

# THE WHY AND HOW OF LIMITED WAR

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**T**HERE are several current perceptions of what limited war is, and there is widespread concern about what keeps a limited war from expanding, escalating, or exploding. One concept has had a most profound influence on the way Americans have been permitted to fight the war in Vietnam. It is the theory which holds that, because of the great military capabilities possessed by the major powers today, rigid rules must be imposed to govern the means employed against a precisely defined target list lest the war sharply escalate into a general holocaust. This concept emphasizes capabilities almost to the exclusion of national interests and intentions.

The other concept has less current support. It holds that limited war is limited because of limited objectives. It emphasizes the idea that, as long as vital interests of great powers are not challenged, the war is likely to remain limited despite the level or types of force applied. A comparison of these concepts may develop some conclusions about how military leaders should proceed after our political leadership decides that military force will be applied in the furtherance of US objectives.

Most discussions of limited war include a definition. This is true because upon the author's definition rests his concept of why and how limited wars should be fought. Some authors have focused on the "why." They have defined limited war primarily in terms of the objectives for which it is fought. Others have insisted that the "how" is the crucial controlling factor—that restrictions on the amount and types of force employed are the most important elements in the definition.

### Osgood's Position

Robert E. Osgood wrote in 1957 that "the decisive limitation upon war is the limitation of the objectives of war."<sup>1</sup> He rejected the idea that fighting to attain limited political objectives necessarily imposes restrictions on the degree or types of force employed:

*To subordinate military operations to political considerations might mean sacrificing the military success indispensable for the attainment of any worthwhile national purpose at all.*

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill., 1957, p. 4.

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Of course, this is not to say that military operations are conducted without regard to political outcome or without concern for the political objective. On the contrary, Osgood emphasized the primacy of politics in war and pointed out that:

*. . . military operations should be conducted so as to achieve concrete, limited, and attainable security objectives, in order that war's destruction and violence may be rationally directed toward legitimate ends of national policy.*

To develop Osgood's position somewhat further, it can be said that limited political objectives, well defined and clear to both sides in the conflict from the beginning, usually do not demand the commitment of the total military effort of which the major belligerents are capable. Furthermore, the employment of military power is designed to lead to a negotiated settlement.

The level of force is determined from the requirements and restrictions imposed by the objectives sought. This is quite different from the idea that, in order to avoid escalation into general war, the great powers should impose limits on their national goals.

### War Characteristics

Whichever way an individual arrives at his definition of limited war, there is general agreement on what limited wars look like. In the first place, there are few major belligerents in a limited war. Second, the battle is confined to a local geographical area, and particular care is exercised in the selection of targets. The third characteristic is not quite so simple—that in limited wars, only a fractional commitment of human and physical resources is seen. This may be true for only one side. Although the United

States committed only a fraction of its military potential in Korea, the total resources of North Korea were engaged.

As far as the careful selection of targets is concerned, this characteristic also requires some qualification. It is possible to visualize a limited war in which the weapons used and the targets engaged, within the local battle area, are virtually unrestricted. Those who believe that the level of violence, as dictated primarily by the choice of weapons, is the essential characteristic in limited war have considerable trouble accepting this idea.

### Deliberate Restraint

One of the earliest and, perhaps, the leading exponent of the idea that wars are kept limited by placing restrictions on the use of force was Bernard Brodie. In 1959, he observed that, while there is a necessary relationship between limited war and limited objectives, it is not a controlling relationship. According to Brodie, it is the deliberate restraint on the means employed that keeps a war limited. He went on to say that "we should be willing to limit objectives because we want to keep the war limited, and not the other way round."<sup>2</sup>

This is another way of saying that limited war does not just happen to be the outcome of limited political objectives. Rather, it comes about because we deliberately select political objectives that can be achieved through the use of much less than our total military power.

This seems to be an entirely rational approach. Certainly, it recognizes the irrationality of adopting political goals that can be achieved only through the use of total, strategic nuclear power.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J., 1959, p. 813.

On the other hand, no responsible political or military leader in this country has ever advocated solving all our international problems with a massive onslaught of nuclear destruction. Therefore, this does not seem to be a particularly useful concept.

It appears that some writers on strategy have so emphasized this concept, and have become so concerned with imposing restrictions on means, that military success in all but the most minor peripheral conflicts would be forever denied the United States. This seems to be the case today because our current and potential enemies in limited wars have demonstrated great staying power when confronted with low and moderate levels of force gradually applied.

### "Why" and "How" Aspects

The following are the most important aspects of the "why" and "how" of limited war:

● The war is fought for limited political objectives, clearly understood by both sides. This is the "why." It implies intent to fight the war in a manner to avoid a general war anywhere in the world.

