

Political Power in the Nuclear Age

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From the time immemorial the most significant element in the content of power had been organised violence. Although there had also been subsidiary expressions of power, yet their importance had changed with the passage of time. They are thought to be the 'planet' of power revolving around physical violence, considered as the 'sun' of power. It is generally held that ancillary aspects of power have changed as a result of changes which have taken place in the structure of human society. But no planet has yet been able to eclipse the sun (physical violence) which still matters most in the international power politics.

Some recent developments in war are strange. The experiences of the two world wars in which the nature of the physical violence used was, what we now call conventional, showed that violence has become somewhat too much of a good thing because the destruction caused by modern weapons in these two wars was so great that the victors were unable to profit economically from victory and at best could only hope to attain their political objectives. Furthermore the chaos created by these wars was such that new problems cropped up which had to be solved often by methods contrary to the purposes for which the wars had been started.

During the 1914-18 war, it was assumed and written on the parchment at Versailles in 1919 that vanquished would pay the costs and preferably a bit more. It was discovered after years of endeavour that this was a fallacy. The defeated Germans could not be made to pay for the war, even though they were lent vast sums of money to help them be good payers. This attempt to achieve what Sir Norman Angell in his 'The Great Illusion' (1911),¹ had declared would be impossible in the next great war was a contributory cause to the great World Slump of 1930s, whose consequences in Germany did much to create conditions favourable to the rise to power of Adolf Hitler. It was again established by the beginning of 1945, that military victory could only be obtained, at any rate in a considerable conflict, if a degree of violence was used which made it impossible for the defeated nation to pay reparations. All this can be summed up by saying that in the decades before the arrival of the nuclear weapons, the level of violence in war between great powers had reached so high and destructive a degree, that it was now only possible to use it to obtain a political objective and not both a political and economic pur-

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pose. Then in August 1945 came the atom bomb and soon after the H. bomb.

More than a generation has passed since United States dropped atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki and President Truman is said to have declared: This is the greatest thing in history². Nuclear weapons have not so far been used again. But there is little question that their mere existence, unused and largely unseen as they have been since 1945, has profoundly influenced the course of power politics. More than a century and a half ago Clausewitz pointed out that war was nothing but a continuation of political intercourse.³ In just the same way, the mere possession of nuclear weapons is dimension of political intercourse- an instrument which may enable countries to achieve, without actually going to war, political objectives they could not have achieved from a state of military weakness. The possession of nuclear weapons, in particular, is likely to strengthen a country's political muscle possibly in an 'offensive' sense and certainly in a defensive sense.

In an offensive sense, a nuclear country may, depending on circumstances gain an enhanced ability to influence, intimidate or dominate other countries without resort to military force to make them behave in ways they would not have chosen for themselves. Even if these other countries rather doubt that the strong country would actually use its nuclear might against them, there are some risks which are simply not worth taking.

The Soviet Union's relationship with Eastern Europe provides striking example of how nuclear strength can be exploited for offensive political purposes. The Soviets have relied heavily on their vast nuclear power for preserving political control over their satellite empire in Eastern Europe. Were it not for the Soviets' nuclear superiority, it is doubtful whether any of the East European countries would still be run by communist governments under a single party system with a foreign policy of sub-servience to the Soviet Union. The Soviet nuclear arsenal ultimately rules out as hopeless any thought that the people of Eastern Europe might entertain of throwing off the Soviet yoke by fighting the Soviet armed forces.

The picture is rather more gloomy on American front which is using its nuclear superiority rather more skillfully to serve its interest. The purpose of the present essay is not to condemn Soviet Union or America for their nuclear arsenals, but to show how nuclear power has become a determining factor in power politics today.

