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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)  The concept of essential equivalence is traced from its beginnings in the Soviet approach to nuclear parity and continuing strategic buildup of the late 1960s, through the official, 1970s US statements describing essential equivalence as a major US objective. Essential equivalence is defined as approximate equality in the strategic nuclear capabilities of the United States and the Soviet Union, an approximate equality that		

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79A The Concept of Equivalence of Strategic Forces (1980)

requires more and better US weaponry than is required for deterrence alone. Essential equivalence is sought because Soviet and third-party perceptions of US strength are believed to be based on it, and these perceptions are considered important for political-diplomatic reasons. The report briefly discusses ways of measuring equivalence and raises questions as to the value of equivalence as a policy goal. Fully annotated bibliography.

ANALYTIC RESEARCH ON  
STRATEGIC, TACTICAL AND DOCTRINAL  
MILITARY CONCEPTS

DRAFT REPORT

The Concept of Equivalence  
of Strategic Forces

A paper prepared for the Defense Nuclear Agency  
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HISTORICAL EVALUATION AND RESEARCH ORGANIZATION  
A Division of T:N. DUPUY ASSOCIATES, INC.  
2301 Gallows Road, P.O. Box 157  
Dunn Loring, Virginia 22027

Telephone 703/560-6427

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D R A F T

THE CONCEPT OF EQUIVALENCE OF STRATEGIC FORCES

INTRODUCTION: TERMINOLOGY

Before one can begin to write about equivalence as a strategic concept, some matters of terminology must be cleared up. Basically, equivalence contrasts with equality, and Webster's Dictionary of Synonyms makes the distinction between them nicely: "Things are equivalent when they amount to the same thing. . . . Things are equal when there is no difference in number, amount, magnitude, value, or the like." (Emphasis added.)\*

The distinction may be pinned down with an example. If one wishes to give two men equal amounts of vitamin C, one may accomplish this task by handing each of them a tablet containing 200 milligrams of that vitamin. If this is not possible for some reason, one can give them equivalent amounts of vitamin C by giving the first man a tablet containing 100 milligrams of vitamin C, plus three large oranges, while giving the second man four small oranges, a handful of strawberries, and a small slice of cantaloupe.

This homely example not only illustrates the distinction between equality and equivalence, but also makes clear one important aspect of equivalence. While it is relatively easy to be sure that one has given two persons equal things, it is very difficult to be sure that one has given them truly equivalent things. Such questions arise as "How large is

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\*Springfield, Mass.: G. & E. Merriam, 1951.

a large orange?" "Do fresher fruits have more vitamins?" "Are synthesized vitamins as readily absorbed as those occurring in nature?" It becomes clear that in practice precise equivalence does not exist, that all equivalence is approximate.

The analogies to strategic forces are obvious. This paper does not focus on the problem of measuring strategic forces for the purpose of judging whether or not those of the United States and the USSR are equivalent. It focuses rather on the concept of equivalence. However, the complexity of assessing equivalence must at least be mentioned. The following interacting factors, and more, must be considered: number of launchers, number of warheads, warhead yield, warhead accuracy, system reliability, and penetration capability. Such questions arise as, "How much superior accuracy balances a strong superiority in yield of warheads? Is equivalent megatonnage ( $EMT = Y^2/3$ , if  $Y = \text{yield}$ ) a satisfactory measure of gross effectiveness? Must superior civil defense and air defense capabilities be counted as subtracting from the effectiveness of the opponent's offensive force? The point of mentioning these questions here is to show that equivalence in strategic forces can never be exact, that it must always be approximate, or rough, or essential. Therefore, in this paper, the commonly used expressions essential equivalence and rough equivalence will be considered synonymous with equivalence and with each other.

Parity is another term with a similar meaning. Unlike equivalence, parity has a long history of use in international discourse on armaments, having been brought to that field from legal terminology. Parity, for example, was the term used for the 5:5 relationship in capital ships and

aircraft carriers established between Britain and the United States, and the 1.67:1.67 relationship established between France and Italy, under the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. Equivalence is a US term, relatively recently introduced to discourse on strategic matters. However, the two terms are basically synonymous, both referring to things that are not equal but that "amount to the same thing" in the terse phrase of Webster's Synonyms dictionary. In this paper, equivalence and parity will be used as synonymous. Rough parity will also be considered synonymous with parity, just as rough equivalence is considered synonymous with equivalence.

#### HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF EQUIVALENCE

The concept of equivalence appeared on the US strategic scene only in the late 1960s. Earlier, when the United States had, first, a monopoly and, later, a commanding lead in nuclear weapons and delivery systems, equivalence was not an issue. During the period of the hypothetical but non-existent missile gap (approximately 1958-61), there was anxiety about maintaining or regaining US superiority, but no question of settling for equivalence. (J. Foster 1978:25)

In the mid-1960s, when it became clear to informed members of the defense establishment that the Soviets were engaging in a massive and rapid buildup of strategic weaponry, the issue was still not equivalence. By that time the concept of stable deterrence based on possession by both sides of invulnerable retaliatory forces had become firmly established as conventional wisdom and official policy. Closely related to this concept was the idea that arms control and weapons acquisition were not conflicting goals but rather complementary parts of one coherent defense policy, whose binding

force was the concept of stability.\* From this point of view, the Soviet buildup was not a serious threat, since any strategic forces beyond those needed for a secure retaliatory force that could do unacceptable damage to the opponent's cities and industries were considered surplus forces. As James Foster has pointed out, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara appears to have believed as early as 1963 that the rapidity of the Soviet buildup was an argument for the United States to spend less, not more, than it otherwise would have spent on strategic weaponry. Since it would be extremely expensive, and probably not possible, to be able to destroy the entire Soviet missile force, it seemed reasonable not to try to achieve that capability, but rather to rely on deterrence by the threat of a retaliatory attack on Soviet cities and industry.\*\*

It should be noted, in view of the discussion that has followed the 1980 announcement of PD 59 and its emphasis on selected Soviet military targets, that a massive US retaliatory strike against all Soviet targets, including cities, was only one McNamara option in 1963, and it was to be a retaliation in kind for a comparable Soviet attack. McNamara also set forth a second US option, to be followed if the Soviet attack had not been massive: retaliation against "bomber bases, missile sites, and other military installations" to reduce the power of any follow-on attack, while keeping in reserve the capability of striking the Soviet urban and industrial complex. (US Department of Defense 1963:30) What McNamara did relinquish at that

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\*See entries for Schelling and Halperin 1961 and G. Snyder 1960 in bibliography for accompanying paper on stability.

\*\*Foster 1978:25, citing William W. Kaufmann, The McNamara Strategy (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 282-85.

time was the capability for a disarming counterforce first strike.

At about the same time, in a November 1963 address, McNamara stressed the importance of the damage-limiting capability of US forces, that is, the ability to destroy some Soviet missiles before they could be launched, and ascribed it to US numerical superiority. To stress the value of this numerical superiority and consequent damage-limiting capability, he pointed out that the smaller Soviet forces could not realistically aspire to damage-limiting capability, and said that this was one reason he would not trade the US strategic posture for the Soviet posture at any time in the coming decade. (McNamara 1963;112) Clearly, at that time, numerical superiority was considered significant, even if a disarming counterforce strike was no longer practically achievable. The concept of equivalence did not come up.

By the end of his tenure as Defense Secretary, with the massive Soviet buildup continuing and Soviet missile sites rapidly being hardened, McNamara had also relinquished the hope of limiting damage to the United States if a Soviet attack should be made. The one US strategic aim became the deterrence of attack through the ability to destroy the would-be attacker "as a 20th Century nation" and the "unwavering will to use these forces in retaliation to a nuclear attack upon ourselves or our allies." McNamara also devoted attention in his 1968 annual report to the question of sufficiency, of how much destruction would be necessary for the Soviet Union to be destroyed as a 20th Century nation, as a measure of how large the US retaliatory force should be and what characteristics it should have. The question of equivalence with the Soviet Union in quantity and characteristics of weapons was still not raised. (US Department of Defense 1968:47)

Even when the assured destruction policy was at its briefly held zenith in official Defense Department policy, analysts within the broader defense community were searching for options other than all-out retaliation. With the coming of a new administration in 1969, this effort was greatly enlarged, leading to Secretary Schlesinger's presentation of the selective nuclear targeting policy in 1974. At the same time, increased attention was paid to the question of "who's ahead" in quantity and quality of nuclear forces, not only in the Defense Department but by many members of Congress. The 1972 Jackson amendment -- to the legislation approving the SALT I interim agreement -- wrote equivalence into law. This amendment required that the United States maintain levels of intercontinental strategic forces not inferior to those of the Soviet Union, as a condition for Senate approval of the SALT I interim agreement.\*

