

Provocation and the Language of Weaponry

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Weapons are a slippery language. What they mean to their owners is quite different from what they mean to the rest of the world. And that meaning is now a far more important part of their function than their actual physical power. We - the powerful nations - see our own weapons as a harmless 'defence'. To us they are soothing; they say 'safety'. Other countries, less powerful, see them very differently. They perceive them as a real threat. To them, these weapons signal the capacity, and perhaps the intention, to attack - somebody. Why would a powerful nation have so many of them otherwise? The only question is, who? And when?

So it is not very surprising that these weaker nations try to imitate us by acquiring a similar 'defence' - that is, a counterbalancing threat. And since nuclear threats are agreed to trump all others, they naturally want their weapons to be nuclear. In the days of 'mutual assured destruction' it was assumed that only two sides could play this game, so that the two threats would always balance out. But now that those teams are broken up this convention no longer works. Every player now has to provide his own 'defence', which must be equal to the relevant threat. Because of the ambiguity noted, this sets up an unworkable escalation. Weak nations try to 'defend' themselves by threats that are mainly bluff. They vaguely prepare, or perhaps pretend, to acquire nuclear capacity. Saddam Hussein may well have been bluffing in this way but the Western Powers read him as if he were seriously intending to attack them. Iran and North Korea are now acting similarly, and the West is again reading their threats, not as 'defence' but as preparations for literal attack.

Meanwhile, the Western powers themselves are actually stepping up the (already raucous) language of their own weapons in a way that cannot fail to call for similar replies. Researchers in the US have been designing 'bunker-buster' bombs and mini- nukes - weapons which are designed, not just for deterrence but for actual use, so that they are bound to destabilise any

deterrent balance of 'mutual assured destruction'. Britain meanwhile has decided to update Trident.

Why, however, do we actually want these weapons? We certainly did not deliberately acquire them in order to produce this provocative result, which has actually turned out to be their main practical effect in the world. They cannot possibly be used in the current 'war on terror' since they cannot be targeted against plotters in attics. In fact their sheer number and force has always been out of proportion to any possible practical use, since they were acquired during the Cold War when the superpowers simply competed in producing weaponry in order to impress each other. Yet any suggestion of down-sizing them is seen as a dangerous loss of 'defence' against some now quite unimaginable attacker. Can we in some way move to understanding that the only real form of defence against international conflict is a good foreign policy - one which sees grievances in advance and works imaginatively to deal with them? Without that better foreign policy, our arsenals will simply increase whatever dangers may arise, and they will do this in direct proportion to their strength.

This issue has an interesting ethological angle. All animals that fight at all constantly use threat-displays. Indeed they always try to use them rather than resorting to actual physical combat. Much of their fighting is therefore mock-fighting, and since that policy promotes survival there has surely been selection for this rather subtle approach. Yet there is something odd about it, since the animal threatened must at some level expect that the threat will actually be carried out. Human beings clearly operate by this same pattern. But perhaps their habit of making things explicit - of stating things that are much better left unstated - stands in the way of accepting the (quite proper) non-literal status of most threats. There is a tendency to say 'Well, if we said we'd do it we shall have to do it, otherwise we shall look foolish', and to feel that looking foolish is so unbearable that it will be far better to precipitate general destruction. This (it seems to me) is part of our trouble today.

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