In a defensive sense, the role of nuclear arsenals in strengthening a country's political muscle is likely to be much more decisive, even in a world which contains several nuclear countries. There is a possibility that a nuclear country may not be able to influence, intimidate or dominate others. But it

should at least be able to resist attempts by others to influence, intimidate or dominate it. Since nuclear weapons were invented, no alternative guarantee of national independence has looked really adequate. Although this applies to the superpowers yet this is applicable to other countries also. Small, nuclear forces, however, should be able to confer substantial protection against political intimidation provided they are capable of inflicting damage on a scale which others would find unacceptable. There-in lies the part of the reason why a number of Third World countries are aspiring to acquire nuclear capabilities.

From a Western standpoint, the nuclear umbrella which United States holds over Western Europe through NATO provides a striking example of how a nuclear capability can protect countries against political intimidation or domination. This nuclear umbrella has contributed, and continues to contribute, decisively to the independence of Western Europe from communist influence but at the same time forces them to dance to the tune of United States. The Soviets for their part can be assumed to see their massive nuclear arsenals, similarly, as protecting them against political pressures from the West, and especially the United States and at the same time forcing its allies to dance to their tune.

A country's political muscle will be greatest if it has a monopoly of nuclear weapons, or massive superiority; weakest, if its nuclear arsenal is massively inferior to those of other nuclear countries; and of intermediate strength if its nuclear arsenal is broadly comparable with that of another country. Taking these cases in turn, if a country has monopoly of nuclear weapons, or overwhelming superiority its power must potentially be strong. The range of its foreign policy options, though still subject to significant constraints, must be vastly increased. The only country which has enjoyed a nuclear monopoly, or massive superiority, is the United States in the early post war years, which exploited the massive political power which this nuclear privilege gave it, to best serve its interests. The stoppage of nuclear fuel to Tarapore Atomic Reactor by America is one among the countless examples of use of nuclear privilege in power politics.

Thus it is clear from the above discussion that the place of physical violence has been taken by nuclear violence as the determining ingredient of power in power politics. The origin of this new force (nuclear violence) in the orbit of power politics struggle has eclipsed the sun (physical violence) to become a planet and has acquired its own place.

Whether it is conventional violence or nuclear violence, but violence is there; can't we get rid of this from of Political Power? Is the element of violence essential to the definition of political power? If an attempt is made

to know the opinion of the experts on the subject we find that Bierstedt⁴ the famous authority on this, chooses to stress heavily the coercive aspect of political power. 'To coerce' is a verb: 'A coerces B'. If this is power and it is no longer latent, then in Bierstedt's terms, it is no longer political power. If power is meant as potentially coercive, then atleast the problem of contradiction disappears. But does power have to be potentially coercive to the exclusion of all other potentialities? To put it in another way, is it potentially operative only against the wills of others?

It is true that pooled energy can be and is used to coerce others but it can also be used to serve collective purposes. Power simply is. It is not inherently directed; it is directed by people and in a multiplicity of ways, not all of them are coercive. This view is also supported by Harold Lasswell who finds himself in complete agreement with Charles Marriam in repudiating the idea that the exercise of power rested always, or even generally, on violence, or that the essence of the power equation is force, in the sense of violence and physical brutality.⁵ Power may rest on faiths and loyalties, habits and apathy as well as interests. Even the constraints may not always take the form of violence. Power only entails an effective control over the policy; the means by which the control is made effective may be many and varied. Thus in theory violence is not an essential ingredient of power in power politics.

The question which mankind must answer is this. Has violence become so enormous that it should no longer be considered the central and most important feature in the content of power? In order to answer this question satisfactorily, we must assess why and how nuclear violence differs in quantity and quality from the conventional violence which was becoming inconveniently excessive in the last years of the pre-nuclear age.

Stephen King-Hall has answered this question in his "Power Politics in the Nuclear Age" by examining the evolution of travel. To quote him, 'A man on foot, a horse rider; a bicyclist; a motor driver; a passenger in a fast ship; the same man in an early plane; his son in a jet plane, all are travellers within a recognisable framework of progress. But when we consider the movements of man in space, conditions become so different from anything hitherto known in the business of movement from A to B that we are dealing with a development which is only tenuously connected with what we have usually meant by the word travel. Space travel for all practical purposes is a completely new form of movement from A to B and raises problem of an absolutely novel character such as weightlessness, dangers from cosmic radiation and so forth'.⁶ King Hall further adds that "there is the same enormous gap between conventional and nuclear violence".⁷ The peculiar qualities of the nuclear weapons show how profoundly they differ from what are now

called conventional weapons and their methods of use both strategically and tactically, have caused many ideas hallowed by centuries of tradition and practical experience to become obsolete. The two superpowers are fully capable of destroying each other along with the whole of the world several times. What was, is no more; what was not even imagined, is.

