which engaged Soviet forces could be localized," he stated: "It is instantaneously a global war." He added that he envisioned a conventional rather than nuclear war, but this is hardly credible. These possibilities are not far removed. Since the summer of 1981 the U.S. has been conducting major war games and large-scale maneuvers in the Caribbean area, obviously aimed at Grenada, Cuba, and Nicaragua. And only a strong public reaction in the U.S. prevented moves toward blockade and perhaps direct U.S. military intervention in El Salvador in the early months of the Reagan administration, in my view.

2. The 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam, surely with at least tacit U.S. backing, might well have elicited a Russian response and U.S. countermoves, bringing the superpowers into conflict. A recurrence is not out of the question. Vietnamese troops are in Cambodia, and the U.S. and China are supporting Pol Pot as part of the policy of "bleeding Vietnam."

3. The U.S. is now committed to arming the military dictatorship of General Zia in Pakistan, allegedly to protect Pakistan from Soviet expansionism. It is difficult to imagine that the USSR would invade Pakistan; and if it were insane enough to do so, the arms being sent hardly would serve as a deterrent. The arms very likely will be used for internal repression, as in the past—for example, in the mid-1970s, when U.S. equipment supplied by the shah was used by the Pakistani army in attacking the Baluch, who now appear somewhat ambivalent, not surprisingly, about the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Interviewing the "triumvirate" of Baluch leaders, Selig Harrison found that each was thinking of the possibility of seeking Soviet support in response to U.S.-backed government repression: "If the Americans pump weapons into the Punjabis, obviously we have to stretch our hand to another superpower," one stated. Further repression might well lead to a call for Soviet assistance, triggering renewed cries of a Soviet "march to the Gulf" and a U.S. reaction, leading to a superpower conflict. Arms to Pakistan will also fuel the Indo-Pakistan arms race, with nuclear weapons on the horizon. It is also likely that the heavily armed Pakistani military dictatorship will come to serve as part of the elaborate base structure for the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force, designed for intervention in the Middle East, while Pakistani troops protect the Saudi monarchy against possible domestic insurgency.

4. The Iraqi invasion of Iran and the recent reversal of fortunes in Iran's favor have created a situation of great instability, in some ways reminiscent of Afghanistan in early 1978 before the Russians won that particular skirmish in the Great Game, but with much higher stakes and far greater dangers. The superpowers no doubt are maneuvering to pick up the pieces, and others are also hovering in the not-so-distant background, in particular Israel, which desires that Iraq break up into separate states and that a post-Khomeini military coup in Iran restore the Irano-Israeli alliance of earlier years. U.S. support for the Turkish military dictatorship is motivated in part by plans to use eastern Turkey as an intelligence center and a base for projection of American power in this region. The USSR presumably is making similar preparations along its own southern border. Again, the possibility of a superpower conflict is not negligible.

The Middle East, for obvious reasons, is the most likely candidate as the trigger that will set off a nuclear war. General Thomas Kelley of the NATO southern command (AFSOUTH) observed plausibly that "If we have a WWII, it will probably

start here in the Mediterranean when a local conflict burns out of control." The largest recipients of U.S. military aid for Fiscal Year 1983 are, in order: Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Spain, Pakistan, Greece. A prime concern in each case is to strengthen U.S. dominance in the Middle East. In addition, the U.S. is selling vast quantities of arms to Saudi Arabia and, as already noted, is developing a base structure ringing the Gulf region for U.S. intervention forces. While the official justification is the threat of Soviet aggression, a more reasonable interpretation is that the perceived threats are indigenous to the region, including the threat of local uprisings against the regimes of the oil-producing states that are, for the most part, closely allied to the U.S. and see themselves as dependent on U.S. power to defend them against radical Arab nationalism. General Kelley's speculation is a realistic one, if we understand "Mediterranean" to mean "Eastern Mediterranean extending to the Gulf."

THE MEDIA AND THE MESSAGE

There are other examples of situations in which local conflicts or outside intervention may come to engage the superpowers, leading to global nuclear conflict. The rational conclusion from a survey of possible cases of this sort is straightforward: If we desire to avert nuclear war, our primary concern should be to lessen tensions and conflicts at the points where war is likely to erupt, engaging the nuclear powers. The size of nuclear arsenals is a secondary consideration.

Even if nuclear arsenals were vastly reduced, a nuclear interchange would be a devastating catastrophe; in fact, if they were reduced to zero, the capacity to produce nuclear weapons would not be lost and they would soon be available, and would be used, in the event of superpower conflict. Furthermore, the relation between the size of nuclear arsenals and the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons is not an entirely simple one. Recall that on the one occasion when nuclear weapons were used to massacre civilians, there were exactly two available—and if two more had been available, in the hands of the Japanese enemy, it is quite likely that there would have been no atom bombing, for fear of retaliation. Nuclear deterrence probably does work, to some extent at least—a fact that cannot be lightly dismissed.

Suppose that reduction of the deterrent capacity would tend to increase the aggressiveness of one or the other of the superpowers—not an unlikely consequence. Then it would increase the likelihood of superpower conflict and, with it, the likelihood of nuclear war. It is not obvious that the prospects for peace and survival are enhanced by efforts to eliminate or radically reduce nuclear arsenals that do not form an integral part of a more general program to constrain state violence.

