How Henry A. Kissinger's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* Moved Away from History and Back into an Unstable Nuclear Age

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Henry A. Kissinger arguably remains a force in strategic thinking circles. On 27–28 October 2025, a two-part documentary on his life was released by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States. The biography presents a case of lived experiences in Nazi Germany shaping the diplomat's realpolitik outlook.[1] In this backdrop of renewed conversations around Kissinger, resumption of nuclear testing,[2] and what is being termed as the Third Nuclear Age,[3] it is of much consequence to re-visit Kissinger's classic work on nuclear weapon use, his book titled *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, published in 1957. Tracing the statesman's strategic thinking on nuclear use reveals much about policy and implementation, and bears much to offer future policy-making for states, especially, de facto nuclear weapon states.

The book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* was written in the early years of the Cold War. It provided both an ailment and a prescription for the brand-new Nuclear Age. Today, reckoned as the First Nuclear Age,[4] this bipolar moment in history distinguished itself by means of (extended)

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deterrence[5] strategies, nuclear arsenal stalemate, followed by disintegration of Soviet Union, one of the two nuclear superpowers. During this age, Kissinger presented a critical departure from the 'Massive Retaliation' strategy of the Eisenhower administration, towards a more potent limited war doctrine.

Kissinger's arguments were straight; the advantage of having a nuclear weapon with a promise of mass destruction does not lay in keeping it as a weapon of last resort. With the Soviet and US having near parity in the nuclear weapons race, the defensive 'Massive Retaliation' deters on the logic of all-out war and total annihilation of self and the other. This does not address, but rather creates conditions for the 'Problem of Survival'.

Leaving a chasm in between political objectives and policy, the real problem thus lies in the fact that the American blanket use (or no-use) makes up for a paralyzing 'American Security' dilemma. Reliance on a single catastrophic response to major Communist aggression, effectively gives the Soviet Union a carte blanche or a 'blank cheque' to pursue smaller conventional aggression.

Stressing on the nuclear deterrence gap, Kissinger invokes the Greek legend of Prometheus, the eternally damned thief who stole fire from gods and passed it to humans. Despite American possession of such firepower, Kissinger argues, the utilisation of such gift remains sterile. Thereby, the main resource in this situation becomes adapting strategy to new technological reality, and converting power into a political instrument to be used against challengers.

According to Kissinger, roots of the dated all-out war strategy belonged to the fact that America had participated in both World Wars and was on the winning side of it. Though it worked in favour of the US during the duality of war and peace imbued decades, with the development of nuclear weapons, such thinking became strategically bankrupt. The cost of pursuing them vastly outweighed any conceivable politically defined goal. It represented a military doctrine divorced from strategic thinking, and thus unable to leverage diplomacy and strategy to make relative gains.

Thus, against the dilemma and reluctance of using nuclear weapons, Kissinger presents his key argument. The United States must integrate nuclear weapon use into its strategic thinking and foreign policy toolkit. It must develop the capability and doctrine to fight 'limited wars'. Controversially, he argued, a viable policy option includes a limited war involving smaller tactical nuclear weapons against military targets on a battlefield. This, he argued, will require a new framework tightly interlinking diplomacy and military force.

The goal would be accomplishment of political objectives, and not focus on the weapon as an end in itself.

This thinking keeps war limited, he argued. By pushing for a strategically calculated foreign policy, Kissinger thus redefined deterrence and the use of nuclear weapons. He combined the separated military and strategic doctrines of World War II era and made way for a limited nuclear weapon use foreign policy. He drew on taxonomy of deterrence and compellence, tactical and strategic use, damage limitation and punitive strikes; to drive home a doctrine that relies on controllable and credible means to protect American vital interests.

Once the nuclear threshold is crossed, can one actually stop the escalation? Kissinger thought so. Pursuit of diplomacy in tandem with military strategy against a rational actor, clear communication of boundaries, and pursuit of realistic arms control instead of utopian disarmament, would enable control of limited war and act as a firebreak to prevent localised conflict from escalating into global thermonuclear apocalypse. This will allow American nuclear deterrence to bridge the gap, and push for politically defined objectives by means and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.

Measured in Time

The irony is, when later in 1969, Kissinger himself entered White House first as National Security Advisor and later both as NSA and Secretary of State, as a practitioner he moved away from the fiery advocacy of limited war doctrine, towards actions weighed by political implications. This was despite the fact that policy by then had evolved from 'Massive Retaliation' into 'Flexible Response' on the recommended lines of Kissinger and others like Schelling, Kahn and Kaufmann. This new policy required US to have a wide spectrum of military options to respond to Soviet aggression proportionally. It included both deployed tactical nuclear warheads and an arsenal of strategic assets like Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles.

