

REITH LECTURES 1957: Russia, the Atom and the West

George Kennan

Lecture 4: The Military Problem

TRANSMISSION: 1 December 1957 - Home Service

What I have to speak about here is the military aspect of our conflict with Soviet power. It may seem strange, and scarcely fitting, that a civilian and common citizen, and a person not privy to governmental information, should venture to speak of it at all, and I do so with some diffidence. But whoever thinks seriously about the problem of our relations with Russia cannot avoid doing his best to understand its military aspect, and making certain assumptions with regard to it.

There are few, I am sure, who would not agree that never in history have nations been faced with a danger greater than that which now confronts us in the form of the atomic weapon. Except in instances where there was a possibility of complete genocide, past dangers have generally threatened only the existing generation. Today it is everything which is at stake, the kindliness of our natural environment to the human experience, the genetic composition of the race, the possibility of health and life for our children and for future generations.

Not only is this danger terrible, but it is immediate. Efforts towards composition of major political differences between the Russians and ourselves have been practically abandoned. Belief in the inevitability of war, itself the worst disservice to peace, has grown unchecked. We have a world order marked by extreme instability. In the Middle East alone we have a situation, any disturbance of which could now easily involve us all in an all-out war. No one on either side wishes this to occur; yet the complete uncertainty as to the adversary's intentions and the premium that rests on the element of surprise in an atomic war could easily cause people to take, under the pressure of fear or misunderstanding, actions the effects of which would be irreparable. It is against this terrible, immediate, and almost inconceivable danger that the risks of an effort to negotiate a political settlement with Russia must today be measured.

To me it is a source of amazement that there are people who still see the escape from this danger in the continued multiplication by us of the destructiveness and speed of delivery of the major atomic weapons. These people seem unable to wean themselves from the belief that it is relative changes in the power of these weapons that are going to determine everything. They evidently believe that if the Russians gain the slightest edge on us in the capacity to wreak massive destruction at long range, they will immediately use it, regardless of our own power of retaliation. Conversely they seem to feel that if we can only contrive to get a tiny bit ahead of the Russians we shall in some way have won; our salvation will be assured; the road will then be paved for a settlement on our terms. This cast of thought seems to have been much encouraged, in my own country at least, by the shock of the launching of the Russian earth satellites.

I scarcely need say that I see no grounds whatsoever for these assumptions. The hydrogen bomb, admittedly, has a certain sorry value to us today as a deterrent. When I say this, I ought perhaps to explain more precisely what I mean. I have never thought that the Soviet Government wanted a general world war at any time since 1945, or that it would have been inclined, for any rational political reason of its own, to inaugurate such a war, even had the atomic weapon never been invented. I do not believe, in other words, that it was our possession of the atomic bomb which prevented the Russians from overrunning Europe in 1948 or at any other time. In this I have disagreed with some very important people.

The Atomic Deterrent

But now that the capacity to inflict this fearful destruction is mutual, and now that this premium has been placed on the element of surprise, I am prepared to concede that the atomic deterrent has its value as a stabilising factor until we can evolve some better means of protection. And so long as we are obliged to hold it at all as a deterrent, we must obviously see to it that it is in every way adequate to that purpose—in destructiveness, in speed of delivery, in security against a sudden preventive blow, and in the alertness of those who control its employment. I should certainly not wish to convey the impression that I have advocated anything like neglect or slackening of our retaliatory capacity.

But I can see no reason why we should indulge ourselves in the belief that the strategic atomic weapon can be anything more than a temporary and regrettable expedient, tiding us over a dangerous moment in world affairs. In particular, I see no reason to suppose that any sort of salvation or any basic solution to our problems is to be found either in the increase of its speed of delivery and destructive power or in the cultivation of elaborate defences against it.

So far as the effectiveness of the long-range atomic weapon as a deterrent is concerned, it is not the indefinite multiplication of its power which is important or relevant to our problem. It need only be terrible enough to make its use against us an irrational and self-defeating act on the part of any adversary. This it has been, in my opinion, for many years; and its effectiveness for this purpose is not going to be enhanced by its being made more terrible still.

And as for these various frantic schemes for defence against atomic attack, I can see no grounds whatsoever for confidence in them. I do not trust the calculations on which they are based. War has always been an uncertain exercise, in which the best-laid plans were frequently confounded. Today the variables and unknowns in these calculations are greater than ever before. I do not believe there is any human mind or group of human minds or any calculating machine anywhere in the world which can predict with accuracy what would happen if these weapons should begin to be used or which, by the same token, could devise realistic defences against them.