We should note, in addition, that the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons is too crude. In the latter category there is an important difference between, say, anti-tank weapons designed for deterrence in Europe and attack carriers or the Rapid Deployment Force (which has nuclear capability as well). Intervention capacity constitutes a large component of the U.S. military budget, though it is often disguised in the official rhetoric of "deterrence." It may increase the danger of nuclear war even more than a new generation of nuclear monsters. More crucial still are policies the U.S. has pursued that contribute to tensions that may lead to war, engaging the superpowers. The U.S., of course, is not alone in this respect, but it cannot be stressed too often that it is U.S. policies that American citizens can hope to

influence directly—a consideration that is of obvious significance in a democratic society, where the public can exert some influence on foreign policy.

There has been much discussion within the disarmament movement as to whether to concentrate solely on controlling the nuclear arms race or whether to include also an “anti-intervention plank” in programs and organizing objectives.



The argument against extending the scope of activities to include interventionism, which has often prevailed, is based on two assumptions: first, that the consequences of nuclear war would be so horrendous that other issues pale by comparison; and second, that a “single-issue” focus will draw broader support.

The second point is arguable. At least with regard to elite groups, the argument probably holds true. It is difficult, for example, to imagine that the movement would retain its remarkably favorable media image—quite unusual for popular movements of protest—if it were to concentrate on the broad range of issues that fall under the rubric of “intervention.” With such a shift of direction, the movement no longer would be “sober” and “responsible” but would become “violent,” “extremist,” and “emotional” in the ideological organs. This fact might in itself arouse a certain skepticism as to the nature of the movement. In general, a favorable media image is restricted to those who do not challenge power and privilege in any serious way. It is important to avoid being seduced by unaccustomed favorable attention in the mainstream ideological institutions and to think clearly about the appropriate distribution of effort if the movement is to be effective in realizing its goals. Nevertheless, though this tactical judgment may indeed be accurate with regard to elite groups, I suspect that it is wrong with regard to the population at large.

Activists in the disarmament movement should ask themselves whether they are not, in fact, holding back the popular

forces that they see themselves as mobilizing. To cite one suggestive example: The Boston Jobs with Peace group succeeded in placing on the November, 1981, ballot a resolution urging that “the City Council call upon the U.S. Congress to make more federal funds available for local jobs and programs—in quality education, public transportation, energy-efficient housing, improved health care, and other essential services—by reducing the amount of our tax dollars spent on nuclear weapons *and programs of foreign military intervention*” (my emphasis). The resolution carried every ward in Boston, winning 72 per cent of the vote citywide. It received the backing of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Archdiocese in Boston, as well as support from labor and ethnic groups, among others. This was the result of a relatively small organizing effort, but evidently it touched a sensitive nerve; and though the anti-intervention issue was not the central focus of the campaign, it was quite clearly and explicitly included.

But it is the first argument that is most seriously flawed. In fact, it quite misses the point. Let us accept the assumption that prevention of nuclear war should dominate all other concerns—an assumption that might not be regarded as obviously correct by a substantial part of the human race, notably the millions who die of starvation every year. It then follows, as discussed earlier, that a prime concern should be the class of issues that fall broadly within the rubric of “anti-intervention” and, more generally, foreign policy initiatives concerning the Third World, where a nuclear war is most likely to break out. Consideration of other related questions seems to me to reinforce this conclusion.

Before turning to these, let me emphasize that I am restricting attention here to the U.S. disarmament movement. The movement in Europe should be considered in a rather different framework. It forms part of the long-term process in which Europe is slowly extricating itself from the bipolar world system established as a result of World War II, which has been eroding in the past years, to the discomfiture of the superpowers.

It is worth noting that the European movement has received a fair amount of harsh criticism in the U.S. media, perhaps reflecting an appreciation of the fact that it does pose a serious challenge to American power. At times, this criticism has taken on a remarkable tone—for example, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* by John Vinocur, chief of the *New York Times* bureau in Bonn, on the antinuclear movement in West Germany. West Germany is affected by a serious “malaise” in his view: “something has shaken loose” in the country, as reflected by the fact that “more young people favor an attempt at achieving neutrality than favor continuing a military alliance with the United States.” “Public feelings of Angst and loss of control have led to increased pacifism,” and for a significant part of the population, “a furious embrace of the illusions—or, at least, the serious miscalculations—of the last 10 years,” in particular, the belief in the possibilities and importance of détente. There is “a crisis of national identity—a reality crisis, really—because it expresses fear and anger about the nation’s being locked into the facts: its loss of unity and of total independence as a result of World War II.” These irrational currents have recreated the “traditional notion of a German middle way between the West, often denounced as incartile and impure, and Eastern Europe, seen as more romantic and less corrupt.” With the collapse of détente, “there is hurt pride, frustration,

anger and a more intense nationalism. With them come great emotion and a weakened hold over the rational—both very unhappy filaments in the Germans' past." One indication of this "weakened hold over the rational" is the belief that the U.S., as well as the USSR, poses dangers to world peace, an illusion that affects "the so-called peace movement." Throughout, Vinocur describes this so-called peace movement as a symptom of a general disease, a "problem" that the West Germans must somehow overcome themselves in a country whose "agonies are deep," and irrational.

