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# On the Art of War

Edward Luttwak talks with Giuseppe Sacco

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*According to several observers, the 1980s have marked the end of an era - the post war era, the age of the Cold War and the balance of terror.*

*Yet the "new beginning" in superpower relations which marked the final years of the Reagan administration could not prevent, in the early days of 1989, a military clash in the Mediterranean, thus casting a shadow on the hope that the years of violence and confrontation had come to their historical end.*

*Indeed, neither the fact that some of the wars by proxy have given way to negotiation, nor the agreement for the dismantling of INF, nor the recent Soviet offers to reduce their armies and begin destroying their chemical weapons, really mean that we are going any further towards a world in which military power, capacity for defence or attack, and the American guarantee to Europe or Japan have genuinely lost their relevance.*

*The Cold War was just a peculiar form of military warfare, characterized by the great care taken to avoid direct conflict between the superpowers, yet interspersed with some 130 "hot" military encounters in the periphery. Today's novelty seems only to lay in the more strictly interwoven ways in which military relations between states combine with political and economic relations. The art of war has by no means lost its relevance, and the new global situation requires as an even livelier effort of reflection and research, in order to avoid what has already happened in the past - that strategic thinking lags a generation behind the evolution of the international community.*

## Edward Luttwak

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*To explore the evolution of the art of war since the beginning of the atomic age, the Editor of The European International, Giuseppe Sacco, met the military historian Edward Luttwak, a most brilliant and anti-conformist American theoretician on strategic issues.*

**E** A discussion on the present state of strategic thinking and **L** military logic seems to me to have to take its cue from the question of whether it is still possible, today, to speak of the art of war. Indeed one has the sensation that, in the nuclear era, the art of war is either to be applied to limited conflicts, the so-called theatre conflicts, or is almost nonexistent. At least in the time period that we can define as the nuclear era, the period that begins with Hiroshima and continues through the invention of the space shield and the launching of the SDI, the art of war seems to exist only as "grand strategy," conducted especially through political and military means or with local wars, given the impossibility of conceiving a truly global war and art of war. Is this true, or is it the erroneous impression of a layman?

**Edward LUTTWAK** - One needs to consider the question from the perspective of time. Originally, when the first nuclear weapon, the nuclear fission bomb, the atomic bomb, appeared unexpectedly in 1945, Bernard Brodie, who was one of the first who recognized the significance of this new weapon, described it as the absolute weapon, that is, as a self-sufficient weapon that would have rendered armies, air forces and navies useless, because a conflict would have immediately been resolved with the threat or the use of an atomic weapon. This use would have undoubtedly had its technical and tactical aspects (how to launch this bomb and, if it is launched from an airplane, at what altitude the airplane should fly, etc...). But, aside from this rather limited and even banal aspect, the art of war was in fact abolished, even if war itself was not abolished.

Bernard Brodie also thought that an extremely high probability existed that war itself had become obsolete. The atomic fission bomb was also seen as a weapon that, even if it had not remained an American monopoly, would have been very difficult to build for any other power. Even admitting that more than one country would have been able to build it, the number of these atomic bombs would have remained quite limited in any case:

## BACKGROUND FILE

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at the time, in 1946, one thought that the bomb would have been so expensive that even a power such as the U.S. would have perhaps been able to store one hundred of them, and that that no other country would easily have been able to get even one. The end of war as an historical phenomenon was also seen as a possibility. On the other hand, it seemed absolutely certain that armies, air forces and navies would have survived only due to bureaucratic momentum, and the natural tendency to self-preservation of all great organizations.

**E**  
**I** *The impact has instead been much less dramatic.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - What has happened is that the conflictual tendencies of the international system have not been blocked by nuclear weapons. Using a metaphor one could say that atomic weapons have built a kind of wall that prevents opposing armies from fighting, but the forces that are hostile to one another have begun to dig a tunnel below the wall, beginning with subversion. As early as 1945, in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, faced with the American atomic weapon and therefore not wanting to provoke an open conflict, instead of imposing its power in the creation of obedient governments in the countries that it had militarily occupied during the war with a simple *diktat*, had to patiently use indirect weapons of subversion.

Instead of charging the local Soviet command with emanating a *ukase* that imposed the formation of Communist governments, exerted pressure to obtain the inclusion of Communist parties in coalition governments. Even if the Communists were a small minority in such coalitions, Soviet support enabled them to emerge in the elections held immediately after the war. Subsequently, the other members of the coalition were submitted to various forms of pressure, through police harassment, personal threats, coercion, and torture. Their representatives were tortured by night and during the day, as members of the coalition, they consented to expel first one party which was further to the right, then a party of the left wing, then another party of the right, until finally totally Communist controlled governments were obtained. The entire process lasted two or three years, and this "waste of time" constitutes an oblique tribute to the power of the atomic weapon which was solely in the hands of the Americans. The nuclear wall, therefore, has remained intact, but has not blocked aggressive tendencies, nor the desire to increase one's own power. In essence the nuclear wall has been avoided, or rather, an actual tunnel has been dug beneath it.



**E**  
**I** *Hence even Stalin's attempt in Greece is to be explained by this need. . .*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Leaving aside other examples that took place when the situation had changed a great deal, I would, instead, like to note that subversion - this avoiding of the nuclear wall - naturally provokes the birth of the art of counter-subversion, that is, of a series of Anglo-American actions to combat with paramilitary weapons this obscure, indirect, political war.

In Greece, for example, this paramilitary art of counter-subversion was quite visible. The successive development is that nuclear weapons became less expensive, and hence less rare. One foresaw the possibility of having not only a dozen or a hundred, but a higher number, while their military efficiency improved as well. Instead of being able to destroy the center of the city, as in Nagasaki or Hiroshima, one sees the possibility of far vaster destruction. This increase in the technical power of nuclear arms, however, at the same time diminishes their trustworthiness in the real world, because the possibility of their use becomes not very credible, even against an adversary without nuclear weapons. Even from a unilateral point of view, the use of nuclear arms as a means of retaliation in peripheral, marginal, and not very important conflicts begins to appear improbable, insofar as it would be excessive.

**E**  
**I** *The more nuclear weapons develop, then, the less manageable they become.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. A factor of disproportion develops. Let's take the hypothesis that Lichtenstein attacks the American troops stationed in Austria, and kills four soldiers. The United States can not use nuclear weapons against Lichtenstein because, even though Lichtenstein cannot threaten to retaliate against the United States, the public opinion itself would not accept such an exaggeration of defence. What happens in this phase is that the nuclear wall remains standing, but this time not only is there a tunnel under it, but it is as if an entire section of bricks had been removed, the first centimetres from the ground are no longer there. Therefore the wall can stop elephants, even dogs, but by now mice can pass through.

The following event was of course that the USSR, in 1949, exploded one of its own atomic fission contrivances. It was not yet a bomb, which the Soviet Union did not have the capacity to build, and of course the USSR did not have

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the appropriate means to launch it onto New York: nuclear parity did not exist yet in September, 1949. At any rate, the USSR was immediately promoted, in the eyes of the West, to a nuclear power, as if they already had the bombers, as if they already had the trained team capable of long distance attacks. What renders our panic of that time more tragic and ridiculous is that today we know that not even fifteen years later would the Soviet bombers have been capable of finding New York. When they sent their planes to Cuba, they had to do it with methods that they could not use in wartime, flying at a low altitude over Latin America, and following the layout of the roads.