What Sort of a Life?

But, beyond this, what sort of a life is it to which these devotees of the weapons race would see us condemned? The technological realities of this competition are constantly changing from month to month and from year to year. Are we to flee like

haunted creatures from one defensive device to another, each more costly and humiliating than the one before, cowering underground one day, breaking up our cities the next, attempting to surround ourselves with elaborate electronic shields on the third, concerned only to prolong the length of our lives while sacrificing all the values for which it might be worth while to live at all? If I thought that this was the best the future held for us, I should be tempted to join those who say 'Let us divest ourselves of this weapon altogether; let us stake our safety on God's grace and our own good consciences and on that measure of common sense and humanity which even our adversaries possess; but then let us at least walk like men, with our heads up, so long as we are permitted to walk at all'. We must not forget that this is actually the situation in which many of the peoples of this world are obliged to live today; and while I would not wish to say that they are now more secure than we are, for the fact that they do not hold these weapons, I would submit that they are more secure than we would be if we were to resign ourselves entirely to the negative dynamics of the weapons race, as so many would have us do.

The beginning of understanding rests, in this appalling problem, with the recognition that the weapon of mass destruction is a sterile and hopeless weapon which may for a time serve as an answer of sorts to itself, as an uncertain sort of a shield against utter cataclysm, but which cannot in any way serve the purposes of a constructive and hopeful foreign policy. The true end of political action is, after all, to affect the deeper convictions of men; this the atomic bomb cannot do. The suicidal nature of this weapon renders it unsuitable both as a sanction of diplomacy and as the basis of an alliance. Such a weapon is simply not one with which one can usefully support political desiderata; nor is it one with which one readily springs to the defence of one's friends. There can be no coherent relation between such a weapon and the normal objects of national policy. A defence posture built around a weapon suicidal in its implications can serve only in the long run to paralyse national policy, to undermine alliances, and to drive everyone deeper and deeper into the hopeless exertions of the weapons race.

These thoughts are not mine alone. They are shared by many other people. They have been well expressed on other occasions. If I have seen fit to restate them here, it is to make clear my own position and to emphasise that their validity is in no way affected by the Soviet earth satellite, nor will it be affected if we launch a satellite ourselves.

Seeking Escape from Mass Destruction

But even among those who would go along with all that I have just said, there have recently been other tendencies of thought with which I also find myself in respectful but earnest disagreement. I have in mind here, in particular, the belief that the so-called tactical atomic weapon—the atomic weapon designed, that is, to be used at relatively short range against the armed forces of the adversary, rather than at long-range and against his homeland—provides a suitable escape from the sterility of any military doctrine based on the long-range weapon of mass destruction.

Let me explain what I mean. A number of thoughtful people, recognising the bankruptcy of the hydrogen bomb and the long-range missile as the basis for a defence policy, have pleaded for the simultaneous cultivation of other and more discriminate forms of military strength, and ones that could conceivably be used for

some worth-while limited national objective, and without suicidal effect. Some have advocated a policy of what they call graduated deterrents. Others have chosen to speak of the cultivation of the capacity for the waging of limited war, by which they mean a war limited both in the scope of its objects and in the destructiveness of the weapons to be employed. In both instances, what they have had in mind was to find an alternative to the hydrogen bomb as the basis for national defence.

One can, I think, have only sympathy and respect for this trend of thought. It certainly runs in the right direction. Force is, and always will be, an indispensable ingredient in human affairs. The alternative to a hopeless kind of force is never no- force-at-all. A first step away from the horrors of the atom must be the adequate development of agencies of force more flexible, more discriminate, and less suicidal in their effects. Had it been possible to develop such agencies in a form clearly distinguishable from the atomic weapon, this, unquestionably, would have provided the most natural path of escape from our present dilemma.

