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Massive Retaliation vs Flexible Response

On January 12th 1954, John Foster Dulles delivered his renowned speech that articulated the strategy of Massive Retaliation. In it, he emphasised that “local defences must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power.”[1] In this case, "massive" embodies the concept of a disproportionate response to aggression, and, of course, "massive" is a euphemism for "nuclear."[2]

I will stop right there. Disproportionate. Nuclear. Retaliation. And being able to threaten nuclear retaliation is important key to deterrence.[3]

Schelling bestowed a capability-communication-commitment framework for generations of analysts. Capability refers to the ability to carry out a threat or promise. It encompasses the tangible resources and military power that enable one party to influence another. Effective communication is crucial for conveying intentions, threats, and promises. It involves signaling capabilities and resolve to potential adversaries. Commitment focuses on the credibility of the threats or promises made. A commitment must be perceived as sincere and binding, meaning that the actor is willing to follow through on its threats or promises.

The effectiveness of communication within the Massive Retaliation strategy can be assessed from various perspectives. The explicit threat of overwhelming retaliation helped to create a climate of caution among adversaries. Massive Retaliation, as laid out by Dulles, may be no longer credible now, but it definitely was when it was first introduced, perhaps due to the context of World War II. It was the largest and most devastating war in history, leaving the world acutely aware of the catastrophic consequences of a potential World War III. The immense destruction and economic burdens from World War II created a strong incentive for nations to avoid further conflict, as they simply did not have the resources to sustain another global war. On the other hand, Soviet leaders often interpreted U.S. communications about nuclear capabilities as aggressive posturing, which later led to the formulation of the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction. Both Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn have highlighted how the ambiguous nature of nuclear deterrence can lead to miscalculations. The Rand Report openly states that the biggest problem with Kahn’s ladder escalation system is the inherent Western mentality.[4]As the geopolitical landscape evolved and new forms of conflict emerged, the U.S. realised that the initial communication of a nuclear response might not be credible in conflicts that did not warrant such an extreme reaction.

Engaging in multiple conflicts akin to the Korean War poses significant risks for a nation, notably diminishing its military retaliatory capabilities in potential future conflicts against major adversaries such as China or Russia[5] and potentially leading to economic strain or “practical bankruptcy”. The term was apparently introduced by Lenin, whom Dulles quoted in his speech. According to Schelling, such overextension compromises a nation's ability to project credible deterrence, as both economic and military resources are stretched thin. The long-term security implications of being engaged in multiple, draining conflicts can lead to a downward spiral in military effectiveness and economic health. The economic incentive to shift towards a less costly nuclear arsenal instead of conventional forces was

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[1] John Foster Dulles, "Massive Retaliatory Power," speech, January 12, 1954, Department of State Bulletin.
[2] Lecture 4
[3] Lecture 5
[4] Paul Davis and Peter Stan, *Concepts and Models of Escalation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Strategy Assessment Center), page 4
[5] Lecture 4

uncanny. “Maximum protection… maximum deterrent at a bearable cost.”[6] And the U.S. certainly ticked the nuclear "capability" box.

Massive Retaliation clearly signaled the United States' commitment to defend its interests and those of its allies by demonstrating a willingness to use nuclear force in response to military aggression. But the intentions are not serious unless reflected in budgets. This commitment was underscored through various public statements and defense posture adjustments during the Eisenhower administration. The strategic thoughts expressed in the NSC 162/2 Report from 1953, developed prior to Dulles's speech, laid the groundwork by advocating for a shift towards reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence, which Dulles then explicitly communicated in his 1954 address. The speech itself served to publicly articulate and reinforce the U.S. commitment to this doctrine. The NATO MC48 Report, the Killian Report, and the Gaither Report each reflect the U.S. commitment to nuclear deterrence and defense capabilities. The NATO MC48 Report, adopted in 1954, was pivotal in shaping NATO's military posture. It endorsed the strategy of Massive Retaliation, advocating for a strong nuclear capability to counter any Soviet aggression, thereby reflecting a commitment to collective defense and the strategic use of nuclear weapons within the alliance. The Killian Report, prepared by James R. Killian Jr. in 1955, emphasized the importance of technological advancements in national security. It highlighted the need for the United States to enhance its missile defenses and satellite surveillance to maintain technological superiority over the USSR. Lastly, the Gaither Report of 1957 starkly outlined the growing missile gap with the Soviet Union and recommended significant increases in spending on missile and nuclear capabilities to ensure U.S. security and deterrence capabilities remained robust. This report influenced government actions towards bolstering the nation's strategic defense infrastructure.

However, the evolving nature of global conflicts and the simplistic binary nature of Massive Retaliation became less applicable later. Initially, Massive Retaliation, which promised overwhelming nuclear retaliation against any Soviet aggression, was seen as a cost-effective means to deter major conflicts. However, as the geopolitical landscape changed, the rigidity and stiffness of this doctrine became apparent. It was less effective against low-intensity conflicts that did not warrant a full-scale nuclear response.

Brian Robinson, a psychotherapist and professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina, developed a theory on the fear of the unknown that examines how uncertainty breeds anxiety, or, in other words, how certainty breeds confidence. This principle was further explored by Gavin de Becker in “The Gift of Fear”. Both argue that cognitive dissonance can heighten discomfort and fear, leading to avoidance behaviors. Familiarity, as a psychological principle, suggests that knowledge and understanding significantly reduce feelings of uncertainty, enhancing an individual's sense of control. When people are familiar with a situation, they can process information more easily and anticipate potential outcomes, which reduces anxiety associated with the unknown. When individuals are presented with clear information and predictable outcomes, they can approach situations with assurance and a sense of control.

The brain naturally prefers patterns and predictability, so familiar scenarios evoke less fear. Comfort in routine.

In other words, the strategy of Massive Retaliation as a deterrence mechanism was in place long enough for both the United States and the USSR to become thoroughly acquainted with its implications. This familiarity diminished the level of fear each side had toward the other, as they developed a comprehensive understanding of one another's military capabilities and strategic intentions. This

[6] John Foster Dulles, "Massive Retaliatory Power," speech, January 12, 1954, Department of State Bulletin.

prolonged exposure to the doctrine allowed both nations to study the risks and consequences associated with nuclear escalation. Consequently, rather than fostering a state of constant fear, the certainty associated with each side's ability to retaliate effectively contributed to a desire to move beyond this framework and test the opponent in new dimensions.

The fear of World War III created routine, and the sharpness of the perceived situation began to fade. Coupled with the all-or-nothing nature of Massive Retaliation, there was a risk of escalating minor skirmishes into nuclear confrontations — a growing concern in a more multipolar world where local conflicts had global implications. This combination created the need for a new approach in strategic military planning.

Thus, the Flexible Response strategy was born.