**[E]** *The Soviets, then, did not have delivery capacity, and this was still at the*  
**[I]** *beginning of the '60s. And yet the demonstrative explosion of their atomic bomb had a strong psychological impact.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - After September, 1949, even if the Soviets did not have the technology of atomic bombardment, there was, nevertheless, an entire category of actions for which Soviet retaliation had to be taken into consideration. And this was why, already in 1949, it appeared clear that the Army, the Air Force and the Navy could not be eliminated, not only for the prestige and the bureaucratic power of these organizations, but also and especially because it is clear that the conventional army was destined to maintain its role in the case of a conflict with the Soviet Union that does not threaten the very survival of the United States. For example, if on the Iranian border there is a small skirmish between two companies of the American army and a Soviet battalion, after 1949 it was no longer possible for the United States to say - as Bernard Brodie thought in 1946 - "Enough! That's all the fighting that I accept: now you either stop it or I'll bomb Moscow." In fact, even if the Soviets at the time could not bomb New York, they nevertheless had the capacity to build a bomb and to take it into the West, perhaps with whatever means they happened upon (for example on a ship in civilian disguise, heading towards a Western port).

Even after the explosion of the first Soviet atomic bomb, then, the "wall against war" formed by the United States' overwhelming atomic superiority remained standing, but another layer of bricks had been demolished at the bottom and by now the wall that continued to stop elephants let not only small animals like mice get by, but also medium sized animals like dogs. In short, what has happened from September '49 to today? This barricade has become ever more skeleton-like, as layer by layer of bricks has been demolished. Now



only a high bar remains, like those that one sees in zoological gardens, which allows snakes, dogs, even lions to get by, but blocks hippopotami and elephants. In other words, the nuclear weapon that should have been absolute, has become a rather limited weapon.

**E** *So, can one now affirm that, step by step, we are going towards a post-nuclear era?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - We are going towards an epoch in which nuclear weapons are limited to discouraging another from nuclear attack. In the era that awaits us, each adversary can do anything to the other without being excessively worried about nuclear retaliation. But each knows that the use of a nuclear weapon against the other would bring immediate retaliation of the same nature. One could object that it is not so much a scenario of the future as a description of the present conditions keeping peace between the superpowers, and that theorists already anticipated this logic even decades ago. But if for decades theorists have been speaking in these terms, the reality of the political powers has been different.

Until today and perhaps for a few more years - or even for many years - in the reality of the political powers, this symmetry has not existed. In fact, for a long period of time, we have found ourselves facing the Soviet army without an army of our own capable of blocking an eventual attack with conventional means. In fact, we have said that in case of a conventional attack, the Western forces would have fought with the same weapons up to a certain point. But if the battle were to take a turn against us, if we were on the point of being overpowered, we would have resorted to the use of nuclear weapons. This behavior demonstrates the unreality of the ideal symmetry of "Mutually Assured Destruction," a theory that - as is well noted - was not only formulated by academicians, but adopted, at least in words, by Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, that is by the American government of twenty-five years ago. This theory did not then, and does not today, correspond to the reality of things. The post-nuclear era will begin only when the Soviet army will be directly and symmetrically balanced by a Western army, and in which, finally, nuclear weapons will be reduced to the very limited role of discouraging a nuclear attack.

In short, we see the art of war reaffirming itself in all its complexity at every stage of the gradual passage from the post-military epoch of the absolute

weapon to the post-nuclear epoch. The art of war, which was reduced to zero or almost zero to purely technical questions (from what altitude should one bomb Moscow?), has re-acquired dignity. Hence, just as the need to draw up armies, navies and air forces returns, also the need to have tactical and operative abilities returns, to develop cadres capable of commanding, devising, and conducting complicated manoeuvres. All this had been developed to the fullest in the Second World War, only to be abandoned immediately afterwards, at the moment - one can say - of the height of the development of the art of war. In 1946, it seemed that everything could be thrown into the sea. What did tactics, manoeuvres and operative arts count if every conflict was settled with a brief exchange of words and a bomb on the capital?

**E**  
**I** *“Mutually Assured Destruction,” then, was a classic intellectual anticipation that did not correspond to reality.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. In the first place, because the Soviet Union had not reached nuclear equality. This was only imaginative: it was attributed to the Soviet Union. In the second place, because of the fact that the doctrine, that is, the operative plans of the American nuclear forces, did not correspond to the officially declared policy, that of MAD. The declared policy stated that it was not necessary to attack military objectives, it was not necessary to have defence, the only thing that mattered was the capacity to destroy a determined and declared percentage of the populations and the industries of the enemy. In reality, though, the objectives of the American nuclear forces, the specific operative plans, were plans of general attack against the military bases and the military industry, not only against a percentage of the total enemy industry.

**E**  
**I** *One remained, in short, in the previous logic of “total war”?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - There was a true diversity between the intellectual doctrines discussed with great tenacity in the seminars on strategy, that which was printed in books, and the operative plans of the military forces, since for the military forces there was no interruption of development. This, in turn, was caused by a very strange coincidence. Nuclear weapons arrived unexpectedly: only a few people in 1945, and in particular, very few soldiers, had foreseen such an innovation. Yet, in an extraordinary coincidence, this so absolutely new weapon already had a strategy for its use. The exceptional nature of this coincidence comes out when it is compared to the armoured car, which was

invented as a technical instrument in 1915, but which was left waiting twenty years before its full capacity was understood. This happened in 1935 with the creation of the first *Panzerdivision*. Technically the armoured car was a banal thing: internal combustion engine, etc... The nuclear weapon, on the other hand, was absolutely new and revolutionary. And yet, at the moment of its arrival, an operative doctrine was already available for its use. This is caused by the fact that already from the 1920s a doctrine of aerial war strategy had been developed.

The doctrine of aerial strategic war was developed more or less contemporaneously by different people: the Italian Giulio Douhet, better known abroad than in Italy, author of the book, *Il dominio dell'aria* (*The control of the air*), printed by the Air Ministry of Rome in the 1920s, the American Billy Mitchell, and an English Lord who would become the founder of the Royal Air Force. They had many points in common: in the first place, that there was no more need for the army or the navy. The bomber, with its bomb, represented, in fact, an absolute weapon that allowed for the direct strike into the heart of the enemy country to destroy the ammunition factories that supplied the front, instead of pushing against the enemy front, sacrificing thousands of infantrymen to advance a kilometre. Instead of having to fight "retail" at the front, one fought "wholesale" by destroying the factories. The bomber then could be used to attack the enemy capital. Here the calculation was to obtain a psychological effect, or if one prefers, a kind of terroristic one. If one succeeded in transferring the war phenomenon from the trenches where men are disciplined, trained and controlled by military police who shoot dissidents - if one succeeded in transferring the bombings, the explosions, the

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**At present he is working on a historical analysis of strategic theory and practice in the Byzantine Empire.**



horrors and the blood of the trenches into the streets of the capital, with all the windows that would break and the houses that would collapse - the public, instead of letting itself be organized and manipulated, would demand the immediate interruption of the war, demand immediate peace. And if these requests were to be ignored, a revolution would follow.

The idea of the absolute weapon had, then, already been developed by these pioneers of aviation strategy. The word "strategic" means, in fact, that it is not a supplementary weapon, a tactical weapon to be added to the artillery or to the cavalry, but a self-sufficient weapon. Strategic aerial strength then means aerial strength that wins wars alone and that is enough to render armies and navies literally superfluous.

