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A Conventional Retaliatory Offensive In Europe

New Strategy or Mere Diversion?

An Analysis

Dennis R. DeWalt
The National War College
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An Analysis

Introduction:

The credibility of our current military strategy, flexible response, is increasingly questioned by a wide range of strategists who propose a variety of alternatives. Samuel P. Huntington's proposal for a conventional retaliatory offensive "strategy" for Europe is but one of these alternatives.¹ The task in this paper is to analyze Mr. Huntington's "strategy" using an established framework consisting of seven analytical elements: context, threat, objectives, assumptions, operational concepts, capabilities, and costs/risks. The reader of this analysis is presumed to have full knowledge of the details of Huntington's proposal and its content will not be reiterated.

To begin, I will agree with John F. Meehan III that Huntington's proposal is not a new strategy, but merely a new operational concept for implementing the existing military strategy of flexible response.² For purposes of clarity, it should be understood that flexible response has deterrence as its primary objective; has both denial and punishment approaches to its implementation; and, has both conventional and nuclear means available for each approach. Within this four part matrix of the flexible response strategy - deny/punish and conventional/nuclear - a variety of potential operational concepts can exist, all of which can be rungs on the escalation ladder which is central to flexible response. Huntington's proposal is merely a new

operational concept for implementing flexible response, another rung, if you will. He proposes a punishment approach to deterrence using conventional forces as his means. It is a new concept in that NATO has not previously incorporated a conventional offensive as part of its planning.

Using the framework, this analysis will evaluate whether the conventional retaliatory offensive concept meets a real threat, is politically and militarily feasible and is credible as a conventional deterrent; and, whether this concept should be added to the flexible response strategy or rejected. The following paragraphs will be critical of Huntington's treatment of the threat, will question the clarity of his military objectives, will present an alternative view of the capabilities required and will provide a net assessment addressing the costs and risks of the proposal and the probable Soviet response to it.

The Problem:

Given that the Soviets have achieved at least parity in nuclear capability and are superior conventionally, strategists, including Huntington, believe that flexible response (with its current options of conventional defense, tactical/theater nuclear defense and theater/strategic nuclear punishment) provides neither sufficient flexibility nor adequate response to a postulated Soviet attack in Europe. To many, the idea that the United States would subject itself and the World to the risk of global nuclear war in an effort to stop a Soviet conventional attack in Europe is no longer credible. I agree.

*Quoted from
statements*

We face a situation in Europe where the nuclear threshold is militarily low and politically high. The potential cost of using nuclear weapons to defend Europe is too high to be a viable option if deterrence fails. Huntington's proposal is one of many that have been made to restore credibility to the deterrence of conventional war in Europe.

The NATO Context-The Political Objective is Deterrence:

War fighting strategies are unacceptable to Europeans; deterrence of war is the NATO political objective; and punishment, not denial, is the acceptable method. Within Europe there is general understanding that the strategic environment has changed, that nuclear deterrence is less credible and that there is a need to improve NATO's conventional capabilities. Yet, there is a persistent belief that a strong conventional capability is unacceptable because it may lead to the conclusion that conventional war is possible and that it can remain conventional. Too much conventional strength can be a threat to deterrence. As Meehan points out, this leads to the proposition that even if the Europeans could build a precisely adequate conventional force for deterrence by denial they likely wouldn't build it. The NATO problem is philosophical not military.³

Huntington's proposal, then, meets one European test because it is a deterrent by punishment not denial. But, it fails the second test because it assumes that there is the possibility of fighting a conventional war in Europe without resort to nuclear forces. The European nations, it seems, have agreed to a minimal

level of conventional capability in order to pacify critics in the United States and to secure the linkage of United States' nuclear forces to Europe's defense. But, they are unwilling to seriously contemplate either the use of nuclear weapons in or a non-nuclear conventional defense of Europe. For this reason alone, Huntington's conventional retaliatory offensive concept would be politically unacceptable to Europeans even more than the already controversial American concepts of AirLand Battle and Follow-On Force Attack.

His attempt to establish the political feasibility of his proposal is further weakened by his bald assumption that significant additional forces would not be required for its implementation. Thus, he tries to avoid the political, economic and demographic problems his proposal would encounter if new forces are required. He offers no force analysis for his assumption and, as will be discussed later when I analyze capabilities, there is every reason to believe his assumption is wrong. For these reasons, the proposal is politically unacceptable at present. Yet, as Huntington points out, the notion of what is politically acceptable changes with time. Therefore, we should look beyond context to the other elements of our framework to judge Huntington's proposal more fully.