In the still later phase of his life, Kissinger became an influential political pundit writing on the subject. His writings from this period show a further departure from his earlier stance as a hardnosed strategic thinker. They are more mature and softened as compared to his young Harvard lecturer self making a case in favour of strategic means of aggression. This shift is on account of his personal placement coming to a full circle; back from practitioner to policy expert. And more importantly because the end of the Cold War had changed the international political structure.

Moving away from his earlier thinking and understanding about nuclear weapons as instruments of statecraft, Kissinger began to envision them as the ultimate threat to global survival. The threat he analysed in the 1950s was the 'Problem of Survival' based on the development of nuclear weapons technology and the threat of total war between two superpowers at nuclear parity. In the 21st century, Kissinger adapted his stated 'Problem' to the new political realities of nuclear terrorism,[6] nuclear proliferation and asymmetric warfare.

In an article published in the *Newsweek*,[7] Kissinger departed from his earlier view on using nuclear weapons to achieve specific geopolitical gains. In the wake of terrorist attacks on the US, War on Terror and the Iraq War, he argued to shift focus of American foreign policy towards prevention of nuclear weapon acquisition by non-state actors.

The inflection point struck in 2007. In a *Wall Street Journal* article titled 'A World Free of Nuclear Weapons', Kissinger categorically reversed course, explicitly joining a bipartisan call to actively pursue a world without nuclear weapons. His logic was that nuclear deterrence held its ground during the Cold War, because the superpowers were rational state actors who perceived threat and avoided damage to population, territory and state. Whereas the 21st century is characterised by the existence of rogue states and terrorist networks of non-state actors. The threat perception of these agents is unlike rational actors, and they stand undeterred by nuclear retaliation. In essence making deterrence obsolete.[8] This called for steps to reduce nuclear stockpiles and halt proliferation. A shift away from the operational imperative of limited-use to non-use of nuclear weapons and reduce 'the danger of accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons'.[9] Additionally, when Kissinger reviewed John Lewis Gaddis's biography on George F. Kennan,[10] he implicitly acknowledged the superiority of non-violent psychological and diplomatic means of statecraft over militarised foreign policy, used to manage Soviet 'Containment' during the Cold War.

As Relevant As Gold

In 1957, at the time of publication of Kissinger's controversial book, strategic contestation between the two superpowers was in full swing. Touted as the First Nuclear Age, it was characterised by vertical proliferation, deterrence based on capacity to inflict harm,[11] and arms control treaties.[12] The Second Nuclear Age[13] arrived with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the 9/11 terrorist attack. It is defined by horizontal proliferation, rise of regional

nuclear actors, and risks of acquisition by non-state actors. Kissinger's last few articles on the subject mentioned above belong to this age.

The emerging Third Nuclear Age,[14] ripe with uncertainty has arguably begun with eroded arms control mechanisms, rapidly evolving weapon technologies making leaps (e.g., strategic non-nuclear weapons such as drones), and a new political structure with intensifying multipolar great-power competition. This age has upended hedges, as capable powers try to grab bigger pieces of the pie and make relative gains over other contenders. Admittedly, the Third Nuclear Age is inherently unstable. As of today, with nine known nuclear powers, the instability remains on the ascendant with guardrails such as the New START Treaty on the verge of collapse.[15] The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) continues to remain outdated with recognition of only the Permanent Five (P5) as Nuclear Weapon States (NWS). Whereas the de facto number today stands at nine with India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea joining the nuclear club from outside NPT.[16] Nuclear testing has entered a new phase with computer simulations, low-yield supercritical testing[17] and ambiguous on-site activity as observed at sites like Lop Nur.[18] States are testing new nuclear weapons (e.g., Russian Poseidon and Burevestnik).[19] China has recently celebrated its Victory Day Parade (War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression) by showcasing, for the first time, its full nuclear triad with land, sea and air delivery systems.[20] The American President has acknowledged the facts and the military parade,[21] and responded in kind by signalling the end of a three-decade-long unilateral moratorium on nuclear test explosions.[22]

In this world 'between orders',[23] in between political and technological liminality, new emerging threats such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and drones,[24] posture sharpening around nuclear weapon deployment, nation states revising nuclear doctrines and lowering the threshold for nuclear weapon use,[25] all create a world full of complexities and insecurities. The book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* and Kissinger's other writings on the subject offers readers and policy-makers a peek into the processes and mechanisms that actively go into working out these insecurities. Kissinger's oeuvre distinctly divided into professional phases of his career[26] gives one a long view on the position of nuclear weapons in foreign policy toolkit. Stephen Walt suggests that despite there being many other notable writers on understanding intricacies of nuclear strategy, Kissinger by sheer age and engagement outlasted his peers in becoming both the most famous 20th century statesman and providing a rich repository of knowledge on the subject.

