

#84

February 21, 1967

The Honorable, The Secretary of Defense  
Robert S. McNamara  
Department of Defense  
The Pentagon  
Washington, D.C.

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Reviewed Chief, RDD, WHS  
IAW EO 13526, Section 3.5  
Date: MAY 03 2013

Dear Mr. McNamara:

Alain Enthoven suggested I write you this letter.

I would like very much to have a chance to talk with you soberly and at some length about U.S. policy and doctrine on strategic offense and defense; in particular about BMD.

I do not myself support a go-ahead on BMD against the Russians - Postures A or B. Military and Congressional arguments for a U.S. BMD (because Russia has one, or "to keep our superiority", or the like) are vague and in my view quite wrong.

However, (1) I believe an American BMD against any nuclear equipped country other than Russia will form an inexpensive and indispensable support for U.S. foreign and military policy in the foreseeable future - whether or not we reach substantial arms control agreements with the S.U.

*Including  
any sub-  
arms control*

(2) It would be wise to commit the U.S. publicly now to undertake such a program at whatever pace intelligence on Chinese progress indicates is prudent - given the inevitable uncertainties. (I do not myself argue for any particular schedule of spending and installation.)

(3) I am deeply concerned that, when locked in battle with Congress and the Chiefs, the government officials I respect most (a) may neglect to make adequately clear to the public the more reasonable alternatives for decision, (b) tend to counter bad arguments with some that I feel cannot themselves sustain examination, and (c) appear to have moved (almost unconsciously) in the direction of a familiar but untenable strategic doctrine of minimum deterrence, ~~one~~ that I do not think can support a coherent and workable U.S. alliance, arms control or other foreign policy. In Asia and the Middle East I have personally observed that parts of your posture statements written with Congress chiefly in mind have been read by foreigners in ways that weaken some of our main purposes.

*or doctrine - one  
doctrine*

Stated summarily, I fear this may seem excessively blunt. In this letter I can only sketch the basis for my concern. We discussed some of these points in 1965 but not other crucial ones.

1. The role of thin area BMD. A substantially preclusive BMD against attacks involving a modest number of apparent incoming objects would offer some protection against unauthorized or mistaken launchings, would help stabilize arms control arrangements against non-signers or violators and most important, while not the whole of a policy against the spread of independent nuclear forces, would be a major factor in such policy; and would cost, as you know, on the average less than a tenth of what we were spending annually on active defense against manned bombers at the end of the 1950s.

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*cancel now - further  
possibility of more*

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A sensible U.S. policy in a world where five or more countries have exploded nuclear devices and some one hundred thirty have not, will aim a) at reducing net incentives to the spread of nuclear forces, b) at lessening the coercive value of any new forces that come into being, c) at discouraging at least the actual use of nuclear weapons against third parties as well as ourselves, and in the event that these prior efforts all fail, d) at reducing the damage done. A thin U.S. BMD has interconnected roles in each part of this four-fold process.

Here I'll discuss phase (a) only. The growing number of Asian proponents of nuclear self-protection against China claim that U.S. interests in Asia are small compared to the risks the U.S. would incur from a long-range Chinese strike; as a result the U.S. either will not protect an Asian country against nuclear threats and attacks or will demand a high price in the surrender of independence of countries it has no net interest otherwise in protecting. On the other hand, opponents of a national military nuclear program assume implicitly or explicitly that the Chinese threat will be canceled by the certain expectation of super-power retaliation, and especially ours.

Such arguments about national safety are not the only ones, but they are central. Their force in Asia is underlined by the feeling that Asia is less crucial to us than Europe, and Asians cite the isolationist minority in the Senate and in American universities in support of the proposition that unlike Europe, Asia is not "vital" to us. In this circumstance we cannot presume, as the posture statement does (p.39), that our deterring attack on third parties depends only on the damage we could do to the aggressor and not on limiting damage to ourselves. The question is: would we risk threatening the aggressor if we could not keep the risks to ourselves low compared to the dangers of non-commitment or failure to meet commitment. In a crisis disproportionate risks could have domestic as well as foreign impact.