This theory, which had enormous influence in Europe, was largely accepted. Up until 1938-39, well-informed and intelligent personalities, people who were used to power, people like Churchill, were convinced that the war would be started with the immediate destruction of London, Berlin, Rome, Paris. Due to a series of technical errors, the possibility that the bombers might not succeed in reaching their objectives was underestimated, while the ease with which one could effect a bombing (even today, in every thousand bombers, only 5-6000 are operative for every mission) and its destructive potential were quite overestimated. One thought that throwing a few bombs was enough to kill thousands of people; on the contrary, in the end - in real wars - on the average about one person is killed for every ton of bombs. Giulio Douhet and Mitchell did not see that, although fighting on the front is always a very expensive activity (it is necessary to take men and arms to this distant place), it allows the great advantage that, when one shoots on the front, at least he shoots and hits something that has a meaning, a value. The great majority of the bombs have, instead, been thrown into empty camps; one believed to have bombed an ammunition factory when it was really a cosmetics factory. One always believes to have destroyed the hit target, because when one sees the photographs after the bombing one sees only the crater, while two days later the factories often were working again at 70% capacity. But above all, the theorists of aerial strategy did not anticipate the developments of aerial defence. They knew the airplane, but they didn't know the radar that allowed for using fighter planes to intercept the bombers, instead of relying on chance. Strategic aerial theory was, in short, totally discredited in 1945, and any country that would have followed it would have been defeated, because they would not have had an army or navy to be able to fight seriously.

## Edward Luttwak

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**E** *Was strategic aerial theory discredited for the reasons brought to light by the defeat of the West in the battle of Berlin?*

**Edward LUTTWAK:** Exactly. There were many errors of overestimation of the effects, and of underestimation of the difficulties. Above all, it was not foreseen that the entire population could be militarily organized. The countries that were heavily bombed, like England and Germany, had populations that in the end were militarized, disciplined, controlled. At any rate, this theory that in 1945 was completely discredited, rejected and abandoned by everyone, was suddenly totally and unexpectedly rehabilitated. The atomic bomb had eliminated all the problems of the bombers, had nullified all the effectiveness of aerial defence, because it was no longer necessary to intercept three out of ten bombers, or even nine out of ten; it was enough if just one got by.

**E** *In the atomic bomb, the air force practically found the bomb adapted to the means.*

**Edward LUTTWAK:** At any rate, faced with such an important change, the soldiers had their doubts about the air force being the "absolute weapon," they had their own theory and they remained faithful to it. This difference between the theorists and the soldiers was an important factor, and still exists. Every time that in America, and, I'm sure, every time that in Russia there was a change of policy in which a new government, a new leader, developed an official strategic doctrine and publicly announced it, the soldiers in control of the details of the operative plans only made superficial changes. When Eisenhower declared that America had adopted the massive retaliation theory, theoretically the soldiers should have come to the conclusion that their air force needs had decreased substantially. 80 bombers would have been enough for the United States to answer a Russian attack with the destruction of all the most important Soviet cities, which are less than fifty. 150 bombers would have, therefore, offered a large margin of security. But no, on the contrary, the soldiers continued to compile the detailed list of all the factories, of the economic objectives, the military bases, the air bases of the adversary. They didn't settle for 150 bombers, but in fact built 600 B-52s.

In the Soviet Union, Krushchev had adopted his theory of massive retaliation in the 1958-59 period and hence, when he had his intercontinental missiles available he should have abandoned every other effort and should have been able to reduce the costs and utilize them in other areas. On the contrary, he

didn't do it. The only case in which this theory served to transform the structure of the Soviet military forces, was in a manner and in a formula that Khrushchev did not want. It's not that he was contrary to it, but let's say he didn't particularly care for it. The Soviet tankmen had finally succeeded in defeating their great enemy, which was the Soviet artillery, because they succeeded in imposing an increase in the military spending for armoured cars and for troop transports, imposing a massive reduction in field artillery. This innovation was justified by saying that every Soviet division, with its four nuclear missiles, no longer needed dozens and dozens of cannons. Nuclear weapons were, in short, instrumentalized by Soviet tankmen to build up their role. And the effects of the change are evident: all the Soviet military leaders are ex-tankmen. The artillerymen, who were very strong, have been defeated and practically eliminated as a division.

This result, naturally, was quite different from what Khrushchev had in mind, just as McNamara did not have in mind the abandoning of defensive strategy in the United States when he spoke of using of nuclear weapons counterforce. In the summer of 1962, the United States briefly used the so-called counterforce strategy.

**E**  
**I** *That is, a strategy in which a nuclear weapon would have been used not against cities, but against the USSR's military forces.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - The United States later abandoned this strategy because it understood the ultimate consequences, that from the Soviet viewpoint, this could have appeared to be preventive war strategy. It seemed as if the West had abandoned defensive strategy, which consisted in threatening the USSR with a nuclear attack if they should invade Germany, in favour of preventive attack strategy, an atomic Pearl Harbor intending to disarm the Soviet Union. The theory was, therefore, abandoned in the same year. But for the soldiers nothing changed: in their long list of possible objectives, all the arms and nuclear bases of the enemy were included. They were included before the McNamara initiative and they remained so during and after the theory became official doctrine.

**E**  
**I** *The art of war, then, never died. It has only remained in a state of stagnation.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - It remained vegetative for a certain period of time, then it was fully and gloriously rehabilitated. In short, it rose up again like a



phoenix. One can say that in June of 1945 every intelligent person, aviators included, had to admit that Douhet, Lord Trenchard and Mitchell had deceived an entire generation. Just two months after the beginning of the war, their promise of resolving the conflict with the air force alone was completely denied by the facts. After the Second World War, history, in a certain sense, repeated itself. The soldiers, both American and Soviet, had had their long years of uncertainty, years in which everyone around them asked themselves what a war during the nuclear era could be like, when the exchange of nuclear bombs lasts twenty minutes or two hours, or, let's say, twelve hours. This is not only an insufficient period of time to call the recruits into the barracks, but even to call in the reserves, have them report to the barracks and give them their uniforms. Evidently today things don't appear to us in the same light: the nuclear wall, riddled with openings, has turned into a kind of fence so loosely knit that it is limited to stopping only the adversary's nuclear attack, nothing else. We have not yet reached the moment in which the fence has only symbolic value, we are not in the post-nuclear era, but we are getting closer day by day to its coming.

**E** *So is this how the present rehabilitation of the importance of*  
**I** *conventional forces is explained?*

**Edward LUTTWAK:** Yes. In step with the decline of nuclear weapons, from the absolute weapon to one that is ever more limited, there is the rehabilitation of the conventional forces and of all that which is necessary for their functioning: discipline, morale, tactical capacities, operative capacities, war studies, and - why not? - pure study of military history. In 1945, studying the battle of Stalingrad seemed to be an exercise in pure archeology, it gave the pleasure of the antique collector. In 1987, every battle of the past can be studied with profit, because in the postnuclear period the importance of troop morale returns, the importance of how to keep troop spirit and how to develop tactical capacities.

**E** *In short, little by little, the factors that were decisive for the battle of*  
**I** *Thermopole are returning.*

**Edward LUTTWAK:** Exactly, Thermopole becomes a historical precedent of very great instructive value: the ancient Greeks' art of war, and military experience from the Assyrians up to today in the Middle East. All this experience is valuable.

**E**  
**I** *Can the military lesson of a limited war have general value?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes. The truth is that every war is a limited war. To truly understand the meaning of this expression "limited war," it suffices to observe that, until the 1950s, the world did not need to use it. It was only the existence of the theory of absolute war, the idea of a war that comes to a conclusion in just a few hours through the total destruction of the enemy, that created, in contrast, the concept of a limited war. The war of Korea was evidently a limited war, in the sense that, after all, it established - at the height of the period in which it was believed that a war could only be a total war - that the world was not destroyed in the first few minutes of the conflict, nor in the first few days, weeks or months. It was then that it became necessary to invent the term "limited war" to describe the war phenomenon. Now, however, we are no longer in the period in which the concept of absolute war became a cliché, and we can return to the concept of *tout court* warfare, because every true war is limited. It is limited by capacity, time, space, and the will to destroy. Adolf Hitler is not generally considered an example of great prudence, and yet even he set limits for himself: he did not, for example, use nerve gas.