In essence, Kissinger provides both, foundational insight into the instability inherent in the nuclear age, and the understanding that nuclear weapons serve as political instruments to pursue political objectives rather than ends in themselves. He provides a conceptual framework that binds nuclear ages, and highlights how old logic ceases on account of changing conditions in the strategic environment. In his early writings, Kissinger performs psychological analysis of deterrence thinking. He recognises that strategy in the nuclear age carries dynamic risk of escalation, necessitating a continuous offer of an off-ramp to the opponent which is 'more attractive than continued fighting'. Alternatively, his post-Cold War writings provide insights into the current instability inherent in a structure that evolves beyond state capacities. Contrary to his earlier writing in NWFP, his later writings move away from the deterrence logic towards emphasis on hazard and the pragmatic need to reduce reliance on decreasingly effective nuclear weapons.[27]

Crucially, any reading of NWFP must also engage with Hans Morgenthau's contemporaneous critique. Morgenthau backs Kissinger's merits of 'fusion of political and military thinking and development of a coherent doctrine of limited war'. He acknowledges Kissinger's restoration of classical military doctrine, and its application to the Cold War period. However, he points out, there are 'specific conditions on which the possibility of limited atomic war' and the 'likelihood of their realisation' depends. Firstly, limited war can only be carried out in large de-concentrated and unpopulated spaces, otherwise there would be no distinction between a counter-value operation begetting an all-out attack and a limited war. And secondly, because war develops a logic of its own,[28] political and military leaders on both sides need to bear an 'unfailing' degree of excellence, and self-restraint in application of will and strategy. Morgenthau's reading of young Kissinger is that Kissinger believes both these spatial and human conditions can co-exist. But for himself, Morgenthau takes a sceptical position and doubts the real-world application of limited war doctrine.[29]

Other proponents of limited nuclear war have argued that nuclear war can be a rational battlefield strategy that can be managed, signalled and stabilised.[30] In the 1980s, such theories came to be known by the acronym NUTS (Nuclear Utilization Target Selection). Like the 1950s, these hypothetical theories of 1980s also went against the grain of established deterrence theories[31] and postulated thermonuclear weapons as an extension of conventional war. Similar to Kissinger's thinking, these theories ran counter to the prevalent MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) doctrine. Critics argued NUTS to be

a dangerous illusion,[32] as they tried to encourage the belief that nuclear wars were manageable and fightable. By logic of gain and calculations favouring nuclear weapon use, they thus swelled the conditions leading to rise in the possibility of war. Somewhat similar to the now known Russian practice of escalate to de-escalate (E2D). Regardless, NUTS theories have been criticised for discounting the 'fog of war' and miscommunication, underestimating the destructive power of actual use of nuclear weapons on population, and the effect of fracturing the established nuclear taboo norm. Consequently, post-Cold War, the arguments bend in favour of the explanation power of deterrence theory again. Towards an understanding that a tragically locked world exists more in a MAD reality, than a NUTS possibility.

Accordingly, American foreign policy did incorporate these varied designs into its nuclear thinking and posturing. Initially, the strategy evolved from 'Massive Retaliation' (1954) to 'Flexible Response' (1961) and then MAD (1965). The major shift being a move away from all-out nuclear strike (compensating for inferior conventional troop numbers in Europe with superiority in nuclear numbers), towards proportional military options, followed by stress on credible second-strike capability for total destruction. In the 1970s and 1980s, the NUTS theories had their say, limited nuclear options targeting military bases and countervailing options to take down political leadership were on the table. But with the end of the Cold War, the doctrine re-shifted its focus from use to passive deterrence with 'Calculated Ambiguity'[33] (1991). In 2018, American Nuclear Posture Review acknowledged the return of great power competition and got back to projecting active deterrence with its 'Tailored Nuclear Deterrent Strategy'. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review maintained continuity of the 'Tailored Nuclear Deterrent' with 'Flexible Nuclear Capabilities and Country-Specific Approaches'. And at the same time expanded to weave together different domains of warfare (such as cyber and space) into an 'Integrated Deterrence Strategy'. Ultimately, these developments drive home the point that amidst the uncertainty of the Third Nuclear Age, America has chosen to signal and assert a renewed comprehensive deterrence.