The Threat - Is An Offensive Justified?:

Huntington's assumption of US-USSR strategic nuclear parity, Soviet predominance in theater nuclear weapons and Soviet conventional superiority are acceptable as fact. While he

provides no specific force comparison detail, his analysis of the threat does address, at least generally, Soviet capabilities. He also provides some analysis of allied vulnerabilities though he focuses more on the issue of defensive vis offensive strategy than on specific force mismatches or deficiencies. His belief that the Soviet threat lies more in superior Soviet strategy than in superior manpower or arms is catchy and appealing. However, his assertion that Soviet numerical superiority does not provide enough advantage to guarantee victory in war is not supported with facts, even though he does refer to two analyses which emphasize the uncertainties that would exist with regard to the outcome of such a war. Further, he is inconsistent in arguing that the allies can successfully go on the offensive with less than a three to one force ratio overall while claiming that a Soviet offensive (with both an overall numerical superiority and the ability to mass forces at the point of attack) faces an uncertain fate. Similarly, Huntington makes much of the possibility of weakening the reliability of the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact countries by threat of a NATO offensive but does not address the issue under purely defensive strategies. He does not, for example, treat the reliability issue in the event of early allied defensive use of either conventional or theater nuclear weapons on Warsaw Pact territory. In sum, it appears that Huntington overstates Soviet capabilities and allied vulnerabilities when applied to a purely defensive concept and understates them when applied to his offensive concept.

good point

The point being that what other would they have?

This said, I do find Huntington's analysis of possible Soviet intentions in initiating a war in Europe very interesting. His theory that the Soviets may have limited goals, that they may just grab some West German territory and then try to establish the demilitarization or neutralization of West Germany is credible because it is probably achievable at costs acceptable to the Soviets. This is especially true if the allies do not use nuclear weapons early and the Soviets are able to achieve their limited goals before sustaining major damage in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. This scenario makes Huntington's offensive concept potentially useful and plausible since a counter grab of Warsaw Pact territory by the allies in response to a limited Soviet offensive could raise the Soviet costs and provide the allies a negotiating position lacking in a purely defensive posture. Alas, Huntington again fails us by not providing adequate analysis of the price the Soviets would be willing to pay for such limited ends and by not analyzing whether NATO could exact more than that price by purely defensive operations. While his inquiry into Soviet intentions shows promise, the promise remains unfulfilled.

In the final analysis, then, Huntington's treatment of the threat does not carefully and thoroughly deal with Soviet capabilities and intentions nor does it fully develop allied vulnerabilities in light of Soviet capabilities and intentions. His treatment of the threat is focused more on justifying his concept than on fully elaborating the threat.

*at
nuclear
army
statement of
a different
concept*

Ends, Means, Methods -- Does A Conventional Offensive Make Sense?

Having established earlier that Huntington's proposal has at its center a valid political objective (though it is not yet politically acceptable) of deterrence by conventional retaliation, I will now turn my analysis to military objectives, capabilities, and operational concepts. Huntington confronts us with a host of possible military objectives for his proposal. Briefly stated they are to: 1) strengthen deterrence without escalation; 2) threaten Soviet political control in Eastern Europe; 3) confront Soviet forces with uncertainty requiring them to be flexible and adaptable; 4) deny quick Soviet victory; 5) gain territory in the East for negotiation; 6) force Soviet forces to a defensive posture and discourage massing; and, 7) counter Soviet threats out-of-area.

These are coherent, reasonable and worthy military objectives. However, aside from those of gaining territory and forcing the Soviets to defend, it is hard to develop criteria for measuring their success. In describing his operational concept of a prompt offensive into Eastern Europe, Huntington provides an example in which the tangible goal would be the capture of several cities. But, there is no way to determine whether success in capturing them would accomplish the objectives shown above. Nor is there any inherent military value in capturing the cities for their own sake.

Huntington has given us so many possible objectives for his proposed offensive it has become impossible to determine what he

really wants to accomplish. Does he mean to defeat the Soviet army through a combination of defense on the central front and a retaliatory offensive into Eastern Europe? Or, is his aim limited to inflicting pain, causing some doubts and occupying some piece of enemy territory with a view towards negotiation? Since he nowhere claims the former, it must be the latter. His objective is a limited one.