**E**  
**I** *His war was, then, also limited by diplomatic objectives and aims.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly, every conflict is limited, and therefore all conflicts can teach something of general value in the field of the art of war. When American or Italian or German soldiers are interviewed about, let's say, the Falklands War, they all say: "Ah, but this is a very particular war; we need to pay attention, to learn a lesson from it because everything happened under such particular circumstances."

**E**  
**I** *Does war in itself have the characteristic of assuming very particular aspects each time?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly, all wars are particular, therefore one must learn from them whenever possible.

**E**  
**I** *From what you are saying, it appears clear that the "military lesson" of the Korean War has been rather important. And yet it has not often been spoken of.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - For the Americans, the Korean War was a great lesson, but you're absolutely right, it has not been often spoken of. The lesson of the Korean War was so clear and evident that it was not even necessary to speak *cum ira et studio* of all that one could have learned from it. It was another obvious lesson: as always in the past, what counts is the morale of the soldiers, the training of the troops, and the equipment. The clarity and the brutality of this situation truly came as a surprise, since in June, 1950, when the war broke out, the United States Congress was convinced to have resolved the problem of military spending with extremely scanty sums, with which they more or less payed for the minimum support of a few ships and a few airplanes, more or less for symbolic reasons. In June, 1950, in fact, the Soviet Union had already exploded its atomic bomb, and the idea of absolute war was accepted by almost everyone, including those responsible in the Pentagon. When these men went to Congress, they limited themselves to asking for a few million dollars to pay for the manoeuvres of an armoured division of the National Guard in Texas, and the cost of diesel fuel for the armoured cars was then only ten cents a gallon, sixty Italian lira for five litres. And yet Congress found this expense excessive. Why on earth are there armoured divisions of the National Guard in Texas? Who needs those worthless old things? Who will ever use them? In the case of war, we only have to decide to let loose the bombs. It was in this intellectual climate that North Korea launched into the conquest of South Korea, attacking with one hundred fifty 1942 model P-34 armoured cars that, given the impreparation of the adversary, became a steam roller of irresistible strength. These few armoured cars had the capacity to conquer South Korea and to inflict a great loss of prestige, a great defeat on the West. And so the members of Congress discovered, from one day to the next, that having armoured cars is still important, just as it is important to instruct the men to use them. What one witnessed during the course of the Korean War was an increase of 13.5 billion dollars in American military spending, an increase of 300%, infinitely higher than that of the Reagan period.

**E** *It is easy to observe that the percentage of increase in spending during the Korean War appears so notable because it had been so low to begin with.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, but one must take into consideration the fact that everything happened in the course of a few months, during which a complete psychological change took place. In a certain sense, this money was not given



to Congress to fight in Korea, but to rebuild the Air Force, the Navy and the Army and to make them true war institutions, with training, etc... But this was such a clear, intense and upsetting lesson, in comparison to the acquired mentality, that one did not need to speak of lessons. It is worth bringing to light, however, that the negative effects of that mentality, which was so brutally blown away by the North Korean aggression towards the South, are still alive today in Europe, as we are speak, 37 years later. The fact that the Western armies were symbolic armies when NATO was created also gave their role in the defence of Europe a symbolic characteristic. The American troops, in particular, had to establish the borders with their presence, so that if the Soviets should have attacked, they could have let loose a justified conterattack with nuclear weapons.

**E**  
**I** *In reality, the armies were not true instuments of war, they were only the trigger of nuclear weapons.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - The fact that the European armies and the American army were rebuilt with this aim left them with a certain original defect, in the sense that, until today, even 37 years after the Korean War taught the American Congress that it was necessary to train the divisions, to buy diesel fuel for the armoured cars and keep them in practice, even today many components of the NATO armed forces, Americans included, still have prevalently symbolic characteristics, or have no true content. These singular insufficiencies vary from country to country. For example, Italy is very well prepared, with fortifications at the northeast border that are an aspect of real war. Some theorists make fun of the Maginot line, but as soon as there is a real battle, the usefulness of trenches, of fortifications and anti-tank barriers, is rediscovered. A very modern army, like the Isreali army, for example, makes great efforts in this field. The Italian army is well prepared in this, while the German army is completely unprepared, and there is no fortification in the Baltic on the Austrian border, which is also NATO's defence line. The Soviet armoured cars can, therefore, pass easily by, since there is not even one anti-tank barrier.

**E**  
**I** *And how is this explained?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - The origin is in the fact that conventional defence has never been taken seriously. The defect is in the idea that the presence of the American troops in Europe is only a nuclear trigger.

**E** *The basic defect outlives, then, not only the military lesson of the Korean War, but also that of the Vietnam War.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, the defect remains even if the Vietnam War discredited what I would call a subtheory, a makeshift theory that was affirmed amongst the experts after the Korean War: the theory of guerrilla warfare. When the theorists realized that the nuclear wall did not block all conflicts because it was easily passed under, they developed the theory of guerrilla warfare, that constitutes an intellectual manner of recognizing the fact that the conflict continued, but at a low level, a level too low to provoke the use of nuclear weapons. Guerrilla warfare takes advantage of the phenomenon that I mentioned in the beginning, the limitation of the use of nuclear weapons caused by unilateral inhibition. In this setting, nuclear weapons are not used for fear of retaliation, but because the enemy is too small. Let's suppose, as I said, an attack from Lichtenstein. It is clear that nuclear retaliation would be excessive. Guerrilla warfare takes advantage of this inhibition, and therefore the war in Vietnam seems to have provided the proof that forces that never would have dared to challenge the United States, could by now conquer the world with guerrilla warfare. The Americans then attempted to elaborate an appropriate answer, but in Vietnam this counter-guerrilla warfare theory failed, and was therefore totally discredited.

**E** *But counter-guerrilla warfare had been affirmed in Malaya where - thanks to the English - it was demonstrated that it could work.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, in Malaya counter-guerrilla warfare worked, but under very particular and very favourable circumstances. One must not forget that both the population and the anti-guerrilla forces were for the majority Malayan, while the guerrillas were all Chinese, so that they could not swim like the classical fish in the water. What's more, there was no North Malaya that - like North Vietnam - could have infiltrated their troops dressed as South Malaysians. Malaya is a peninsula with extremely limited contact with land, easily controlled, in order to create a sort of island and prevent any provisioning of the guerrillas. In short, Malaya was quite a favourable laboratory for counter-guerrilla warfare, and it was an error to take this success in extremely favourable conditions, deduce a theory and apply it to Vietnam, that is, to the least adapted place for repeating the experiment, covered as it is with jungles, populated with such courageous men, and especially with a very long border from which Communist North Vietnam introduced into the country



not only weapons, but also men, regiments, and entire units. And we must say, the theory of counter-guerrilla warfare was also sabotaged from the American side, because the great bureaucracy of artillery, of infantry, of armoured cars, did not want the special counter-guerrilla troops - which is a structure of little bureaucratic weight - to dominate the war, one of those wars that receives attention both from the public and from the president and that are important in obtaining funds and prestige. It was precisely these strong bureaucratic structures that insisted that two infantry divisions be sent to Vietnam, and so on until it had become a traditional war.

**E** In his book *On Strategy*, Infantry Colonel Summers sustains that the **I** error was, in fact, an American one in the Vietnam War: putting the troops on the ground when they should have taken precise action.