As a complete departure from *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger in his later writings has argued against these postures. He has argued that moral and political actions normalising nuclear weapon use undermine nuclear taboo. Consequently, increasing risks of war and chances of disastrous accidental errors. In essence, his position has solidified as it has continued to move further and further away from advocacy of nuclear weapon use, and in favour of reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally.

It's Getting Sharper Out There

With the rise of 'no limits' Russia–China dyad, and continuation of Pakistan–China dyad,[34] nations like the US and India have begun to feel the heat of 'looming two-nuclear-peer threat environment'.[35] Furthermore, the nature of the escalation has transformed on account of sharpening global and regional dynamics, rising asymmetry in capabilities, and the emergence of new threats (cyber, hypersonic, AI precision). Bipolarity has given way to a multi-nuclear actor environment, characterised by 'to each its own' doctrines divergences, and a complex mix of calculations and incentives. Thus, as scope of a nuclear anarchy rises, three problem areas stand out.

The first is doctrinal divergence. Some nuclear states (or nuclear weapons actors) like Russia and North Korea have adopted hedged positions that make limited-use more plausible. For example, the use of tactical or lower-yield weapons to redress inferiority in conventional warfare.[36] This is in line with the younger Kissinger who had advocated restricted options and limited war. But a point of distinction is the fact that Kissinger recommended them as an exception rather than as a thumb rule. Therefore, unlike Kissinger these postures lower the political threshold for use, and risk becoming norms in their own right.

Second, cyber-attacks have a tendency to increase opacity and necessitate hasty decision-making. This reduces the legroom for leaders to make reflective political choices, something Kissinger argued was essential to inform nuclear decision-making.[37]

Third, there is greater ambiguity and a risk of error as a result of the collapse of the mutual transparency and arms control regime. These treaties were a hallmark of US–Soviet relations which provided manoeuvring space for diplomacy and disarmament, and in turn kept the nuclear warheads in control. Ambiguity on ways and means to test new weapon delivery systems or resumption of choice of non-explosive nuclear tests,[38] ambiguity on renewal of arms control treaties and so on, reflect the character of growing uncertainties of the day.

Additionally, Kissinger had also been vocal about the need for new guardrails especially to keep the emerging threat of AI in check. Kissinger in his final piece for *Foreign Affairs* wrote on 'Path to AI Arms Control'.[39] In this article with Graham Allison, like the book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, he tries to understand and spell-out the new 'Problem of Survival' at the intersection of a newer, faster and riskier technology, and a redundant, sluggish design and strategy. He highlights the unprecedented

existential threat posed by AI to humanity. Unlike previous eras where technology and strategy gaps manifested in inefficiency in pursuit of political objectives, AI Arms risks stripping humanity of agency over weapons as a whole. Unconstrained US–China AI Arms Race and the erosion of 'nuclear deterrents, the pillar of today's world order'[40] are among others casualties as this competition intensifies for technological supremacy. Kissinger suggests that traditional negotiation processes need to adapt to the speed of developments in AI. Diplomacy needs to transform into a multi-layered approach involving corporate, national, bilateral and global actions and create conditions for AI arms control. The logic is that the global nuclear regime was effective in preventing a nuclear war in the past seven decades. Thus, lessons learned from it should be adapted and put to use in averting catastrophe from the future risk of AI Arms.

Conclusion

Kissinger provides a valuable analytical study for these turning times. Rather than looking for a solution to the strategic problem in his work, a reason to read Kissinger's *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* and his later writings is because it reveals nuances and provides clarity of thought. It explains why technology does not drive strategy, in the same way that a cart placed before a horse cannot drive the horse. Understanding strategy as capability, potential and practical use, he explains how to integrate military means with political ends.

Morgenthau's critique remains relevant as a foiling criticism. His warning of human fallibility, bureaucratic incentives, and the moral hazard of normalising the use of nuclear weapons serves as a sobering example of the pitfalls that ivory tower theorising can sometimes lead towards.

Prometheus' gift is tragic. But in the eyes of young Machiavellian Kissinger, it wielded enormous strategic advantage despite the cost of irradiated battlegrounds. For older Kissinger, times and motivation had changed. He preferred peace over contestation encapsulated in the old Ronald Reagan refrain of 'a nuclear war cannot be won—and must therefore never be fought'. However, it is not enough to just sit with either in these uncertain times. The dilemma in strategy that came along with firepower needs to be continuously unlocked.

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