Bargaining and Escalation

Bargaining

At the centre of the strategy of stable conflict was the concept of incomplete antagonism. The prospect of an all-engulfing nuclear war reminded the super-powers that they should not push their differences over ideology and geopolitical interests too far. The issue was how far was too far. Arms control was concerned with preventing any sort of war, but an armed clash could not be ruled out. Would it be possible at low levels of violence for the shared interest in avoiding the most extreme form of military collision to continue to govern the resolution of the conflict? The question aroused mixed anxieties. If a war came, something other than the uninhibited release of all nuclear arsenals would be preferable, but knowledge that war-fighting would lead to something less than a complete disaster could make it more tempting for an aggressor. Moreover, a desire to limit the use of nuclear weapons could work to the advantage of the combatant with the strongest conventional capabilities - the USSR.

The dilemma could only be solved if a way could be found of employing nuclear weapons to effect without bringing about total destruction upon oneself. The trend towards invulnerable second-strike forces, encouraged by the formal strategists, reduced the chances of fighting wars according to the principles of wars of the past. The only alternative was to develop rules suitable for this singular form of conflict, rules which would permit controlled use of nuclear weapons directed towards objectives other than military
victory. This chapter is concerned with the attempts to discover such rules in known features of international activity or in postulated rational behaviour under alternative scenarios of crisis and conflict.

The emphasis was on political objectives. The relationship between political ends and military means, so often forgotten in the heat of battle, now had to be more intimate and direct than ever before. There was little point in military activity for its own sake; complete victory no longer appeared as an acceptable route to a satisfactory political settlement. Without military victory there could be no unconditional surrender by the enemy. In consequence, after the military activity, there would have to be some negotiated resolution of the differences. Hostilities, however destructive they had become, could only be terminated through a process of bargaining. Consequently it was in contributing to bargaining positions that the utility, if any, of nuclear weapons could be discerned.

The theme of bargaining in Schelling's work has already been stressed. It was taken up by his contemporaries. For example, Thornton Read concluded that 'tactical nuclear war is not an alternative to a conventional ground-holding capability for NATO, but a mechanism for carrying on punitive reprisals, as part of a bargaining strategy'.

Almost every analyst is now agreed that the first use of nuclear weapons – even if against military targets – is likely to be less for the purpose of destroying the other's military forces or handicapping its operations, than for redress, warning, bargaining, punitive, fining or deterrence purposes.

There were a number of bargains to be struck, the most important being over the shape of the final settlement. However, understanding would also be needed on the actual conduct of the war. At the start the combatants would signal by their actions the sort of rules by which they thought the game should be played. The first nuclear salvos could signal preferences about proper targets and the scale and tempo of attacks; the riposte would signal whether these rules were acceptable.

There was in addition an interest in preventing an expansion of conflict. The process of deterrence need not stop with the first shots in anger. As 'intra-war deterrence' it could continue, in an attempt to control a deteriorating situation. Once objectives shifted from forcing an enemy to do something rather than persuading him not to do