

Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Southeast Asia

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Atomic Energy Act 1954

STUDY S-266

TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (U)

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Summary:

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the military consequences of a U.S. decision to use tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in Southeast Asia, under the assumption that the war remains theater-limited and that no strategic exchange occurs. The study divides into two main parts. (1) possible targets for U.S. TNW, and effects of nuclear bombardment on the ground war if the use of TNW remains unilateral; and (2) possibility and effectiveness of enemy retaliation with nuclear weapons supplied by the USSR or China. Among both military experts and the general public, there is wide agreement that the use of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia would offer the U.S. no military advantage commensurate with its political cost. This opinion is usually based on an intuitive judgment, however, rather than on detailed analysis. There is some disagreement as to whether the use of nuclear weapons would still remain unprofitable if China openly intervened with large ground forces in the Vietnam War. It therefore seemed worthwhile to make a study of the consequences that would follow from a U.S. decision to use nuclear weapons in tactical operations in Southeast Asia.

We have arbitrarily excluded strategic nuclear operations from the study. This means that we assume the annihilation of the civilian economy of North Vietnam (NVN) or China to be outside our terms of reference. Nuclear weapons are to be used tactically in the strict sense, that is to say, only on military targets, only within the theater of ground combat, and while avoiding civilian casualties so far as practicable. The reason for limiting the study to tactical use is that we wish to stay as much as possible in the realm of technical military analysis and to avoid involvement with political and moral judgments.

The study has involved four men working a total of three man-months. Such a small effort cannot deal adequately with so large a subject. Almost all our conclusions are tentative, and they should be investigated further by professional experts. We regard our study as only a beginning.

This report is divided into seven sections; Sections III and IV contain the major part of the work. Section III discusses military consequences of the U.S. use of tactical nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia, under the assumption that this use remains unilateral and that the enemy response is purely defensive. The questions that arise are: What kinds of targets exist, how many weapons of what yields could be profitably expended, and how great would be the effects on enemy ground operations? Section IV discusses the feasibility and effectiveness of enemy use of nuclear weapons against U.S. forces. Here, the emphasis is on the logistic difficulties of supplying nuclear weapons and the means of delivery from the USSR or China to guerrillas in Vietnam as well as on the vulnerability of U.S. military bases. Section V briefly discusses the long-term effects that may arise if guerrillas in other parts of the world acquire nuclear weapons. Section VI deals with the political consequences of U.S. use of nuclear weapons, but without any attempt at a complete political analysis.

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