The plain fact is that at the present time only the Russians can do substantial harm to the U.S. on a first or second strike. If we do nothing to prevent it, China will get the power to do us grievous harm at least in a desperate act of massive retaliation or in ~~an~~ act issuing from some crisis of escalation. This would be an important change in the strategic situation of the U.S., and it will affect the expectations of countries that feel menaced by China.

We do not answer such a capability by saying that we'll have "enough missiles left over after attacking Russia, to take care of China." Neither a U.S. second strike nor a preclusive first strike capability cancels the political effects of a desperate Chinese threat to the U.S. in the event of our helping one of her neighbors. A preclusive defense that - without requiring the U.S. to initiate a nuclear exchange - can keep us substantially free of damage is qualitatively quite different, especially in a crisis. By protecting us against even desperate acts it reduces the effect of desperate threats. Countries that regard themselves as less "vital" to the U.S. than Europe will be extremely sensitive to this difference, even if they do not analyze it. Many conversations with Indians and Japanese both here and inside their countries convince me that they will regard even a nominal Chinese capability against the U.S. as an important change and a lessening of their own safety. American strategists preoccupied with the binary relation between the U.S. and the S.U. tend to treat damage

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limiting as of minor importance or even as dangerous. Their attitude is doctrinaire rather than realistic. I think they are wrong in general, but particularly so in ignoring the political role of an explicit or latent Chinese massive retaliation threat. Massive retaliation is a poor policy for a great power. However, it is the sort of thing a small power is likely explicitly or implicitly to threaten. We tend to think only of acts as destabilizing, but a failure to act, as the strategic situation changes, is also destabilizing. For this reason I believe that just as today the U.S. is not subject to attack from lesser powers, so it will ultimately defend itself against small ballistic missile attacks from lesser powers. But this should be made clear to the world now.

I have no space to discuss status as distinct from safety considerations that impel countries to consider military nuclear programs, but they also are related to the notion of the atom as an "equalizer". Great power programs that drastically degrade the military effect of small nuclear forces reduce their status value too. Deflating China indirectly takes some pressure off her neighbors, and has direct effects as well. Even Shastri and Bhabha speculated in veiled terms about whether they could ultimately compare with the superpowers. Evidence that the U.S. - by spending on the average only a half a billion dollars a year - can cancel small nuclear forces greatly reduces their status.

Your 1967 posture statement seems much weaker on this matter than the one in 1966. In 1966 aside from the question of timing, the uncertainties you exhibited had to do with whether the Chinese would develop a small force of ICBMs and whether, as seemed promising, we would be able to get a moderately priced effective defense against it. In your 1967 statement it appears that the cost of a thin BMD will be less than half the 1966 estimate and that it will be effective. Yet the 1967 statement says that it is not clear that we need an ABM defense against China. If this is based on the assumption that a first-strike capability is a perfect substitute for a preclusive defense, I believe that to be a grave mistake, and an unfortunate casualty of the present debate about postures A and B. On the other hand this still leaves open the question of the timing of deployment as distinct from the timing of commitment.

(2.) Why commitment now? Because we can affect decisions in the making now in Asia and the Middle East. The question of commitment now differs from that of exactly when to install an area BMD. (The posture statement does not separate the two questions.) No one can speak with confidence on how rapidly after an IOC the Chinese might build their force, and even an IOC against the U.S., possible as you say in 1969, might have a potent political effect.

But more important than the matter of the timing of expenditures is our willingness to make perfectly clear that we are now and henceforth committed to the protection of non-nuclear countries in Asia from the nuclear coercion of China, and easily can and will keep low the costs in American lives of executing such commitments on guarantees. Debate is going on now in Asia and the Middle East on decisions to undertake military nuclear programs. These decisions may be affected by many things. But one unambiguous factor that would push new countries to the adoption of a nuclear weapons program would be the belief that they have no other way of assuring their safety from nuclear coercion or attack. The U.S.

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commitment, tacit or explicit, formal or informal, unilateral or clothed in the dress of a United Nation collective security arrangement will be a potent element in these decisions and in making for stability on the international scene.