**Edward LUTTWAK** - I don't know if you noticed or not, but Harry Summers quotes me. He is an Army colonel, and in his book on the one hand he defends the army, and on the other hand he accuses it. He defends it from the false, or at least exaggerated clichés of soldiers who went around drugged, who killed their officers, etc..., that is from the enormous exaggerations of the media. On the other hand, he accuses the army of not having fought rationally in Vietnam, of not having applied its capabilities to the objective - independent from the fact of whether or not the war could have been won - and to have used Vietnam as fertile ground for the development of its own military bureaucracy. Moreover they are accusations that I, more than anyone else have aimed at our army. The great military bureaucracies insisted on sending entire infantry divisions to Vietnam, even if the enemy was never present in divisional forces, but at the most in companies, rarely in battalions, almost never in regiments; they insisted on having armoured divisions, all this even though the enemy did not have a front to destroy and to break through, nor installations to manoeuvre around. And all this because, for the military bureaucracy, not being present in Vietnam meant not being important, not receiving attention, promotions, funds. It is for this reason that Vietnam was filled with front line regiments that certainly had great shooting abilities, but also needed an adequate objective. On the contrary, neither the guerrilla groups in continual movement nor even the North Vietnamese troops, in the end, were adequate objectives for the artillery, which could not even distinguish them, much less nail them to the earth. And what should one say about the air forces that measured their own ability by the number of completed missions, and were always looking for possible objectives for these missions?



## Edward Luttwak

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**E** *If Malaya was the best possible ground, and hence the military lesson*  
**I** *that could be taken from that conflict was deformed in the positive sense,*  
*and Vietnam was the worst possible ground and therefore the lesson was*  
*deformed in the opposite sense, is it possible to consider the Phillipines a*  
*theatre with intermediate characteristics?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, because, on the one hand the guerrillas are not ethically isolated as they were in Malaya, and on the other hand they move across a country made of islands, which puts them at a disadvantage in comparison to the Vietnamese situation. I would, however, like to point out that in Vietnam, in spite of such unfavourable conditions, both the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese guerrillas were, in reality, defeated at the great Tet Offensive, which was the tomb of the Vietcong. Of course in the minds of many in the West, Tet remains the symbol of the American defeat, because this was how it was presented by the American media itself. But, in reality, what happened is that the North Vietnamese had to put their troops in guerrilla form to replace the defeated Vietcong. From this moment on, in 1968, the reality of another war began. This, of course, could not happen when the Phillipine guerrilla is defeated, because there could be no North Phillipine army to infiltrate in the form of guerrillas. Therefore the Phillipines represent a case in which the probabilities of success for the guerrillas and for the anti-guerrilla forces are, let's say, equal.

**E** *That is from the technical viewpoint. Politically, however, the*  
**I** *psychological consequences of the Vietnam War could prevent American*  
*intervention in the Phillipines.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - It is very possible.

**E** *In these cases not only the morale of the troops, but also that of the*  
**I** *public counts.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Certainly, but the psychological effects of a defeat are not foreseeable. One loses a war under certain conditions and then believes not to be able to win any war. But there can also be opposite effects. In the Middle East, for example, the PLO was only damaged by the military lesson of the Communist victory in Vietnam. The PLO strongly believed - and in my opinion, even the Soviet Union deceived itself at a certain point - that it could use the same strategy in the Middle East that was used first by the Vietminh

against the French, then by Hanoi in South Vietnam. They thought they could apply the formula of the guerrilla born in the jungle to a desert environment, which is substantially different. A helicopter that flies above the jungle sees very little, therefore its military effectiveness is reduced to a minimum, whereas a helicopter over the desert sands sees everything. And also, the Arab-Israeli conflict does not present the same situation as in South Vietnam which was extensively permeated by North Vietnam, politically and militarily. The result is that, in 1967-68, both the leaders of the USSR and those of the PLO learned an erroneous lesson from the events, even more so because they were informed by the same media that saw the Tet Offensive as a success...

**E**  
**I** *In short, they were taken in by the television, like the Americans.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. Speaking in simplified terms, one can say that the Communists fooled the public opinion, persuading it that *Tet* had been a great American defeat, but they also fooled themselves because they ended up believing it too. The result was that guerrilla warfare in the Middle East was completely defeated, to the point that it was abandoned in favor of terrorism, which is a double bladed knife and marks the abandon of the objective of *de facto* administration of the territory, to limit themselves to a few spectacular acts, more destined to impress international observers than anything else.

**E**  
**I** *This means going clearly backwards, going down on Mao's scale of revolutionary war.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly, it is as if the Vietcong had abandoned the attempt to conquer Vietnam, limiting itself to placing bombs in the markets and hijacking airplanes on the Saigon-Bangkok line instead. This demonstrates that not only is it dangerous to be manipulated by propaganda, but it is also dangerous to manipulate propaganda.

**E**  
**I** *Because one ends up believing it...*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. In Hanoi, in fact, they believed it. And while everyone thought that Vietnam would have marked the beginning of a long series of victorious guerrilla wars, in reality, it ended up being an isolated case, the only victorious guerrilla warfare.

## Edward Luttwak

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**E**  
**I** *Guerrilla warfare failed even in countries where nature was to its advantage, like in Bolivia.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Of course, nature was to its advantage...

**E**  
**I** *...but the population was not to its advantage.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. It was the population, the social environment that was different from that in Vietnam. Ernesto "Che" Guevara had a rather rare chance, if one can say so, as a social scientist. As a politician he had the chance to prove his theories in society, to put them into practice and see how they worked. But usually a politician whose theories are discredited does not normally have to pay with his life, as he did, demonstrating, at a high price, that, if it was possible, in the nuclear era, to launch the art of guerrilla warfare, then there is also a rediscovery of the art of counter-guerrilla warfare.

**E**  
**I** *Nevertheless, this rediscovery of the art of guerrilla warfare and of counter-guerrilla warfare is only a part of the greater phenomenon of the rediscovery of the art of war.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, a very small part, even if it appeared a very important part as long as the illusion of nuclear weapons continued.

**E**  
**I** *Guerrilla warfare seemed very important because one thought that the "open" section of the nuclear wall was rather low...*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - ...and only guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare were seen as possible open warfare. Now that one sees as possible that which can be called true war, even on a large scale, war of armies, divisions, and armed corps, one foresees the other still actual aspect of the art of war.

**E**  
**I** *Are you thinking of great wars of tanks, like the Israeli-Egyptian wars?*

**Edward LUTTWAK**: Yes, or of the Iraq-Iran war, that reproduces elements - or at least a few elements - of the First World War.

**E**  
**I** *Is that only due to the backwardness of the soldiers?*



**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes. It is due to the backwardness of the soldiers. It is true that Iran has a weak air force for the fact that it has few airplanes. But even though Iraq has many airplanes and air bases, it has no air force either, because in order to have an air force, one needs above all pilots, which Iraq does not generally have.

Similarly, Iran does not have great armoured forces because it does not have enough tanks, only a few hundred. But, from its side, neither does Iraq have a true army or armoured forces, it has only thousands of tanks, but it does not have generals with the prerequisites of Rommel and Guderian. Nor does it have the minimum number of lieutenants capable of training a crew to manoeuvre a tank. It is, therefore, a kind of First World War of infantry against infantry, artillery, barriers, obstacles, trenches, and a bit of the Second World War. To that one must add the occasional launching of a few missiles. And this is today's war.

**E**  
**I** *The war between Israel and Egypt had aspects of the Second World War.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - In 1967, we had a war like the one fought in 1941-42 in the deserts of North Africa. But already in 1970 things became a bit more serious: it was aerial and counterair warfare using missiles. In 1973, we entered fully into today's war, decisively surpassing the Second World War.

