Re-thinking the unthinkable
-revisiting Kahn and other classics of nuclear strategy

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“Kahn does for nuclear arms what free-love advocates did for sex: he speaks candidly of acts about which others whisper behind closed doors”
- Amitai Etzioni, 1961

I AGREE THAT THINKING THROUGH THE ULTIMATE DYSTOPIA MAY HELP PREVENT IT
“A catastrophe can be pretty catastrophic without being total”  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dead</th>
<th>Economic Recuperation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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<tr>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>2 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>10,000,000</td>
<td>5 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>20,000,000</td>
<td>10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>40,000,000</td>
<td>20 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>80,000,000</td>
<td>50 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>160,000,000</td>
<td>100 years</td>
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</tbody>
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Will the survivors envy the dead?

Kahn, Herman (1960), On Thermonuclear War

“In a real sense you people don’t have war plans, you have war-gasms. It went pssst and everybody ducked.”
- Kahn in a briefing to SAC officers. (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2005, p. 238)
Why a return to nuclear scenarios??

- Nuclear weapons have not gone anywhere, they have been conveniently forgotten...
- What if deterrence fails? How will any conflict escalate?
- The world is fundamentally different – calculations are no longer valid
- Is Russia playing chicken? What about North Korea? Has the logic changed with nuclear taboo?
- Trump and future of extended deterrence?

Why the need to rethink – shift from bipolar to multipolar world of nuclears...
NUCLEAR DICHOTOMIES

- Peace studies - War studies
- Retarded - Paradoxical
- Nuclear parity - Nuclear Stalemate
- Spasm war - Surrender
- Massive retaliation - Flexible response
- First strike capability - Second strike capability
- Deterring war - Fighting war
- Strategic - Tactical
- Counterforce - Countervalue
- Minimum deterrence - Cross-domain deterrence
- Policy - Strategy/operations
- No data - Need to create scenarios
The need to de-escalate ANY situation

**FIGURE 13.5: Kahn’s Crisis Dynamics**

The metaphor of the escalation ladder – is it valid?

**THE RUNGS OF THE ESCALATION LADDER**

- Subcrisis Maneuvering
- Traditional Crises (The Boat Is Rocked)
- Intense Crises (The Unthinkable Nuclear War Becomes Credible)
- Bizarre Crises (Nuclear Weapons Are Used)
- Exemplary Central Attacks (Violating the Central Sanctuary—Nuclear Gunboat Diplomacy)
- Military Central Wars (The New Kind of All-Out War)
- Civilian Central Wars (Violation of the “No-City” Threshold)
Certainly the ladder today must be different, but the metaphor is valid.

It is a tool for thinking how a war might develop and needs to be understood to prevent crises from turning into wars...

Complexity vs. “Intuitive science of thermonuclear war”

• Create a scenario on nuclear war when
  • There is not empirical data
  • No earlier case studies in history that could provide models
  • Hundreds of different relationships between actors
  • Strategies and OPLANs are unknown (i.e. targeting)
  • Most of the choices are not rational but they are revolting
  • Numbers of weapons are estimations at best
  • Their yields and effects are largely unknown...
  • The most unlikely scenarios unfolding might end the anthropocene — so perhaps even they are worth consideration...

• IN OTHER WORDS ONE HAS TO EVALUATE WITHOUT ANY RELIABLE DATA EVERY POSSIBLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT – EVEN AND ESPECIALLY THE MOST OBSCURE ONES
ANY QUESTIONS???

From “Dr. Strangelove, Or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb

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