● The war is fought with the forces, weapons, and in the places necessary to gain the political objectives at the least cost and in the shortest possible time. It is fought under constraints designed to appeal to the rationality of our major adversaries in a way that will impel them to seek a negotiated settlement while dissuading them from employing their full military potential. This is the "how."

The quick use of decisive force has caused us the most difficulty. Overwhelming concern to avoid a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, or a major war with the land armies of China, has dulled our perception of the

factors that influence our adversaries when they face crisis decisions in response to US military actions. These factors are their vital national interests and capabilities.

Fear that the nuclear capability itself begets irrationality has prompted such statements as "almost all analysts

factors. Sometimes they call these factors "perceptions of risk." They worry about what we should not do so as not to have the war escalate into a general war. This kind of analysis seems useful only after political objectives have been determined and supporting military strategies considered



*Marine Corps*

**Decisions to limit US operations in the Korean War were influenced by estimates of possible Soviet counteractions in Europe**

agree that the fighting of a local war increases the possibility of a central war"<sup>3</sup> although this viewpoint has never been supported historically. Furthermore, reliance upon it as a guide to noninvolvement would nullify the purpose of resisting local aggression lest the aggressor's success encourages him to embark on more ambitious adventures.

Theoretical strategists have been excessively concerned with negative

and generally identified with capabilities. Then, it is appropriate to test the strategies against likely enemy reactions as determined by careful analysis of his interests, intentions, and capabilities.

When we are deciding whether to challenge Soviet or Chinese power in any area, and trying to determine the maximum level of force that can be applied to gain the objective without eliciting an unacceptable response, we should first discover what our major adversaries' interests are in the area

<sup>3</sup> Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., N. Y., 1968, p 11.

of conflict. We estimate how important these interests are so that later we can convert our estimate into an assessment of what type of assets they would be willing to invest to protect their interests.

### General Guidelines

We have learned a few general guidelines through recent experience. We know that China is vitally interested in its border areas, but that the Soviet Union's threshold of tolerance to Western military action in Southeast Asia is high. Excessive reliance on this type of historical precedence could paint a false and misleading picture, however, because the power and interest situation is dynamic. Therefore, each situation must be analyzed with reference to the full range of conditions and interests existing at the time. Such an assessment will give a basis upon which to examine indications of enemy intentions.

We must remember that we are not concerned exclusively with his intentions with regard to nuclear weapons, or with broadening the scope of the local war. There are likely to be many other dangerous options available. For that matter, one significant failing observed in most writings on this subject is the almost exclusive preoccupation with escalation and explosion while scant attention is paid to diversions and reprisals.

In these days of mutual deterrence, there are few situations that would evoke a major nuclear response by either side while there are many opportunities for conventional and insurgent attacks that would be inimical to US interests in peripheral areas. Our enemies know that US capabilities would be severely strained to meet simultaneous, multiple commitments of the Korean or Vietnam type.

There is a lesson in the manner by which decisions were formulated during the Korean War. According to General Omar N. Bradley, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were concerned essentially with Soviet capabilities to create major disturbances in Europe while the United States was nearly totally committed in Korea.<sup>4</sup> This concern was the proximate reason they advised against using our full power in Korea and favored limiting the operations to south of the Yalu River.

### Risk Estimation

Nowhere does the record show that Soviet interests and intentions were carefully evaluated. Considering the fact that the United States possessed, at this time, a virtual monopoly in strategic nuclear forces, it seems that the importance of the Soviet ground attack capability in Europe should have been mitigated significantly in the estimate. Furthermore, evidence of Soviet timidity already had been shown by its backdown during the Berlin crises of 1947 and 1949.

It really might have been safely estimated that it was not in the Soviet Union's interest, nor was it its likely intention, to risk nuclear war by attacking in Europe in an attempt to retrieve a lost cause in Korea that was not too important in the first place. For that matter, US operations already had reached high intensity and had not evoked any such response. Essentially, failure of Soviet policy in Korea was a *fait accompli* by the end of the first United Nations offensive in the fall of 1950.

Although capabilities are an essen-

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<sup>4</sup> General Omar N. Bradley's testimony appears in *Hearings* before the Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 82d Congress, First Session, to Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur From His Assignments in the Area, 1951, pp 729-62.

*NATO's Fifteen Nations*

In June 1967, the Israelis achieved rapid victories but adhered to their initial goals

tial part of risk estimation, a careful analysis of Soviet interests probably would have shown that the Soviets would have swallowed, however bitterly, almost any US military action in Chinese territory adjacent to Korea in preference to embarking on a major war. It just was not worth it.