**E**  
**I** *Was that only because the number of armoured cars involved in that battle was superior to that of the great battles of Normandy and France?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - No, not only for this. The art of war, the means and techniques, had developed. One began to see the war of the future, the war that the Israeli army waged in Lebanon in 1982. Even if the result of this campaign was at least doubtful for political reasons, it was a much more advanced war than what most of the armies in the world can even conceive of and fight, because it was the result of a highly technical ability.

**E**  
**I** *Are you referring to the destruction on the ground, in a matter of just a few hours, of the batteries of the very modern anti-aircraft missiles lined up by the Russians to defend the Syrian stationings, without Israeli losses?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - On that occasion the Syrians waged a war of today and the Israelis fought a war of the future. The famous encounter of June 10, 1982, between the Syrian air force (that are much superior to those of Iraq, with modern jets and trained pilots) and the Israeli aviation (that is already the aviation of the future) demonstrated coordination in the use of forces that is considered by Western air forces a valid model to imitate in the future. Direct battle between fighter planes, or between squadrons is destined to disappear, in fact; and the skies will be dominated by an aerial fleet whose flying radar, systems of electronic countermeasure and scouts and fighter bombers will all be integrated into a single communication and collective action system. Between these two aviation realities - Syria's modern one and Israel's futuristic one - is the difference that runs between the most beautiful of the heroes unsung by Homer, and the type of war that the Spartans waged, in which an entire line of Spartans worked in a concert of perfect co-ordination and was capable of destroying and dispersing masses of men who were numerically much greater.

**E** *If this is the war of the future, it doesn't seem to me, however,*  
**I** *that the military lesson of the Israeli-Syrian encounters can do much good for European defence, given that this enormous technical difference does not exist between Europe and its potential enemies.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - No, but what one can learn from the Arab-Israeli War, and that would have enormous value for European defence, is the importance of true training.

**E** *In conditions of substantial equality of possession of weapons and*  
**I** *equipment, then, the superiority of the Israeli army is one of training.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes. Napoleon said that the ratio between the importance of the morale factor and of equipment is four to one. Even today, no one who is impartial can give a different evaluation of this ratio. Equipment is important but it matters only one fourth as much as morale and training.

**E** *The fact that today you again propose this "ratio between factors"*  
**I** *already indicates a very big change in comparison to what it was logical to conclude from the Vietnam experience. If one thinks about that war, in which the ratio between the importance of morale*

*and the importance of equipment was probably a hundred to one, this ratio already appears positively changed in favour of the equipment element.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly, in Vietnam the environmental conditions, an enemy who avoided open confrontation and a territory that allowed him the maximum ease in doing so, reduced the importance of equipment. Of course, a man with a machine-gun is totally superior to a man with a pistol, if the two are in an open field; but if they are in a brushwood the inequality is much less, and when they are in a dense jungle a man with a knife has a good possibility of defeating the man with the machine-gun.

**E** Today the art of war can, then, propose new ideas that would be useful  
**I** even for European defence, in which the deployment of conventional forces would no longer have just the function of a trigger.

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Exactly. Today the art of war is capable of giving us indications of how to prepare a counterblitz if the Russians should attempt a blitz, of what combination of fortifications of arms against conventional ground forces, helicopters and air forces, and of what type of counterattack deep into the country are necessary to block the advance of the enemy and hit the bases that he is coming from. The art of war is, in short, newly able to suggest a coherent set of defensive measures capable of substituting nuclear retaliation.

**E** These defensive measures that take the place of nuclear weapons would  
**I** at the same time allow for a certain control of European territory.

**Edward LUTTWAK** - This is precisely the new element. At the time of the theory of massive retaliation to a Soviet attack, there was, in fact, no tentative to defend the European, and in particular the German territory. Massive retaliation was the ideal strategy from the German point of view, because it foresaw that practically nothing would have happened on German territory. Moscow would be burnt, New York and Washington would be burnt, but Germany would remain intact. Grazing the trigger would be enough. Fighting at the border between the two Germanies, in an area three kilometres wide would have been enough to let loose the massive retaliation. Now, on the contrary, we have divisions and armed corps that are capable of defending themselves, even if we do not have divisions in proportionate numbers to the



## Edward Luttwak

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Soviets, nor armed corps with operative capacities which are analogous to the Soviet armies.

**E**  
**I** *Is it possible to have this kind of a war on German territory alone, or is it necessary to involve the French territory, too?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Undoubtedly a certain area of French territory is necessary. But it does not mean waging a war of manoeuvres with armoured means on tens of kilometres. If there are barriers and fortresses one can seriously conceive of a war that is limited to the first ten kilometres.

**E**  
**I** *Moving the war onto the aggressor's territory, in Eastern Europe...*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, but not through an invasion, but with an aerial attack into the depths of the country, with non-nuclear missiles.

**E**  
**I** *Is this the war of the year 2000 in Europe? A non-nuclear answer tending to destroy the bases from which the aerial covering troops come?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, but to the use of aerial forces, of non-nuclear attack missiles and of artillery capable of firing on the enemy's zone behind the front must be added the capability of fighting with manoeuvre elements on the border. This does not necessarily mean operating deep into the country. I am not one of those who wants to propose the ideal war, even if to fight it one needs to destroy what one wants to defend. I sympathize with the Soviet point of view according to which the USSR forces are not interested in manoeuvres like Rommel, because these would destroy the two Germanies with the movement and counter-movement of the divisions.

**E**  
**I** *What is the impact of this vision in the structure of the alliance in which Western Europe is involved?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - The structure of the alliance requires a continual effort of modernization, considering the progress that the art of war has made. Each step that brings us closer to the postnuclear era reduces the probability of a war exchange at the maximum level of destructive violence, and therefore the terror in which we have lived for the past decades. But every step that is made in that direction requires a major effort of will and imagination: also an economic

effort, of course, because nuclear weapons are much more expensive; but above all, I repeat, it requires intellectual effort and will.

**E**  
**I** *Does post-nuclear condition mean that NATO will be obliged to greatly increase conventional forces in order to balance a Soviet army on an equal footing, and is this possible, given budget constraints as well as the present demography of the Western European countries and of the U.S.?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - If the Soviet army is greatly reduced then obviously the loss of the one-sided nuclear advantage will not require an increase in NATO forces, but I must underline *greatly* reduced, because equal reductions will not help. That is not only because of the familiar gap between the two sides. The one side has three regiments and the other side has two regiments: equal reductions of one regiment each do not help. In fact NATO does not have a numerical inferiority if one is willing to count American national guardsmen back in Texas, Turkish Infantry, etc... added all up, the numbers do not look bad. Unfortunately, the numbers do not describe the military problem. NATO is on the defensive. The Soviet Union has the permanent advantage of the initiative and this is as important today as it has ever been. The leaders of the Soviet army have certainly thought so, because in the last fifteen years we have seen them put an exceptional effort into surprise attack forces, that is elite forces that can go into action with aircraft, helicopters, etc...

**E**  
**I** *We saw this in Afghanistan as compared to the previous Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Absolutely. The Afghan invasion began with a leap of commando style forces, except there were not a hundred men or two hundred men, but in fact, five or six thousand men, mainly of one airborne division. At any rate, the advantage of starting first is very important, because a variety of long prepared commando operations, even if not all of them succeeds, can dislocate the defence, making numerical balances temporarily completely irrelevant. The effect wears out, but in the meantime it can really wreck the system, because NATO has developed its structures under the nuclear rules and under the nuclear rules one did not have to worry about certain things like, for example, the vulnerability of air bases. Air bases would only have been attacked with nuclear weapons and it did not matter how relatively vulnerable they were, they were all completely vulnerable. Well, now if we go into post-nuclear conditions, the fact that a large proportion of NATO power is in

tactical air forces (and they depend on air base complexes which are so near to the East German border creates a very strong vulnerability). The other problem for reductions is that because NATO is on the defensive it has to cover the front. The so-called central front area is the German border, which is 600 kilometres long, and the defence has to have enough forces to cover the front.