In this "malaise," Vinocur perceives signs of a revival of the Hitler era. As his evidence, he cites a press report

that people opposed to the Frankfurt Airport Authority's building a new runway through a wooded area think the plan is a NATO-United States plot. The mood is captured in a remarkable admonition—the vocabulary could have come out of a Hitler-era time capsule—tacked to a tree in the controversial woods: "Tremble before this tree. It was holy to your forefathers. Doing anything against the tree is a sign of an inferior people and base individual morality."

But all is not lost. Chancellor Helmut Schmidt "still represents pragmatism and a pro-Western orientation in the country" and, according to a confidant, feels "that the country's mood, sour and Angst-ridden, comes in part from an insufficient exercise of authority on all levels"—an impression that Vinocur appears to share. Note that this concern over "an insufficient exercise of authority on all levels" does not evoke memories of the Hitler era, in contrast with concern to save trees.

Once again, it is interesting to compare the generally favorable media treatment of the American disarmament movement, in the *New York Times Magazine* and elsewhere, with Vinocur's lament over the irrational concern for peace and détente and the equally irrational belief that both superpowers, not just the Russians, exhibit threatening behavior. His reaction perhaps can be understood as a manifestation of a fear that "the so-called peace movement" in Europe constitutes part of a long-term development toward a more independent role in world affairs for a European community of nations that might, if recent trends persist, become a really serious rival to the United States, with an economy on the scale of our own, a high level of education and technology, independent access to resources and raw materials, and interests that do not necessarily coincide with those of dominant groups in the U.S. and, in fact, are increasingly in conflict with them.

Mary Kaldor is, I think, quite right when she argues in *The Nation* that a motivating force in the European peace movement is "the sense within the movement of political emancipation," a sense that is international in scope and is "related to a growing awareness of European identity": "For the peace movement, the idea of a Europe free of military blocs and free from the artificial division of the continent—seen to have been imposed by the superpowers—is at least as important as the demand for denuclearization." The significance of such proposals as "no-first-use," she argues plausibly, is that if it is "seen as a way of *deemphasizing* the role of nuclear weapons in NATO and hence loosening the relationship between the United States and Western Europe, this might help to initiate a very different kind of reciprocal process, one that could eventually lead to the detachment of both halves of Europe

from the superpowers." This aspect of the "no-first-use" policy, she notes, was completely ignored (not very surprisingly) by the "four eminent members of the American establishment—Robert McNamara, George Kennan, McGeorge Bundy and Gerard Smith" in their "widely publicized proposal for a 'no-first-use' nuclear strategy for NATO" in the Spring, 1982, issue of *Foreign Affairs*, just as they overlooked "the political nature of the demand for a nuclear-free Europe," namely, the "sense of emancipation" it reflects. Various important questions arise in this connection that are surely related to those that specifically concern the American disarmament movement and to the shape of the future world more generally.

As this discussion indicates, it is misleading to isolate concerns over the size and character of nuclear arsenals from a much broader nexus of issues. It is also important to bear in mind that strategic nuclear forces and "conventional forces" tend to grow in parallel, and for good reasons. The real function of the strategic weapons systems sometimes can be discerned in pronouncements of planners, for example, in the January, 1980, statement to Congress by President Carter's secretary of defense on the proposed military budget. "The programmed rates of growth," he argued, "are needed for two basic reasons." One is "the sustained expansion in the Soviet defense effort," and the other is "the growth in international turbulence, illustrated by recent developments in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, Korea, Afghanistan, and Iran." The U.S. thus faces "simultaneous demands." "Our strategic nuclear capabilities," he said, "provide the foundation on which our security rests.... With them, our other forces become meaningful instruments of military and political power."

This is the heart of the matter. In fact, for each superpower, strategic nuclear capacities provide a protective cover for programs of state violence that it undertakes or supports in its own domains.

PROLIFERATING FACTORS

What, then, are the proper directions for the disarmament movement? It should, certainly, be concerned with controlling and reversing the strategic arms race. It should also be concerned with the proliferation of nuclear weapons; with the vast arms sales of the major (and some minor) powers, which are placing enormous means of destruction in the hands of states that will use them for internal repression or aggression; and with the fact that so-called "conventional arms" are reaching a point of destructiveness not far below that of nuclear weapons, so that "small" or "limited" wars will be extremely costly in human lives.

But there are other issues that cannot be dissociated from this complex and that are in many respects even more crucial: the domestic factors that drive the arms race, the dynamics of the cold war and its impact on many millions of people, the extraordinary dangers (and horrors) of superpower intervention, the policies that contribute to maintaining or inflaming conflicts and tensions throughout the world, which, apart from the cost to victims, are the most likely cause of a potential final holocaust.

The drift toward this final solution has a seemingly inexorable quality. The factors and powers involved appear to be out of control, beyond our ability to influence or constrain them. We can only hope that this perception is false.