The degree of nuclear violence is so enormous and indeed virtually unimaginable, that the saints and the sinners are now on the same platform. Morality and expediency have become Siamese twins. "It is wicked to use violence", say the Saints. 'It is mutual suicide to use it' say the sinners. Now every body has realised that since nuclear violence is logically unusable and terribly expensive, it should be abandoned. Previously violence seemed to be useful for power politics but now it has been turned upside down too quickly. It has all happened within the life span of one generation. The experiences of World Wars I and II forced every one to admit that conventional violence had become so great, that it could no longer be sensibly used to achieve political and economic objectives.

If there had been a third world war with conventional weapons and perhaps a 25% increase of violence over World War II, then it might well have turned out that the educational process would have been completed. People might have said; "It is now clear that this idea of settling disputes by violence is obviously absurd. No one has won World War III".

But instead of taking one more step towards the goal of realizing that violence had outlived its usefulness and theoretically also it is not necessary for political power, violence has made a leap into the Nuclear Age. We know that our leaders keep on telling us, that nuclear war is mutual suicide but we still can not swallow the fact that this is the end of the long connection between power politics and violence. The situation is further confused by the fact that no country who has nuclear capacity is limiting it but rather increasing it many fold. The recent talks between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev have taken the first steps towards an accord on limiting nuclear arms stocks. NPT is being used to deprive the non-nuclear countries to have nuclear capacity but those who already possess great nuclear capacity have been left untouched by it. It is only to prevent those who are striving to attain nuclear power.

Clearly a very urgent and practical requirement is the prevention of the spread of nuclear weapons and, therefore, of violence capacity in its deadly form. The hour is late and this objective will not be achieved unless the Americans and Russians can come to terms with this problem. It is also clear that the collaboration of England, France, Canada and China would also be indispensable. It is only by this that we can progress towards the ideal of the

elimination of violence in international power politics otherwise it will wipe out the whole of humanity from the surface of the earth this time.

It would be strange and unnatural if these far reaching effects of nuclear violence had not altered radically the relative importance of the various components of power. It is generally admitted now that nuclear energy by its degree and type of violence has ensured that violence as the prime element of power has come to the end of its day. If man refuses to recognise this, then, he will destroy himself through incapacity or unwillingness to adapt himself and his institutions to this great change.

But it is hard on man that an idea which has been so basic in his theory and practice of power politics for so many thousands of years should disappear in a flash. No wonder he is lost, puzzled and confused as he apprehensively tries to convince himself that what some begin to realise is a myth, is still the reality in which he believed for so long. But if he is to survive he must make a supreme effort to eliminate nuclear violence from power politics.

Notes:

1 Angell Norman, *The Great Illusion* 1971.

2 Liddell Hart, B.H., *History of the Second World War*, (Pan Books, 1973), p. 727.

3 Clausewitz, Carl Von, *On War*. (London; Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1911), Vol. III, p. 121.

4 Bierstedt Robert: An Analysis of Social Power in "American Sociological Review", December, 1950, p. 733.

See also

Bierstedt Robert: *Power & Progress: Essays on Sociologic Theory*, New York, Mc Graw Hill, 1974.

5 Marriam, Charles E., "Political Power" in Lasswell, Harold D., Marriam Charles E., and Smith, T.V., *A Study of Power*, (Glencoe; Illinois, The Free Press 1950), p. 20

6 King-Hall, Stephen: *Power Politics in the Nuclear Age* (London; Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1962), pp. 50-51.

7. Ibid.