The offence can choose where it will send its invasion columns, on this sector or that sector, whereas the defence has to cover the front. So, in fact, in order to maintain equal security while reliance on nuclear weapons continues to decline, NATO cannot, in fact, get along even with true equality because it has to overcome the disadvantage of being on the defensive. Tactically the defence is stronger. If there are a hundred men holding a trench that can not be by-passed, it takes three hundred men to take them out of that trench. But strategically the defence is at a disadvantage because it has to cover everything. Just as it takes many more bank guards than bank robbers to keep bank robbers from robbing banks, because the guards have to cover every bank whereas the robbers can attack where they want to. If the Soviet Union at the present time seems to be interested in a reduction, it may carry them out but it will only be when we see a drastic change in the very structure of the Soviet army that this will actually improve the situation for NATO. Removing a tank army from East Germany will not make a difference.

**E** *One observation and one question about this. First of all, when you*  
**I** *speak of numerical equality, you put the global force of NATO and the*  
*global force of the Warsaw Pact in comparison. Now, the real point is that*  
*what is relevant is what the two sides have in Europe...*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, well, let me just say that I only mentioned numerical equality to dismiss its importance in general. First of all these numbers just sum together all kinds of people in uniform, some of which are relevant, some of which are not. Secondly, numbers do not determine military strength. Certainly what counts for the security of the central front is what is there or could get there. Obviously ten divisions of Turkish infantry or very likely much of the American reserve force can never get there, although some things could get there. But the problem is not that the Soviet army has more divisions, that means so little; divisions are very different things, they are not units of measurement. The problem is that NATO has built itself a defence structure based on the assumption of nuclear use, whereas the Soviet army has retained, either because of wisdom or because of inertia, the structures of



effective commercial warfare. That is the fundamental problem. If NATO wishes to have a conventional equilibrium, it will have to carry out a drastic restructuring, moving the bases, changing the way things are done, etc... Also it will have to change the whole nature of training. The fundamental problem is that we have brought up an entire generation of officers who have only lived under the nuclear assumption, and the nuclear assumption is that if fighting seriously becomes nuclear, then what is not nuclear is not serious from a military point of view. Therefore, when one chooses equipment it should be done on a basis of industrial considerations, when one does the training one does the training that one likes and not the training that is unpleasant, etc...

**E** *Some German Social Democrats say that it is possible to reduce land forces and all land based forces (including missiles, etc...), in Europe on the basis of the inevitable asymmetries. They seem to mean that there is an asymmetry due to the fact that the Russians are in Europe and the Americans are not there, so a certain amount of Western superiority can be counted to compensate for that...*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - ...Well, that becomes the second condition. As I said, the first condition is that NATO as a multinational alliance does not have the option of starting a war, which means that the Soviet structure can be focused on the offensive and does not have to allocate attention to the defence. And the other asymmetry as I pointed out, is that when the forces are withdrawn from Western Europe, the Russian forces go to the end of a railway line but the American forces go to the other side of the Atlantic. I should add that they don't stay there, because American army divisions that move from Europe to America are simply not maintained. Not within the present political and budget requirements. We will not have divisions sitting around in Texas when they can serve no purpose except in the highly hypothetical possibility of a European war and one in which they will have the time to get there.

**E** *The Russians seem now willing to recognize that there are asymmetries.*  
**I** *There is an asymmetry on the Central European front. But they say that there are asymmetries to their disadvantage too, for example on the Mediterranean front. Now this is certainly to be proved, and this creates another problem, because the asymmetry on the Mediterranean front, whichever side it is in favour of, also involves the air force and the navy. This makes reasoning in terms of theatre forces much more difficult, as it also is difficult to distinguish between conventional and nonconventional forces.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - First of all, the reason why there are these numerical asymmetries, which, I repeat, are not important now, in the Mediterranean to the disadvantage of the Soviet side, is because of the traditional hostility between Greece and Turkey. If people in Moscow can honestly be frightened at the prospect of a sudden NATO invasion based on the Greco-Turkish forces, then they are more paranoid than I thought. And then, as you correctly point out, the main strength of NATO in the Mediterranean is air and naval. The fact is, is it a threat to the Soviet Union? I think not. Is the Soviet army in East Germany a threat to Western Europe? Yes it is. Why? Armoured divisions, structured armoured forces, not particularly effective for defence but very effective for offence, poised right across the border, with relatively few kilometres to cover, 60 kilometres to the center of Hamburg, etc.... is quite different from the fact that somewhere in Anatolia there may be Turkish troops, which, if all dutifully counted, would outnumber Bulgarians and Soviets in Bulgarian territory.

**E** *So, practically, this passage from the nuclear way of thinking of the*  
**L** *post-nuclear one is far from being completed intellectually.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, that's a very basic point to make because the accumulated experience of nuclear arms control is of no use in confronting the problem of commercial arms control.

When a missile force is reduced from 1000 to 500, it is reduced by half, just because 1000 minus 500 is 500, which is half of 1000.

When one has 10,000 tanks and one reduces the number to 5,000 tanks, one has not reduced the threat of those forces by half. An armoured division consists of maybe 17,000 people in the Western case, 12 or 13,000 in the Soviet case, with thousands of different specialized vehicles and weapons, and also 300 tanks. The three hundred tanks are like the drill bits of a big power drill: they only last a few days at most in combat before they are repaired and replaced. So, removing tanks, as it has been recently announced, can be a complete delusion, because one is removing the tanks, but the organization of the power drill is left there, and all one has to do is replace the drill bit. So one sends a few trains loaded with tanks that go to the end of the armoured division, as it were, and the capability is there. In a nuclear case, weapons are forces; in the conventional case forces have weapons. So weapon-focused reductions do not capture the essence of the capability.

Strategic forces are weapons with people. And that means that weapon reductions are not so important. The case of the tanks is the most dramatic. It really applies in general. The capability of an army arises from these many thousands of people with all these different skills: the bridging companies, the command, the control, the engineers, the sappers, the repairers, the infantry and also the visible tanks and guns etc... . Therefore removing those tanks and guns but leaving the other structure in place just means it can be replaced with a few trainloads overnight. Taking the entire structure and moving it also doesn't help. After all, when we do nuclear reductions, we take the missiles and we burn them, we smash them, but even for the sake of arms control we are not willing to kill people. Therefore when one says that one is withdrawing Pershings, it means that one is taking the Pershing boosters and breaking them; when one is withdrawing an armoured division, one cannot go around shooting the officers and men. That means that there still is an armoured division. That armoured division may exist as a demobilized unit but it is still there and can be re-mobilized. This problem is particularly acute in dealing with the Soviet army, because even now the Soviet army is three quarters reserves.

**E**  
**I** *It is like the Israeli army.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, that's right. If one disestablished every formation of the Israeli army, the capability of the Israeli army would be reduced by about 15%. If one disestablished every single Soviet division, if the people were sent home, the equipment withdrawn and everything else, it would reduce the capacity of the Soviet army for an immediate invasion, which they now have, but it would not reduce by an appreciable extent the capacity of the Soviet army for a general invasion.