In considering capabilities, it is not useful to deal in gross enemy capabilities. No meaningful basis for risk estimation is contained in the statement that the Soviet Union has the capability to destroy the world by nuclear assault. Neither is it helpful to count the Chinese population and China's 100-odd infantry divisions and conclude that these factors give it a capability to dominate any ground war against

the Western Powers in Asia. Yet this is the kind of thinking that is characteristic of some influential, nonmilitary writers on strategy.

Instead, estimates of capabilities must be made with reference to the particular situation and area under study. Although it might be estimated that China has 70 or more divisions ready for employment in Southeast Asia, a careful study of the terrain, logistic capabilities, and other militarily limiting factors might reveal that far fewer could be effectively deployed and supported.

Our estimates of capabilities cannot stop here, however. We must use imagination, guided by understanding of the interests of all our actual and

potential adversaries, to foresee what worldwide capabilities they might employ to disrupt our plan. A US operation in an area where the United States enjoys superior strength might well be countered by the enemy through an attack in an area of relative US weakness.

When we have done all this, we can confidently test our plan and our capabilities against the threat. This should reveal to us whether the prize sought through the commitment of US military power is worth the risks entailed.

Assuming that the political decision has been made, how can the United States best employ its military capabilities in the successful prosecution of a limited war?

### Political Objectives

The first requirement is that the political leadership must furnish precisely defined political objectives. Our major adversaries must understand the limits of these objectives. Once the battle is joined, these objectives should be expanded only with great reluctance for it is essential that we establish a credible pattern of performance in this regard. There should be no repetitions of the type of unfortunate, midstream decision that expanded the objectives in Korea. Reflecting on the record of that decision, it appears that the prudent exercise of reason may have been overwhelmed by the exhilaration of unexpected success.

The consistency shown by Israel in adhering to its initial goals in two recent wars is particularly commendable. The flush of quick victory did not impel Israel beyond these goals into protracted conflicts which exceeded its capabilities to sustain or gain benefit.

On the other hand, we should not

become rigid to the degree that we are blind to changing situations and new opportunities. There can be envisioned circumstances that would justify a modification of political objectives downward or upward on the scale of ambition. The entrance of new belligerents, or the withdrawal of others, are only two occurrences that should call for a fresh evaluation.

It is essential, however, that changes be made only after new estimates reveal all probable outcomes of the new objectives. If greater military commitment is needed, it should be made only after new military objectives have been considered and the forces are ready to execute.

### Military Capabilities

The second requirement is twofold: decisive military objectives should be assigned, and they should be seized quickly. Admittedly, the selection of decisive objectives for a limited war is easier said than done. It is the job of the military planner, but the selection cannot be made without reference to the political factors that will doubtless limit the alternatives available.

It may well be that politically imposed restraints will leave no opportunities for the selection of decisive objectives. If this is the case, the restraints should be reevaluated against the estimated worth of the political objective and the risks entailed if the restraints were to be lifted. Then, if the political leadership reaffirms that the restraints are essential, the military planner should advise that a quick military solution is not likely.

In combat against large Communist armies, particularly in Asia, attrition is not in the category of decisive military objectives. The basic tenet of protracted struggle, practiced with enduring success by Asian Communist

armies, militates against attrition as an acceptable objective.

It is axiomatic that the support of the people in our democracy is essential to successful prosecution of war, and there appear to be only two kinds of long wars that the American people will steadfastly support. One is a war for survival (or at least a war that the people think is for survival); the other is a war fought by regulars only. T. R. Fehrenbach wrote:

*However repugnant the idea is to liberal societies, the man who will willingly defend the free world in the fringe areas is not the responsible citizen soldier. The man who will go where his colors go, without asking, who will fight a phantom foe in the jungle and mountain range, without counting, and who will suffer and die in the midst of incredible hardship, without complaint, is still what he has always been, from Imperial Rome to sceptered Britain to democratic America. He is the stuff of which legions are made.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, The Macmillan Co., N. Y., 1963, p 658.

The United States will not support regular forces of the size necessary to fight long wars of the scope of the ones in Korea and Vietnam. There are only two ways to face this problem: one, avoid the commitment in the first place; or, two, fight it decisively, in a hurry, after a boldly realistic analysis of the risks.

Perhaps the era of US sacrifices in the name of liberty is drawing to a close. Nevertheless, US fighting men are still charged with immense, worldwide responsibilities. The fulfillment of these responsibilities, with the limited resources available, cannot be achieved through military operations planned and executed in fear by taking cognizance of every captious and unlikely prediction of disaster. They can be met by the rapid and courageous application of overwhelming force against decisive objectives, in consonance with plans built upon sound, specific, and attainable political objectives, tested for risk against the adversary's interests, intentions, and capabilities.

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