Clausewitz, in his chapter on the limited aim in offense, cautions that the decision to pursue the limited aim turns on whether one can be sure of holding it, whether a temporary occupation is worth the cost of the operation if it cannot be held and whether there is any risk of being strongly counterattacked. He also cautions that an offense of this type cannot always make up for losses elsewhere and that, if not of overwhelming significance, such a project will not compel the enemy to give up his own conquest.⁴ In his chapter on the culminating point of attack, Clausewitz tells us that if the attack leads to peace the object will have been obtained but that strategic attacks which have led directly to peace are the minority. He concludes that most strategic attacks end in defense awaiting peace and facing a reaction that is usually much stronger than that of the original attack.⁵ As to Huntington's proposal, it is unlikely that the allies could hold any territory gained for long; that a temporary gain would be worth the cost; that it would compel the Soviets to quit their conquest; or, that it would lead directly to peace. It is 'virtually certain to

produce a strong counterattack. In judging Huntington's objectives, we do well to remember that Clausewitz found the attack the weaker and defense the stronger form of war. He noted that if there are enough forces for the weaker form they must surely suffice for the stronger. He warned that every strategic attack ends in a defense whose result would be determined by the circumstances which would be very favorable when the enemy was destroyed but very difficult otherwise.⁶

By Clausewitz' terms, then, since Huntington seeks neither to defeat the enemy or to take and hold specific territory, it appears that what he proposes is not really a strategic attack or offensive at all but, rather, a diversion - "an attack on enemy territory that draws off the enemy forces from the main objective".⁷ He is really proposing an offensive diversion in the context of a broader defensive operation. This being the case, Clausewitz suggests that in a diversion the attacker must be sure he has more to gain in the enemy's area than to lose in his own and that the size of the diversion not ~~is~~ too large an operation because the larger the enemy force the easier his defense. Clausewitz cautions that conditions for successful diversions are rare. He seems to capture Huntington's real intent when he says that "the more remote the likelihood of a great decision in a war, the more legitimate it is to use diversions but, of course, the smaller are the gains one can expect. Such diversions are simply a means of stirring up a situation."⁸

I conclude this portion of the analysis with the observation that Huntington's military objectives are unclear; that he

appears not to have defeat of the enemy in mind; that there is more to lose than gain; and, that his diversion probably has little chance except as a means of "stirring things up". Because his objectives are vague, his operational concepts are not clear. His proposal is sequential but the sequence of events and the criteria for judging when to end one event and begin another are not provided. Clear measures of success are absent. Having labeled his military ends as vague and his method questionable, I move now to the means.

Does Huntington realistically portray the capability required to conduct a strategic offensive? For an answer, I turned to an article by Keith A. Dunn and William O.

Staudenmaier, both of the United States Army War College. They, unlike Huntington, looked to the Soviets' second strategic echelon deploying from the Western military districts and concluded that if the allied strategic offensive cannot survive a counterattack by these forces it will present an irritant but not a decisive use of military power.

The Soviets have sixty-five divisions in the European TVD's which could be dedicated to the second strategic echelon. Sixteen additional divisions from other TVD's are available as a strategic reserve. Dunn and Staudenmaier gamed Huntington's proposal. After assuming the most favorable allied circumstances, they found that on D+21 the Warsaw Pact forces were at the Weser-Lecht River line moving toward Frankfurt and NATO forces were fighting for Prague and Leipzig. However, to

ensure a Soviet breakthrough did not occur in the North and to ensure a successful NATO offensive in the South, thirty-one new NATO divisions were required during the game.⁹ This work by Dunn and Staudenmaier, even if adjusted for the possibility of substantial error, demonstrates the gross inadequacy of Huntington's analysis of the capabilities required to implement his concept. Their work demonstrates the critical need for proposals such as Huntington's to be subjected to detailed operational level evaluation. Huntington's failure to consider the Soviet second strategic echelon invalidates his proposal on military grounds. His contention that an offensive strategy would improve deterrence by forcing the Soviets into uncertainty or to divert offensive forces is valid only if the offensive is credible militarily, ^{that is} if it can be decisive. As noted above, and as shown by the Dunn and Staudenmaier analysis, Huntington's proposed offensive appears to be a matter of "stirring things up" more than a decisive strategic concept. If NATO could produce the required additional forces for the conventional offensive, then it could provide a credible conventional defensive deterrent.

The remaining question in this section of the analysis is whether Huntington adequately discusses alternatives to his proposal. He provides two specific alternatives - acquiesce to a weaker deterrent and creation of a German nuclear deterrent. He dismisses the former because of its risks of increased Soviet influence and alliance tension; the latter because of a lack of

political feasibility. In reality, Huntington simply makes his proposal look better by comparing it with two options that are as bad or worse than his own. While rejecting the possibility of major conventional defensive improvements due to budgetary problems and understating the costs of his own proposal, Huntington fails to analyze a host of other possibilities. Alternative concepts for implementing flexible response include French General Gallois' proposal for a European version of mutual assured destruction not linked to United States' strategic forces; Colin Grey's proposal for an inflexible tactical nuclear defense not linked to strategic retaliation and a variety of proposals for denial of victory using conventional means. These latter include proposals for border fortifications, urban defense and other defense in depth concepts and envision the use of existing or increased NATO or territorial forces.¹⁰ My purpose is not to detail these alternatives here but merely to show that Huntington does not adequately address the full range of alternatives to his proposal.

