

WW2 with Nuclear Weapons

Ever since the nuclear revolution, the effect of nuclear weapons on the causes and events of war has provoked debate. Today, political scientists have come to a consensus that nuclear weapons, when in the hands of rational leaders, can have a deterrent effect on war. In that case, could the presence of nuclear weapons in Europe and the United States have kept World War II from breaking out? Due to both Hitler's great ambitions, and France and Britain's policies of appeasement, the presence of nuclear weapons would not have a profound effect on the causes of the war. However, the course near the end of the war would have been either drastically more intense or a close call with an early conclusion, depending on the German's ability to control Hitler's madness.

In order to predict the effects of nuclear weapons on WWII, we need to first understand their effects on the causes of war. When asked whether nuclear weapons are good or bad, most people would probably say bad. This is most likely due to the immense destructive power of nuclear weapons. However, it is this very destructive power that can also have a positive effect on the causes of war. This is because of the concept of MAD, or Mutually Assured Destruction. For most rational leaders, wagering the total destruction their respective states presents too many risks. Therefore, in a conflict between two nuclear powers with rational leaders, the mere presence of nuclear weapons encourages both sides to be especially careful and to find a reasonable, diplomatic solution. A nuclear war is to be avoided at all costs. In this manner, as counterintuitive as it may be, nuclear weapons may actually have a deterrent effect on war.

However, this deterrent effect of nuclear weapons is reserved for conflicts between two states with rational leaders. When nuclear weapons get in the hands of irrational people, they

become extremely dangerous and unpredictable. Whether it is a ruthless leader who does not value the lives of his citizens, or a suicidal terroristic organization, the fact that they cannot be deterred by reason creates an exceedingly grim situation. The reason why we fear nuclear weapons getting into the wrong hands is because once irrational people acquire them, it becomes almost impossible to stop them.

With this understanding of the effects nuclear weapons have on war, we can begin to predict the outcome of the following hypothetical situation: Imagine that nuclear weapons were invented around 1920, after World War I. By the time the events that actually induced World War II begin, around 1933, Germany, Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States possess large nuclear second-strike countervalue capabilities. Second-strike countervalue capabilities are the abilities of a state to absorb an all out attack by another, and still retain the capacity to inflict unacceptable damage on the adversary's society in retaliation. This removes any first strike advantage in this scenario. Aside from the addition of nuclear arsenals, nothing else is different in this hypothetical world.

In this scenario, my first assertion is that the events leading up to the war would not have differed very much, if even at all. This is because the build up to the war had two main causes, both of which are unaffected by the addition of nuclear weapons. The first reason was Hitler's great ambition.

Before Adolf Hitler's rise, Germany was already in a position where the people genuinely felt that they were not responsible for the outbreak of World War I, and that they had been severely wronged by the Treaty of Versailles. "The depression also stirred up the universal German loathing for the Treaty of Versailles. Many Germans explained the ruin of Germany by the postwar treatment it had received from the Allies."¹ Although both claims were untrue, the

1 Palmer, R. R., and Joel Colton. History of the Modern World. 7th ed. NY: Knopf, 1991, p 825

German government had successfully propagated these myths to the extent that even France and Britain were beginning to believe them. Thus, when Hitler rose to power, it was easy to rally his people behind his cause of undoing Versailles. Thus, although a normal person may have second thoughts about violating such a treaty against other nuclear possessing countries, Hitler's ambition gave him an extra incentive, in addition to the German victim narrative, since undoing the treaty was the first step of his plans for domination.

Also, Hitler's initial violations of the treaty were not as risky as they may seem, even if against nuclear powers. This was due to the fact that the British and French were beginning to believe that Versailles was indeed unfair to the Germans. Not to mention that from Hitler's perspective, the British and French were both too spineless to enforce the treaty. In this sense, he was really just testing the waters, and seeing what he could get away with. "He inspired in them alternating tremors of apprehension and sighs of relief. He would rage and rant, arouse the fear of war, take just a little, declare that it was all he wanted, let the former Allies naively hope that he was now satisfied and that peace was secure; then rage again, take a little more, and proceed through the same cycle."² With the addition of nuclear weapons to this equation, the German public may have had objections initially, but they would soon be convinced by Hitler's success at reversing the treaty, and would have given their whole hearted approval. Thus the addition of nuclear weapons would not have changed this cause of the war.

