REVIEW OF BOOKS


No one can win an all-out nuclear war. From this most simple concept, Robert Jervis seeks to create a comprehensive theory for the nuclear era. In The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon, Jervis melds qualitative empirical data, historical analysis, and powerful logic to elaborate his theory of a revolution in international relations brought about by nuclear weapons.

Jervis explicitly rejects a "conventionalized" perspective toward the nuclear era. (That is, while nuclear weapons are vastly destructive, basic military and political considerations have not changed). Instead, he maintains that the mutual vulnerability created by the possession by the US and USSR of secure second-strike capabilities has fundamentally changed the essence of statecraft. It should be noted that Jervis's argument revolves around the possession of second-strike capability rather than simply the development of nuclear weapons per se. More specifically, the traditional relationship between force and foreign policy has been drastically altered. States can no longer pursue "deterrence by denial"—discouraging others from aggression by being able to repel an attack. Rather, defense against nuclear weapons being impossible, states are limited to "deterrence by punishment"—preventing attacks by threatening an adversary with massive retaliatory destruction.

In the past, states have been able to pursue political goals through military victory, even to the point of total war. While the nuclear revolution does not preclude the possibility of escalation to nuclear exchange and the specter of devastation, military victory is an empty concept. Although this may not necessarily be the result, the ever-present possibility of just such an outcome serves as a major influence on statesmen. Thus, as Jervis maintains, the use of force as a tool of foreign policy has been drastically altered.

According to Jervis, certain basic implications derive from this central premise. The first is that great power wars should occur; however, Jervis rightly notes that other elements such as bipolarity and modernization may also influence this outcome. Secondly, the status quo will be maintained due to the potentially high risks involved in attempting to alter it. Indeed, attempts have been made by the superpowers to alter the status quo, such as the Soviet's attempt to force the West out of Berlin. But the threat of nuclear escalation prevents such adventures from being pursued to their fullest. Following this crises will be relatively infrequent. Further, since actual military force is not often used, the importance of credibly threatening to employ military force is greatly enhanced. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, given the mutual vulnerability inherent in the nuclear era, the actual military balance of power—including the conventional balance—is rendered relatively unimportant. Once both sides obtain a secure second-strike capability, any further military differential is not terribly relevant.

After elaborating his basic framework and its implications, Jervis goes on to examine strategic theory, looking at the good and bad ideas of both older and newer strategic thinking. Particular focus is put on the works of Bernard Brodie and William Liscum Borden. Out of this examination, Jervis draws three key principles. The first is that, although strategic doctrine is viewed by some as having minimal importance, the doctrinal starting point one chooses determines many policy preferences. Secondly, "... if one adopts a conventionalized perspective ... one is inevitably led to try to reestablish the central role of military victory" (73). Finally, drawing on Clausewitz, Jervis notes that
"one must not lose sight of [the] ... central point that the use of force is senseless if it is divorced from an intelligent appreciation of political goals (73). The message to be drawn is that military advantage does not necessarily lead to political advantage and may, due to mutual vulnerability, actually hinder the state’s most precious goal—its own security.

Jervis further elaborates this position through an examination of the best-known nuclear strategy, Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). First, Jervis notes that MAD is defined differently by different analysts, and offers four definitions. MAD-1, the most basic scenario, denotes a situation in which the state threatens to inflict unacceptable damage on what it believes its adversary values. The other’s values are its cities, and a nuclear strike would be an all-or-nothing proposition (75). MAD-2 encompasses the same concepts, but stresses the probable unintended escalation to the nuclear level (75). MAD-3 argues that, since nuclear war cannot be kept limited (given nuclear parity), the use of nuclear weapons is simply unthinkable. Therefore, strategic forces have lost whatever military value they once had, and can only serve as a means of deterrence against other strategic forces; hence MAD-3 rejects the idea of extended deterrence (76). While citing numerous counter arguments to such interpretations, Jervis maintains that all are flaws in their attempts to encompass the proper role of nuclear weapons.

Jervis thus puts forth a further definition, MAD-4, revolving around his central premise that the “nuclear revolution” has altered the relationship between force and statecraft. Again, the key is mutual vulnerability. “The impossibility of protecting the state should the other seek to destroy it (i.e., the impossibility of deterrence by denial at the highest level) alters the purpose of military options and renders questionable the efficacy of defense by denial at lower levels of violence” (79). Superpower conflict at all levels is affected because the shadow of nuclear destruction influences bargaining at all levels. This is not to say that conflict—even military conflict—will, therefore, be ameliorated. A state could still implement limited violence without committing national suicide. However, any such action carries with it the possibility of escalation, either controlled or uncontrolled.

The key is that total, i.e. nuclear, war is neither certain nor impossible. If it were certain, no limited action could sensibly be pursued. If it were impossible, threats of escalation would be meaningless. The uncertainty as to the location of the "firebreak" between limited and total war is what makes MAD-4 a vital concept. Following logically from this, Jervis notes that, since mutual vulnerability would be only slightly altered, the actual nuclear balance of forces—short of a huge advantage leading to a first strike capability—would be of little influence (105).

Having established his basic framework, Jervis then goes on to focus on particular aspects of the nuclear revolution. In separate chapters he examines problems of morality, the psychological aspects of crisis stability given the implications of the nuclear revolution, and the vital role of symbolism to nuclear politics.