**E**  
**I** *Now, why does this technical aspect have an impact on the possibility of actually having a reduction of 50%, or whatever, of strategical forces on one side, and on the negotiations for the reduction of conventional forces on the other?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Well, the 50% reduction on nuclear forces was, until now, at the time that we are speaking, in June, 1988, delayed by technical problems of definition and verification. However, in the meantime, it turns out that very serious doubts have arisen about this reduction, quite fundamental doubts. In the past, it was considered among more conservative people in America that nuclear reductions with the Soviet



Union would be disadvantageous to the United States because they would favour the Soviet Union. This time the START proposal has aroused stronger and stronger concerns of a quite different nature. Nobody is particularly afraid that it will favour the Soviet Union, rather the concern is that it would favour neither side but will threaten both because the post-START forces will be more de-stabilizing than the pre-START forces. It is a problem of arithmetic. When we go down to 6000 warheads above size, since a lot of the weapons have multiple warheads, we are reducing the number of weapons much more than the number of nuclear charges of the weapons. This means that the number of targets is much more reduced than the number of nuclear weapons that can be sent against them. That is not a good way to go. As a matter of fact it violates the basic idea behind arms control. For example: of the 4,900 warheads that are allowed to the United States, all the submarine-launched ones would come from just 16 or 17 submarines, all the 1100 allowed bombs now missileed would come from 20 bomber bases, and the extent of the remaining ballistic missiles, warheads, come from the MX, every thousand comes from a hundred, so now suddenly one is faced with a situation where both sides are still allowed thousands of warheads but the number of targets is in the very low hundreds. Each side would have thousands of warheads but would only be faced with a couple of dozens of submarines, twenty bases of ten bombers and maybe 200 or 300 missile silos.

**E** *So the temptation of a surprise attack that would disarm the enemy*  
**I** *would be much stronger.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - That's right. And therefore it's really quite extraordinary in a way, that very late in the process, while working out the details, one might say that the negotiators looked up from the details to see that they were, in fact, doing something that is wrong in a macro sense...

**E** *...but this is on both sides...*  
**I**

**Edward LUTTWAK** - ...yes, absolutely on both sides, this is not one of the situations where we are being fooled by the Russians. This is not the clever Russians fooling us, this is all of us together being fooled. Originally the negotiators focused on warheads because that was the way to sum together all

these different cruise missiles and ballistic missiles and land-based and sea-based and bombers. Only very late in the day they recognized that what was happening was that they focused on reductions that overlooked the fact that the ratio between warheads and weapons would greatly increase, and that's not how it should be. There should be a situation where each side has hundreds of warheads and hundreds of weapons, so that neither can plan an ambitious offence.

**E**  
**I** *And this cannot be reduced by some form of technological step back, going back to before "MIRVization"?*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Absolutely. We have reached this situation because, in the days when people were trying to multiply warheads, the efficient and cheap way to do it, was to have multiple nuclear charges on weapons. Now we are suddenly, so to speak, going to reductions. We have changed gears but we are stuck with the weapon designs of the previous age. We went for efficiency and the result is that now that we want to have warhead reductions, we are stuck.

**E**  
**I** *Now the obvious question is, how does all this relate to the most recent and very fast changes that are occurring in the Soviet Union? On the one side, one could say that these strategic calculations are overtaken by the change in the political relationship between the East and the West. On the other side, one also could assume that difficulties in this field might make political change in the USSR more difficult.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Let me address your first question: political developments and military developments are linked, but they are always out of phase with one another. It takes up to ten years, even fifteen years to research, develop, produce and introduce and militarily operationalize a weapon. Political decisions about a weapon can be made instantly, but to acquire a weapon it takes fifteen years and it takes time even to establish its use. Without addressing the whole question of political inertia, there is the simple fact of mechanical inertia. So, if we would see a complete change in military policy today, in June 1988, if we would suddenly see Soviet production rates for weapons go down, which has not happened in the third year of the Gorbachev rule (we still have production rates which are steady), if we would see that happen; if we would see changes in terms of conscript service for the Soviet army, reductions which have not happened, if we saw the beginning of a

defensive restructuring of the Soviet army, which has also not happened, then it would take several years before this would actually change the military balance. That's why there is consensus, I think, in Europe, that the military policy of the NATO Alliance should not simply be abandoned because of the fact that the current political developments in Moscow could eventually result in profound military change, several years after the change begins. The simple fact is that the change has not yet started. Some things have changed in the Soviet Union, others have not, and one of the things that has not changed is the emphasis on military investment.

**E** *Still this change in the Soviet Union, the change in psychological relations, the change in perception of the Soviet Union in this country, is already killing the SDI project.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - There is no doubt that part of the very strong political reaction to Gorbachev has been a dramatic decline in political support for continuing military efforts. This decline is not absolute. For example even a Democratic controlled Congress in the United States, even a Congress that is very much aware and supportive of the Gorbachev revolution in Moscow, really wants to reduce SDI, not eliminate it. There is also the little fact that one consequence of *glasnost* is that the Soviet Union has now repudiated its claims of the last several years, according to which SDI was an American-only innovation designed to militarize space, and, in fact Gorbachev himself admitted that the Soviet SDI programme has been underway for some years.

The conjunction between no change in the military side of the Soviet Union in spite of changes in other areas, with a propensity in the West to act immediately on hopes, could result in the very familiar dangers. It may even be that Gorbachev's attempt to revolutionize the Soviet Union will fail, but in the process, Gorbachev will have discovered a solvent, the secret of how to dissolve the Western Alliance. That too is a possibility. The cruel pattern of Russian history and of Soviet history recently, is that reformers fail to reform but they succeed in laying the basis for great military progress. Peter the Great wanted to bring commodious lodgings and to clean inns for travellers to Russia the way Holland had them. Well he did not succeed in doing that but he did succeed in introducing a lot of Dutch military knowledge for making weapons and ships, etc... Similarly Khrushchev, as we now know, of course, wanted to bring about a drastic improvement in the political climate in Russian Soviet life. He failed for the most part, but succeeded in that he introduced a lot of



efficiencies into the system which were then exploited for the re-armament launched after his fall. And that is the cruel fact. If this cruel destiny repeats itself, Gorbachev will have failed to liberalize the Soviet Union but will have succeeded in bringing a lot of capital and technology into the Soviet Union, and also in really eroding the Western Alliance.

**E** *But this is not something typically rational. The same thing happened*  
**I** *with the Ottoman Empire, the efforts of modernizing the country and not modernizing the army.*

**Edward LUTTWAK** - Yes, this is not a rule of all regimes and it's not a rule of all dictatorship regimes, but it may be a rule of empires, because the empire has the problem that when the army is liberalized to a certain point, then it is the existence of the empire that comes into question. What is the real limit of the democratization of the Soviet Union? It is that when a certain level of democratization is reached, entire blocks of the country will act democratically and demand secession. In that regard it is unfortunate that, whereas the American Constitution does not give states the right to secession, and of course the United States fought a cruel war to deny that right, in the case of the Soviet Union the constitution does allow the right of the component Soviet Socialist Republics to secede. Although there is no doubt that not all of them would exercise this right, some of them would.

If the Soviet Union does progress towards democratization, it will then come to this crucial decision moment which is either to stop course and reverse or proceed and start breaking up the Soviet Union. That's what happened to the Ottoman Empire, obviously, and that's what's going to happen to any multinational empire. It's not the fate of regimes, it's not the fate of dictatorships even, but it is the fate of multinational empires.

The empire cannot make the trip on the road to democratization, it can only go so far, and then something else can continue, but it will not be the empire. It could be the Russian nation, the Russo-Ukrainian federation, or whatever, but not the Soviet Union.