Of course, Hitler's ambition was not the only factor driving pre-war events. The second reason for the events leading up to World War II was the policy of appeasement practiced by Britain and France. After suffering large losses³ in WW I and being content with the conditions of Versailles, both Britain and France were tired of war and wished to avoid conflict if at all

² Palmer, 837

³ Palmer, 835. About 1.4 million Frenchmen died.

possible. Plus, they were beginning to accept that Versailles had indeed been too harsh on the Germans. “They had made a treaty in 1919 which a dozen years later they were unwilling to enforce. They stood idly by, as long as they could, while the dissatisfied powers tore to pieces the states recognized, the frontiers drawn, and the terms agreed to at the Peace of Paris.”⁴

Therefore, when Hitler began to demand changes to parts of Versailles, instead of taking a strong stance and enforcing the treaty, they tried to solve matters by satisfying Hitler's demands. They trusted him and failed to realize that his ambition knew no bounds. They allowed Hitler to get away not only with his violations of the treaty, but even when he went even further, taking independent Czechoslovakia. Sure, they may have threatened him, but they never followed through, destroying any chance of Hitler taking them seriously.

With the consideration of nuclear weapons, Britain and France would only have been even more eager to keep peace. In the beginning, Hitler's minor aggressions didn't warrant a nuclear threat, and by the time he was doing things that the French and British really disagreed with, they had already lost their credibility. In this manner, even if they tried to subdue Hitler with the threat of nuclear weapons, he would just assume that they didn't have the guts to go through with it, which would probably have been true.

Thus, neither of the two main causes of the war would be significantly affected by the introduction of nuclear weapons. Hitler would still have been able to remilitarize the Rhineland in 1936, absorb Austria in 1938, take the Czech Sudetenland in 1938, and take both independent Czechoslovakia and Memel in 1939. These events would have caused France and Britain realize that trying to appease Hitler was useless, just as they had actually done. “A horrible realization spread in France and Britain. It was clear that Hitler's most solemn guarantees were worthless, that his designs were not limited to Germans, but reached out to all eastern Europe

4 Palmer, 834

and beyond, that he was essentially insatiable, that he could not be appeased.”⁵ By this point, war had become inevitable. Germany was now a powerful aggressor state that could no longer be stopped diplomatically. The British and French threats had become bluffs and Germany had lost its credibility, since Hitler had repeatedly lied to the British and French about his aims. Neither side trusted the other at all, and Hitler still had an insatiable hunger for expansion.

Britain and France now understood that the only way to stop Hitler was to fight him. They decided that they would declare war on Germany the at the next sign of aggression. Thus, despite warnings from Britain and France, Germany attacked Poland in 1939, causing both Britain and France to declare war.

These events would also not have changed with the addition of nuclear weapons. Germany would have attacked Poland regardless of the types of threats Britain and France made, because he no longer believed them. Britain and France would still feel that Germany needed to be stopped, and to this end would still have declared war. Although Britain and France would have been much more cautious about starting a war when nuclear weapons are considered, they really didn't have much of a choice, since Germany was already starting its rampage of Europe. Although Hitler may have had crazy ambitions, he wasn't completely irrational, and would have understood that using his nuclear weapons against another nuclear armed state, would have brought about the destruction of his own. Thus, when attacking other countries, Hitler wouldn't use nuclear weapons right off the bat, and he really didn't need to - his army was powerful enough as it was. The British and the French would have realized this as well, and thought that as untrustworthy as Hitler was, he wouldn't be willing to risk his country to use nuclear weapons. Whether or not the assumption would prove to be true or not, the British and French would feel confident that a war with Germany wouldn't turn into a nuclear one. They needed to

5 Palmer, 842

take a stance and defend Europe, and although far from ideal, declaring war was their best option. Thus, the war would still have begun.

At it's early stages, the course of the war with nuclear weapons would also be very similar to the original. Hitler would be confident that other countries wouldn't nuke Germany, for fear of getting nuked themselves. Thus, Germany could still be an aggressor state, attacking in the same fashion as they did without nuclear weapons. Thus, in 1940, they would still deliver a crushing blow to the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, utilizing their Blitzkrieg offensive. The first three, not being nuclear powers would have gone down rather quickly, perhaps even sooner, being more eager to surrender. The questionable one is France. This is because it is possible that a nuclear power on the verge of defeat may use it's nuclear weapons in an act of desperation and irrationality. If not actually carrying out an attack, a power may threaten to use it's nuclear arsenal, hoping to deter the enemy. However, France was this type of state. They would not have been willing to start a nuclear offensive, regardless of how badly they were getting defeated. They would have accepted that they were outplayed by the German's, and that trying to change that by nuclear means wasn't worth it. Even if they had tried to threaten Germany, they would have been bluffing, and there's no doubt that Hitler would have called them on it. Thus, the presence of nuclear weapons would also not have affected these events significantly, and France would still fall early in the war.

