Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: A Bad Idea in Vietnam, an Even Worse Idea Today


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Recommended Citation

"Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: A Bad Idea in Vietnam, an Even Worse Idea Today", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 09, 2003, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautil-s-institute-policy-forum-online-a-bad-idea-in-vietnam-an-even-worse-idea-today/

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PFO 03-17: March 9, 2003

A Bad Idea in Vietnam, an Even Worse Idea Today

By Peter Hayes and Nina Tannenwald

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute and Nina Tannenwald of the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University argue that the 1966 JASON study on the first use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam is a stark warning that using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against Iraq, North Korea or transnational terrorists would make more likely increase the risk of nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies.

II. Essay by Peter Hayes and Nina Tannenwald

"A Bad Idea in Vietnam, an Even Worse Idea Today"

By Peter Hayes and Nina Tannenwald
The Nautilus Institute & the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University

Should the United States use nuclear weapons against rogue states and nonstate actors such as terrorists and insurgents? This question has been raised by the Bush administration in a variety of policy statements, including last year's Nuclear Posture Review, which ordered the Pentagon to draft contingency plans for using nuclear weapons against a number of countries, including Iraq.

But the question is not new. It was asked three decades ago, during the Vietnam War. As a recently declassified top-secret report from 1966 reveals, both the analysis conducted then and the answer - a decisive no - remain remarkably relevant. After waiting 19 years to respond to a Freedom of Information Act request from the Nautilus Institute, the Pentagon has finally made its Vietnam-era study available to the American public.

The report grew out of an overheard remark. As the Vietnam War escalated in the spring of 1966, a high-ranking Pentagon official with access to President Johnson was heard by scientist Freeman Dyson to say, "It might be a good idea to toss in a nuke from time to time, just to keep the other side guessing."

Dyson and three other scientists - Steven Weinberg, S. Courtenay Wright and Robert Gomer - were so appalled by the remark that they undertook a systematic study of the utility of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War. They were members of JASON, a group of elite scientific advisors to the Pentagon who spent two months each summer analyzing tough problems confronting the United States military.

Other officials involved in the JASON study confirm that there was recurring talk around the Pentagon that spring and summer about using tactical nuclear weapons to block passes between North Vietnam and Laos, especially the Mu Gia Pass, a key part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail - the Viet Cong's primary supply route headed south.

The 55-page study analyzed the effects of using tactical nuclear weapons against a variety of targets, most in North Vietnam, as well as the likely political effects of a nuclear campaign. Although it eschewed any comment on the moral dimensions of using tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam and focused primarily on military considerations, the report came to a strong conclusion: A nuclear attack on Vietnamese insurgents would "offer the U.S. no decisive military advantage." Rather, the political effects of such an attack "would be uniformly bad and could be catastrophic."

The report identified a number of targets against which, in principal, tactical nuclear weapons might be useful: bridges, airfields, missile sites, large troop concentrations, tunnel systems, Viet Cong bases in the South and urban-industrial targets such as ports and storage depots in the North.

The analysis of the scientists revealed numerous obstacles to the effective use of nuclear weapons. Often, it would be hard to find the targets. In many cases, there were more effective alternatives. In others, use of nuclear weapons would not substantially affect enemy operations. For example, the authors estimated that it would take 3,000 tactical nuclear weapons per year to interdict supply routes like the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Even then, damaged roads and trails could be relatively easily rerouted and cleared.

Most importantly, the study warned that a first use of nuclear weapons by the United States could lead China or the Soviet Union to provide Vietnamese fighters with tactical nuclear weapons. These weapons could be used with great effectiveness against U.S. forces concentrated in 14 large and "highly vulnerable" bases. In fact, U.S. targets were far more vulnerable to the effective use of nuclear weapons than were the smaller, relatively mobile and difficult-to-find enemy encampments. What are the lessons of this analysis for today? Although its details are historically specific, its fundamental conclusions remain surprisingly valid.

The JASON report carefully examined the same motivation that today appears to be driving the Bush administration toward war with Iraq: the possibility that a state armed with weapons of mass destruction might transfer those weapons to nonstate actors willing to use state-scale terror. Despite Bush administration claims to the contrary, today, as in 1966, nuclear-armed states remain unlikely to supply rogue groups with nuclear weapons, because to do so could bring retaliation and possible annihilation of its leaders and populations.

In the context of the Vietnam War, the JASON report noted that the Viet Cong's backers - China and the Soviet Union - had little interest in supplying their communist insurgents with nuclear weapons for purposes of a first use. Chinese and Soviet leaders would either be self-deterred by the prospect of loss of control, or would be deterred by the prospect of U.S. retaliation.

But crucially, the JASON group recognized that any restraint felt by state supporters of insurgents might end if the United States were to use nuclear weapons first. Under those circumstances - whether for reasons of prestige and credibility, or to counter overwhelming U.S. power, or to demonstrate their own nuclear strength - nuclear armed or -capable states might become more willing to provide weapons of mass destruction to insurgents.

Then, just as now, once insurgents had acquired such weapons, they would have the military advantage, because the United States and its troops overseas present more suitable targets for weapons of mass destruction than do insurgents.

The JASON study of first use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam is a stark warning that using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against Iraq, North Korea or transnational terrorists would make more likely the use of the only weapons that can really threaten the United States.

Not only the United States but also its allies, friends and even some American adversaries are put at risk by this threat. Insurgents today have global reach; their counterattack with weapons of mass destruction could take place anywhere. Our highest priority should be to keep insurgents apart from states capable of supplying weapons of mass destruction - not bring them together.

For the full text of the original 1966 JASON study:
https://nautilus.org/vietnamFOIA/report/report.html

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org