Unfortunately, this seems no longer to be an alternative, at least so far as the great nuclear powers are concerned. The so-called tactical atomic weapon is now being introduced into the armed forces of my country; and there is an intention, as I understand it, to introduce it into yours. We must assume that the same thing is occurring in the Soviet Union. While many people in our respective governments have become convinced, I am sure, of the need for being able to fight limited as well as total wars, it seems now to be largely by the use of the tactical atomic weapon that they propose to fight them. It appears to be their hope that by cultivation of this tactical weapon we can place ourselves in a position to defend the Nato countries successfully without resorting to the long-range strategic one; that our adversaries can then also be brought to refrain from employing the long- range one; that warfare can thus be restricted to whatever the tactical weapon implies; and that in this way the more apocalyptic effects of long-range nuclear warfare may be avoided.

It is this thesis which I cannot accept. That it would prove possible, in the event of an atomic war, to arrive at some tacit and workable understanding with the adversary as to the degree of destructiveness of the weapons that would be used and the sort of target to which they would be directed, seems to me a very slender and wishful hope indeed.

Cheerful Assumption

But, beyond this, let us bear in mind the probable ulterior effects, the effects, particularly, on the people in whose country such a war might be waged, of the use of tactical atomic weapons. There seems to be a cheerful assumption that these weapons are relatively harmless things, to be used solely against the armed forces of the enemy and without serious ulterior disadvantage. But surely this is not so? Even the tactical atomic weapon is destructive to a degree that sickens the imagination. If the experience of this century has taught us anything, it is that the long-term effects of modern war are by no means governed just by the formal outcome of the struggle in terms of victory or defeat. Modern war is not just an instrument of policy. It is an experience in itself. It does things to him who practises it, irrespective of whether he wins or loses. Can we really suppose that poor old Europe, so deeply and insidiously weakened by the ulterior effects of the two previous wars of this century, could stand

another and even more horrible ordeal of this nature? Let us by all means think for once not just in the mathematics of destruction—not just in these grisly equations of probable military casualties—let us rather think of people as they are; of the limits of their strength, their hope, their capacity for suffering, their capacity for believing in the future. And let us ask ourselves in all seriousness how much worth saving is going to be saved if war now rages for the third time in a half-century over the face of Europe, and this time in a form vastly more destructive than anything ever known before.

Unfortunately, the danger is not even limited to the possible effects of the use of the tactical atomic weapon by our own English or American forces in time of war. There is a further contingent danger, and a very imminent one as things now stand; and this is that atomic weapons strategic or tactical or both, may be placed in the arsenals of our continental allies as well.

A Fateful Step

I cannot over-emphasise the fatefulness of such a step. I do not see how it could fail to produce a serious increase in the existing military tension in Europe. It would be bound to raise a grave problem for the Russians in respect of their own military dispositions and their relations with the other Warsaw Pact countries. It would inevitably bring about a further complication of the German and satellite problems. Moscow is not going to be inclined to entrust its satellites with full control over such weapons. If, therefore, the Western continental countries are to be armed with them, any Russian withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe may become unthinkable once and for all, for reasons of sheer military prudence, regardless of what the major Western Powers might be prepared to do.

In addition to this, it is perfectly obvious that the larger the number of hands into which the control over atomic weapons is placed, the smaller will be the possibility for their eventual exclusion from national arsenals by international agreement, and the more difficult it will be to preclude complications of all sorts. So long as only three Great Powers are involved, there is at least a chance that things can be kept under control. To place these weapons in the hands of a number of further countries is practically to assure that there can in future be no minor difficulty in Europe that does not at once develop into a major one.

I am aware that similar warnings against the introduction of the atomic weapon into the armaments of the continental countries have also recently been part of the stock-in-trade of Soviet diplomacy. I cannot know what the motives of the Soviet Government have been in taking this position. I certainly cannot say that they have all been ones we could respect. But I think we must beware of rejecting ideas just because they happen to coincide with ones put forward on the other side. Moscow says many harmful and foolish things; but it would be wrong to assume that its utterances never happen to accord with the dictates of sobriety and good sense. The Russians are not always wrong, any more than we are always right. Our task, in any case, is to make up our minds independently.

Is there, then, any reasonably hopeful alternative to the unpromising path along which we are now advancing? I must confess that I see only one. This is precisely the

opposite of the attempt to incorporate the tactical atomic weapon into the defence of Western Europe. It is, again, the possibility of separating geographically the forces of the great nuclear Powers, of excluding them as direct factors in the future development of political relationships on the continent, and of inducing the continental peoples, by the same token, to accept a higher level of responsibility for the defence of the Continent than they have recently borne. This is still a possibility. Close as we are to it, we have not yet taken the fatal step. The continental countries have not yet prejudiced their usefulness for the solution of continental problems, as we have ours, by building their defence establishments around the atomic weapon. If they could be induced to refrain from doing this, and if there could be a general withdrawal of American, British and Russian armed power from the heart of the Continent, there would be at least a chance that Europe's fortunes might be worked out, and the competition between two political philosophies carried forward, in a manner disastrous neither to the respective peoples themselves nor to the cause of world peace. I would not know where else this chance is to be looked for.