We all believe so much in the importance of preserving options that it is easy for us to forget that foreclosing some options is equally essential if we want to keep others open in the future. We commit ourselves in NATO to regard an attack on Europe as an attack on ourselves. We make similar commitments to other allies and, since the first Chinese nuclear explosion, to some non-aligned countries. This is no folly. If we don't commit ourselves and keep it plain that the configuration of our interests and capabilities will continue to make any sacrifice by us in fulfilling a commitment smaller than the loss we would suffer if we did not fulfill it, then the countries we are protecting against nuclear threats will have to preserve their safety by their own means. This, of course, is what Gallois and the advocates of the spread of nuclear weapons say they must do and it is also implied by minimum deterrence or deterrence-only doctrines, (the latter have logical and genetic connections with Gallois' theory of the atom as equalizer.) But such a failure to commit ourselves will in the long run reduce our options by changing the international environment adversely.

(3.) Strategic doctrine and the current debate. Several formulations on the basic doctrine in the posture statement need re-examination: (a) the claim that deterrence has nothing to do with our ability to limit damage to ourselves is dubious in general, but surely cannot be sustained when we talk of deterring attack on third parties. (b) The assured destruction concept with its emphasis on mutual unconditional deterrence in all foreseeable circumstances and reference to "acceptable" or "intolerable" damage without any explicit indication of comparative risks may have some use in avoiding complexities for the Congress, but to my knowledge has raised questions in the minds of careful analysts in Japan, (if the Russians can under all foreseeable circumstances inflict intolerable damage and so reliably deter us, mightn't they deter us from responding to their attack on an ally? On at least some of our allies? Would we be sure<sup>er</sup> even though we can destroy more than one quarter of the Russians - that they would be deterred if we bomb China? East Germany? Poland?) In fact I don't think either we or the Russians can unconditionally deter each other. Moreover we can stand not being able to deter the other from responding to acts we expect to avoid, or in circumstances we think have a good chance of not coming up. I would go farther and say that unconditional mutual deterrence is not a sensible goal. If each of the nuclear countries could unconditionally deter any other, this would mean instability, not stability: any nuclear power could then coerce any non-nuclear one. (c) The implicit assumption that there is something peculiarly destabilizing about defense, making an adversary more likely to respond to defense than to an increase in our offense capability, is implausible in general, and especially so as applied to the Russians who have said exactly the opposite many times. (d) The statements on "arms races" have, I think, several important defects that

require extended treatment.

These and several other points of doctrine it would be best to discuss with you at some length. However, for the one action recommendation that I have to make (namely that we make clear now our commitment to a defense precluding damage from small power ballistic missile attack) the relevant matter is that the particular arguments made against postures A and B (both valid and invalid) have no application to thin area defense. (i) The latter would leave untouched the Russian capability to destroy over  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the U.S. population even if they failed to make minor adjustments in their offense restoring the status quo ante. (ii) As an area defense it would not arouse the regional pressures you suggest postures A and B would inevitably produce (even if, contrary to the indications of University of Pittsburgh public opinion polls, U.S. citizens are highly interested and informed about the character and distribution of active defense). (c) Directed as it is against nth countries, it is no part of a supposed zero-sum two person competition with the S.U., though disarmers frequently act as if it were. It does the Russians essentially no harm if we have a defense against the Chinese, and I'd say it is all to the good for us if the Russians get a BMD cancelling the French as well as the Chinese forces. (d) Most important, it cannot be claimed that the costs involved are "fantastic", in the now unfortunate stereotype. At less than a tenth of the rate of expenditure for active defenses at the end of the 1950s such a capability would seem a bargain.

I think it fair to point out that RAND and SRI studies of cost estimates for strategic offense and defense showed that Bell Telephone and Western Electric estimates for Nike Ajax and Nike Hercules were almost the only examples of conservative costing. Perhaps long experience with getting the costs of complex systems recognized by public utility commissions has affected Bell and Western Electric favorably for our purposes. My impression in any case is that the cost estimates of a thin area BMD are quite sober and would be modest, even if doubled. Are the public, the press and Congress adequately aware that some of the alternatives for decision involve not fantastic costs, but quite reasonable ones?

May we meet to talk of some of these matters?

Sincerely,

AW:fh  
Carbon to Alain Enthoven

Albert Wohlstetter