The presence of nuclear weapons would also have no effect on Britain's actions during the war. This is an easier conclusion to draw, because although Britain's forces were pushed off the continent, they were never really in danger of being defeated at home. In this way, they were never put into the same desperate situation as the French. Thus World War II events, such as the Battle of Britain, would still occur. The same rational can be applied on the US, showing that

they would take similar actions in this hypothetical situation.

Although a little more difficult, the same can be argued for Russia. At first, it seems that when Germany charged into Russia, the Russians were in a desperate situation that meant the life or death of their country. Not to mention that Joseph Stalin wasn't exactly the most rational leader. However, a deeper investigation of the facts reveals otherwise. Although the German's were eating through western Russia, this was more due to the fact that the Red Army had not fully mobilized yet, than the fact that the Russians were weak. Because Russia was such a big country, it could afford to sacrifice space for time. Thus, although the situation looked very bad for Russia at a glance, they weren't trying very hard yet, and therefore were not in a situation in which they had one last resort. Plus, although Stalin may have murdered millions of people, he still values the well being of his country as a whole. Therefore, although he may not have cared much for lives of his citizens, he would not resort to using nuclear weapons to protect the wellbeing of his country.

In this manner, the major events in the initial stages of the war would have occurred in a very similar fashion. This is because the leaders involved were all rational, or at least rational enough, to avoid an all out nuclear war. This rationality would persist for all countries involved until the end of the war drew near, and the one country with a truly irrational leader was put in a desperate situation.

Of all the countries involved in World War II, Germany was by far the most likely to lose control in the face of a desperate situation. This is because Hitler was truly crazy. Unfortunately, this desperate situation would come towards the end of the war, when it became clear that Germany would lose. We know that Hitler didn't value the lives of his own people, because towards the end of the war, he sent troops on what were essentially suicide missions.

Usually, leaders can at least be accredited with with acting rationally enough so that their own lives are not endangered. However, Hitler was suicidal. So not only did he not care about the lives of his people, but he didn't even care about his own life. These two facts combine to make a scary truth, that had nuclear weapons been around during WW II, Hitler may have been willing to be the first to use them.

If Hitler had decided to use his nuclear weapons, in a last ditch effort, there are two possible scenarios that could ensue. The first is the “doomsday scenario” that everyone fears. In this scenario, Germany unleashes nuclear weapons against the major powers of Europe, including France, Britain, and Russia. Then said powers respond by completely annihilating Germany. In this scenario, I am assuming that long distance transportation and usage of nuclear weapons is not yet possible, allowing the US to be safe. As highly unfavorable this may be to a rational person, if Hitler wanted to go out with a bang, this was one way to do it.

The question, however, is whether or not Hitler would be able to execute such a large attack. This depends on how eager the Germans would be to carry out his plan. If enough people were able to properly predict Germany's annihilation as the outcome of a nuclear offensive, then perhaps Hitler would be assassinated or lose his political power. If such a thing were to occur, Germany would be able to blame Hitler's craziness for the war, and be willing to surrender early instead of dragging on the war. In this world with nuclear weapons, this is the optimal situation. This is supported by the fact that when Hitler sent troops on what were basically suicide missions, many of them mutinied. If they were not willing to sacrifice their lives then, they would be even less willing if it meant the destruction of their country. However, it is also harder for the average person to predict such an outcome. It is arguable that the troops mutinied because their immediate lives were in danger. If they were unable to easily see the

outcome of a nuclear offensive, they may support it without fully realizing its detrimental consequences. For example, if there was propaganda that overplayed Germany's nuclear power and underplayed others', the Germans might support a nuclear offensive. Not to mention that the German machine was very efficient at carrying out orders - just look at the Holocaust. In this way, the outcome of World War II would really be up to the German people.

Even in a world with nuclear weapons, World War II would still be unavoidable. This is because Germany was an aggressive state with great ambitions, ambitions that began to be realized thanks to France and Britain's policies of appeasement. Once Germany got started, even a nuclear threat would not have deterred them. When initiated, the events of the war would also be similar until Germany was close to defeat and Hitler decided to use nuclear weapons in a final act of desperation. The conclusion of this war would then lie in the hands of the German people and their ability to stop him, concluding in either an earlier German surrender or the widespread destruction of Europe.

Imagining World War II with nuclear weapons is a good exercise that reminds us of the great danger nuclear weapons pose when in the hands of irrational leaders. It also shows the importance of keeping rational states from becoming overly ambitious, past the point of deterrence. If we are able to maintain these two things, we can keep doomsday scenarios, such as the widespread destruction of Europe, from happening.

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