In his concluding chapter, Jervis clarifies the basic lessons to be learned from the nuclear revolution. The first is that, given the impossibility of winning a total war, international politics, will be characterized by stalemate (230). Also, given that unlimited means cannot be employed to achieve political ends, it is equally necessary for limited objectives to be pursued. This not only applies in the sense of trying to fully defeat a fellow nuclear power, but also in limiting goals at lower levels of violence in order to avoid prodding the other side into escalation. Yet the key to Jervis’s work is a reemphasis of Clausewitz’s vital principle: that armed violence only makes sense if it serves political ends (227). What Jervis seeks to stress is that the nuclear revolution—through mutual vulnerability—has greatly altered the ability of armed violence to serve political ends.
All told, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* is a powerful and persuasive work. Jervis has managed to move from a simple concept to formulate a concrete and eminently sensible theory. Indeed, it is doubly valuable for its simplicity. His concept of a nuclear revolution deriving from the mutual vulnerability inherent in a secure second-strike capability and the ever-present possibility of escalation to that level offers a clear, fresh perspective from which to analyze nuclear issues. More importantly, from a theoretical standpoint, such a perspective has the effect of turning much of the logic of previous nuclear thought on its head. For example, the very concept that the nuclear balance of forces is vitally important militarily is rendered impotent by such a perspective. Indeed, all such conventionalized notions of nuclear weapons are dashed by Jervis’s theory. In a more specific instance, the countervailing strategy, targeting the Soviet Communist Party in order to destroy their ability to maintain control, seems an unnecessary proliferation of taggers that does little to alter the fundamental risks involved in starting a conflict that could lead to nuclear war. If analyzed in the light of Jervis’s nuclear revolution, many such concepts decrease drastically in their efficacy.

Jervis also raises many fine points in dealing with specific aspects of nuclear politics. In his treatment of morality and nuclear weapons, he rightly points out that the basic fact of the nuclear age—that punishment with nuclear weapons will inevitably lead to millions of innocents being killed—is simply irreconcilable with our basic moral principles. But more importantly, he notes that many empirical disputes over nuclear strategy contain hidden moral assumptions and vice versa. The important implication is that if we do not consciously separate these two considerations, that is, accept the impossibility of fully reconciling the moral and practical concerns of nuclear strategy, then poorly conceived strategy will follow.

Jervis’s chapter on crisis stability is also a thorough and well-written treatment of that subject. However, to a great extent he wanders from his central thesis in this section—the implications of the nuclear revolution—and delves into a more generalized discussion of the factors that aid and hinder crisis stability. A clearer distinction as to the affects of the nuclear revolution on crisis stability would have better served his work.

His treatment of the symbolic nature of nuclear weapons, however, fits much more easily into his framework. The relationship between force and statecraft has led to a situation where the most powerful weapon a state may possess is largely symbolic in purpose. While noting that such an instance is not unique to the nuclear era, Jervis is clearly correct in arguing that the nuclear revolution has increased the importance of psychological and symbolic factors (182).

Although *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* has many conceptual strengths, it also suffers from some basic failings. First and foremost is the problem of its utility as a general theory of international relations. Jervis’s thesis of a nuclear revolution is based on the possession by two or more opposing states of mutually destructive second-strike capabilities. He makes it quite clear that this, rather than simply the possession of nuclear weapons, is what has led to a revolution. The difficulty is that such a situation, in any complete sense, is only illustrative of the US-Soviet relationship. One might argue that such a situation also exists in regard to China. The arguments become extremely diluted, however, in regard to France, Great Britain, or any of the lesser, albeit often unconfirmed, nuclear powers such as Israel.

Without doubt, the United States and the Soviet Union have been the players in the Cold War world. However, to present the “nuclear revolution” as a general revolution that affects the foreign policy of all states is exaggerating the case. To be fair to Jervis, he never explicitly says that his theory applies to all states. On the other hand, he never
explicitly says that it does not. Unless many nations possess such mutually destructive ability, it is not feasible to extrapolate the details of Jervis’s concepts universally. While it may serve as a solid explanatory and/or predictive theory of US-Soviet or East-West relations, it loses much when generalized.

Implicit in Jervis’s theory, however, is that the nuclear revolution is relatively able to be generalized because the powers possessing second-strike capability—the US and USSR—are likely to be involved either directly or indirectly in any major peripheral conflict. Thus such conflicts do contain the possibility of escalation. Such a distinction is quite sound in a relatively tight bipolar system where international conflicts are often viewed as zero-sum exercises. Yet the recent and drastic changes in international politics have greatly weakened such a characterization. As the events of the Gulf War indicated, the superpowers are no longer likely to automatically be at opposite sides of all conflicts. They may now be able to undertake lower levels of international violence against third parties without the specter of mutual destruction through escalation hanging over their heads. (Obviously direct military attack is another matter). The key causal factor in Jervis’s theory, that the threat of escalation alters the ability of states to use force as a foreign policy tool at all levels, is, while certainly not negated, limited. The fact that the United States can undertake massive military operations in the Persian Gulf—an area of traditional contention between East and West—without any substantial worry of escalation to nuclear conflict with the Soviets is evidence of this trend.

The theory of a nuclear revolution as presented by Jervis is only truly valid if two second-strike-capable nuclear arsenals are poised in a threatening manner. If the tensions and conflicts of the Cold War continue to abate, such a characterization of international politics will lose much of its potency. Thus Jervis’s theory may be temporarily bound to the period from 1945-1989.

In the final analysis, Robert Jervis has produced a work that is an unquestionable contribution to the understanding of nuclear strategy and to international relations as a whole. His thoughts are as to the primary implications of the nuclear era are lucid and impressive in their insights. His work may unfortunately, on the other hand, fall victim to the sweeping changes taking place in the world. While this may limit the applicability of his theory, his work still stands out as one of the finer works in the vast number of volumes on strategic thought.

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