A_Net_Assessment:

In this segment of my analysis, I will briefly discuss the costs and risks of Huntington's proposal and potential Soviet reactions to it. As Dunn and Staudenmaier show, the likelihood of a decisive victory is small and the military costs are high. There would be fewer forces for defense; American and West German forces in Eastern Europe may complicate allied use of nuclear weapons; and, there is a high probability that the allied

offensive would be destroyed without striking a decisive blow. The proposal requires far greater forces than suggested by Huntington and the political economic and demographic costs in raising the forces are, in my opinion, not achievable. An attempt to raise them will cause discord in NATO and adverse public reaction in its member countries. Thus, the military, political and economic costs and risks are high even if the Soviets do not react.

Likely Soviet reactions raise the costs and risks to clearly unacceptable levels. According to Daniel S. Papp, who analyzed potential Soviet reaction to the proposal, the Soviets are likely to respond politically, diplomatically and militarily in a concerted effort to use the proposal as an opportunity to further their own position. In all, Papp sees nine likely responses, only one of which is favorable to the strategy. The nine are: 1) a political-diplomatic campaign in the United States and Western Europe to kill the strategy and to divide NATO - Europe from the United States, European states from each other and European publics from their governments; 2) a political-diplomatic campaign in Eastern Europe to force the Pact closer together and justify stricter controls; 3) a political-diplomatic campaign in the Third World to split those nations, especially China, from the allies; 4) withholding forces from their attack to meet the NATO offensive as Huntington hoped; 5) additional advanced deployment of Soviet forces in Eastern Europe; 6) increased territorial defense in Eastern Europe; 7)

strengthening the first echelon attack forces to ensure quicker success and complicate NATO decisions; 8) preparing static defenses to frustrate the NATO offensive; and, 9) using chemical and/or nuclear weapons against the NATO offensive forces when they mass.¹¹

The additional costs and risks for NATO produced by almost any combination of the above are high and, when added to the initial costs of achieving the offensive capability, would result in a net reduction in NATO's ability to deter or win a war in Europe. The costs and risks are too high, the proposal must be rejected.

A Framework for Strategy Development or Just Analysis?:

The framework proved a useful tool in analyzing Huntington's proposal and deciding that it does not make sense as military strategy. In looking at NATO and the flexible response strategy through the prism of the framework, I was struck with the importance of the threat (especially Soviet intentions) and by the complexity of its relationship to the political context, the operational concept and the required capabilities and of their relationship with each other. Likewise, in analyzing costs and risks, I found it imperative that likely enemy reactions be analyzed. This includes political and military reactions and reactions in both peacetime and wartime. Only then will the full costs and risks become apparent.

The framework helped focus these views. But, it is not clear that the framework copes with the dynamics of these

relationships well enough to rely on it to build a strategy. The potential is there; but, a more robust, more integrated and more synergistic framework may be needed. Finally, in looking at NATO in its broadest sense, I come, more and more, to the conclusion that the NATO problem is not one of military strategy, but a far more difficult one of whether it is time to rethink the whole basis of the alliance (political, economic, and military) and to see whether a new trans-atlantic bargain should be struck. The framework leads us in that direction but we may not have the courage to proceed. I think we must if we are to avoid a slow but steady decline in the ability of NATO to deter war and to defend Europe.

Correct. The framework can only
set an agenda for discussion/analysis, not
produce original thought.

Denny
a thoroughly first-rate piece from beginning to end.
Good insights, well documented and integrated, and
a superior writing style. As good an analysis as
I have read on the subject. Thank you for such
a fine piece of work and for your superb
contributions to the seminar. Good luck after
graduation.

THK

ENDNOTES

1. Samuel P. Huntington, "Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe," International Security, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983-84).
2. John F. Meehan III, "NATO and Alternative Strategies," Parameters, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1986), p.21.
3. Ibid., p.19.
4. Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.612.
5. Ibid., p.19.
6. Ibid., p.524.
7. Ibid., p.562.
8. Ibid., p.563.
9. Keith A. Dunn and William O. Staudenmaier, "A NATO Conventional Retaliatory Strategy: Strategic and Force Structure Implications," in Military Strategy in Transition: Defense and Deterrence in the 1980s, ed. Dunn and Staudenmaier (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1984), p.202.
10. Meehan, "NATO and Alternative Strategies," pp.20-22.
11. Daniel S. Papp, "Potential Soviet Responses to a NATO Retaliatory Offensive Strategy," in Military Strategy in Transition: Defense and Deterrence in the 1980s, ed. Dunn and Staudenmaier (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1984), pp. 152-159.