

# Comment

## A dangerous game of nuclear chicken

**F**eb. 4, 1986, 0746hrs, S/SW of Cyprus. A new Arab-Israeli war. Tension soars between the U.S. and USSR. Their units in the Mediterranean go on high alert.

Suddenly the combat information centre aboard the U.S. carrier *Forrestal* reports frightening news: Shadowing Soviet destroyers have uncovered their missile tubes. Enemy search and guidance radar is now "painting" the giant U.S. carrier. Flash: A Soviet ship may have launched a SS-N-12 missile.

What should the *Forrestal's* commander do? Fire at the enemy or wait until missiles — if, in fact, they really are missiles — strike his ship. This awesome dilemma is at the heart of a new and important debate now going on inside NATO.

And while the media like to portray scare stories of haywire computers launching ICBMs, it is the above scenario that, in reality, is the likeliest and most dangerous threat of accidental nuclear war. This deadly problem is called "rules of engagement."

NATO and Soviet warships routinely shadow one another. No NATO task force operates without an escort of Soviet surface ships, submarines, reconnaissance bombers and the ubiquitous ELINT (electronic intelligence) trawlers. Prime targets are the 12 U.S. carrier battle groups, the heart of NATO naval power. Soviet ELINT trawlers track the U.S. carriers in peacetime, monitoring their communications. In wartime — and remember that any war would begin with a surprise attack — the trawlers would serve one vital function before being sunk: To guide in long-range Soviet anti-ship missiles against the U.S. carriers.



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Every major NATO surface group would be targeted by cruise missiles fired by Soviet ships, subs and aircraft. How long, I once asked a most senior U.S. military intelligence official, would U.S. carriers survive under such a surprise attack. "About 15 minutes," was his reply. He went on to tell me that new Soviet naval missiles are so accurate that they can "shoot right into a barrel." NATO must not allow the missiles to be fired.

As a result of this growing threat, NATO admirals have lately been calling for a change in the "rules of engagement," instructions that specify how our warships may respond to enemy threats. At present, these rules specify that NATO ship commanders may only take offensive action when fired upon. But in our age of hypertechnology and smart weapons, what precisely does "fired upon" really mean?

Must a ship wait to be struck by enemy missiles — and thus likely severely damaged or even destroyed — before riposting? Or can it attack the perceived enemy once missiles are spotted in flight? Suppose a carrier captain knows that his ship is being "painted" by enemy missile-guidance radar:

Is this an act of war? Should he attack enemy ships that are clearing for action?

NATO commanders are asking that the rules be changed to allow them to destroy menacing enemy ships when they feel an attack is imminent. They also want to sink enemy spy trawlers before these vessels can target in missiles. But how, of course, to really tell when an attack is "imminent?" Obviously, the scope for a disastrous error is enormous. Even a limited naval clash could quickly go nuclear, at least on the tactical level.

Yet to sit back and do nothing, waiting for missiles to strike carrier decks loaded with aviation fuel and bombs, is also madness — an invitation to a chain of mini-Pearl Harbors. Some NATO officers have suggested, as one alternative, creating "exclusion zones" around major NATO battle groups in times of high alert. Any Soviet ships entering these "no-go" zones would be immediately sunk.

But the Soviets, who do not yet have huge, vulnerable strike carriers, (two are abuilding in the Black Sea) are not about to afford NATO this luxury. How, for example, to force their ships out of "exclusion zones" when an alert is declared. Every solution to this problem seems to create new ones. The only low-risk alternative is to jam 100% of enemy communications, something that cannot today be done.

Until a solution is found, NATO and Soviet warships will continue to play "chicken" with one another, only a trigger-finger away from an armed clash. When victory goes to him who fires first, the risk of a missile exchange at sea is very, very real.