Western Europe without Water-wings

I am aware that many people will greet this suggestion with scepticism. Oh the Continent, in particular, people have become so accustomed to the thought that their danger is a purely military one, and that their salvation can be assured only by others, that they rise in alarm at every suggestion that they should find the necessary powers of resistance within themselves. There is an habitual underestimation among these peoples of the native resources of Europe. The Western Europe of 1957 reminds me of the man who has grown so accustomed to swimming with water-wings that he cannot realise he is capable of swimming without them.

It is plain that in the event of a mutual withdrawal of forces the continental Nato countries would still require, in addition to the guarantees embodied in the Nato Pact, some sort of continuing local arrangements for their own defence. I am free to admit that for this purpose their existing conventional forces, based on the pattern of the second world war, would be generally inadequate. These conventional forces are designed to meet only the least likely of the possible dangers: that of an outright Soviet military attack in Europe, and then to meet it in the most unpromising manner, which is by attempting to hold it along some specific territorial line. All of this is obviously futile. If this were the- problem, then of course foreign assistance would be needed, although it is questionable whether it could ever be enough.

But this is not the problem. We must get over this obsession that the Russians are yearning to attack and occupy Western Europe, and that this is the principal danger. The Soviet threat, as I have had occasion to say before, is a combined military-political threat, with the accent on the political. If the armed forces of the United States and Britain were not present on the Continent the problem of defence for the continental nations would be primarily one of the internal health and discipline of the respective national societies, and of the manner in which they were organised to prevent the conquest and subjugation of their national life by unscrupulous and foreign-inspired minorities in their midst. What they need is a strategic doctrine addressed to this reality. Under such a doctrine, armed forces would indeed be needed; but I would suggest that as a general rule these forces might better be paramilitary ones, of a territorial-militia type, somewhat on the Swiss example, rather

than regular military units on the pattern of the Second World War. Their functions should be primarily internal rather than external. It is on the front of police realities, not on regular military battlefields, that the threat of Russian Communism must primarily be met. The training of such forces ought to be such as to prepare them not only to offer whatever overt resistance might be possible to a foreign invader, but also to constitute the core of a civil resistance movement on any territory that might be overrun by the enemy; and every forethought should be exercised to facilitate their assumption and execution of this role in the case of necessity. For this reason they need not, and should not, be burdened with heavy equipment or elaborate supply requirements. And this means—and it is no small advantage—that they could be maintained at a fraction of the cost per unit of the present conventional establishments.

I am inclined to wonder whether this concept could not well find application even as things are today, and in the absence of any Great Power withdrawal.

I would not wish to make a fetish of it or to suggest any sweeping uniform changes. The situations of no two Nato countries are alike. There are some that will continue to require, for various reasons, other kinds of armed force as well. I mean merely to suggest that if there could be a more realistic concept of the problem and the evolution of a strategic doctrine more directly addressed to the Soviet threat as it really is, and not as we have imagined it, the continental countries would not be as lacking in the resources or means for their own defence as is commonly assumed.

Let me reiterate that the primary purpose of the dispositions would be not the defence of the country at the frontier, though naturally one would aim to do whatever could be done in this respect, but rather its defence at every village crossroads. The purpose would be to place the country in a position where it could face the Kremlin and say to it: 'Look here, you may be able to overrun us, if you are unwise enough to attempt it, but you will have small profit from it; we are in a position to assure that not a single Communist or other person likely to perform your political business will become available to you for this purpose; you will find here no adequate nucleus of a puppet regime; on the contrary, you will be faced with the united and organised hostility of an entire nation; your stay among us will not be a happy one; we will make you pay bitterly for every day of it; and it will be without favourable long-term political prospects'.

I think I can give personal assurance that any country which is in a position to say this to Moscow, not in so many words, but in that language of military posture and political behaviour which the Russian Communists understand best of all, will have little need of foreign garrisons to assure its immunity from Soviet attack.