The term equivalence is not mentioned in Secretary Laird's final report in 1973, but the idea is there:

We have strategic sufficiency at the strategic nuclear level because Congress agreed with us that the American people may perhaps be willing to accept strategic nuclear parity, but would never accept inferiority. (US Department of Defense 1973:5; emphasis added)

It may be noted that Secretary Laird also used the term sufficiency, and in a slightly different way from Secretary McNamara. McNamara was concerned about the amount of potential destruction that would be necessary to deter the Soviet Union, and, by implication, about the amount of US force that would be necessary to achieve that destruction. Laird appeared

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\*PL 92-448, signed by the President as amended, September 30, 1972.

to be associating sufficiency with parity -- in contrast to inferiority -- with the Soviet Union.

Also in 1973, the new Defense Secretary, Elliot Richardson, listed three principles of foreign policy in his annual Defense Report: partnership with friendly nations, sufficiency of military strength, and willingness to negotiate. Of these, the only military item was the one calling for sufficiency, which presumably in this case meant simply whatever forces might be necessary to carry out US military aims. Equivalence was not mentioned. (US Department of Defense 1973b)

In his FY 1975 Defense Report, Secretary Schlesinger mentioned equivalence, and indeed essential equivalence, as a fact, but did not set it forth as an aim:

The issue that faces us no longer is (if it ever was) how to avoid initiatives that might continue or accelerate the strategic competition, but how -- in a situation of essential equivalence -- to interpret and respond to a wide range of potential Soviet initiatives. (US Department of Defense 1974:26)

However, Schlesinger did express aims that are close to equivalence. He called for a "more equitable and stable arrangement" in which

both sides maintain survivable second-strike reserves, in which there is symmetry in the ability of each side to threaten the other, and in which there is a perceived equality between the offensive forces of both sides. (p. 44)

Lehman and Hughes (1977:1046) have described this as Schlesinger's public announcement of a policy of equivalence and have described the three criteria quoted above as criteria for equivalence. However, survivable second-strike reserves are the basic requirement for mutual deterrence and have always been so regarded, and symmetry in the ability of each side to threaten the other, although subject to various interpretations, appears

also to be a bulwark of mutual deterrence and crisis stability, not necessarily requiring equivalence of forces. It is the last criterion, "perceived equality between the offensive forces," that seems to describe what came to be called essential equivalence.

In this same FY 1975 Defense Report, Schlesinger listed six features of the defense program proposed for the next five years. Along with assured destruction and flexible targeting was listed the following:

an offensive capability of such size and composition that all will perceive it as in overall balance with the strategic forces of any potential opponent. (US Department of Defense 1974:45)

Again, although the term equivalence is not used, here is a call for a force that appears to be the equivalent in size and composition of that of the opponent. Here is mentioned an aspect of military strength that is valued for the perceptions it produces. It is apparently something in addition to the forces earlier deemed necessary for deterrence, since these are listed separately as forces for assured destruction, flexible targeting option capabilities, and survivable second-strike reserves. The idea is that US strategic striking forces should not appear inferior to those of an opponent. This idea was to become an important aspect of equivalence.

In the Fiscal Year 1976 Defense Report, Schlesinger spoke explicitly of equivalence and specifically of essential equivalence. The element of perceptions was again present, and specifically perceptions of non-superpower nations. However, the essential equivalence he spoke of differed from the concept as it was most often understood later in that it did not seem to refer to numerical equivalence, but rather to qualitative matters. Schlesinger did not speak of aggregate force size or composition. (Foster 1978:27):

Credible nuclear deterrence depends on the satisfaction of four major requirements. First, we must maintain an essential equivalence [emphasis added] with the Soviet Union in the basic factors that determine force effectiveness. Because of uncertainty about the future and the shape that the strategic competition could take, we cannot allow major asymmetries to develop in throw-weight, accuracy, yield-to-weight ratios, reliability, and other such factors that contribute to the effectiveness of strategic weapons and to the perceptions of the non-superpower nations. At the same time our forces should promote nuclear weapons and by deterring and avoiding increased nuclear deployments by other powers. (US Department of Defense 1975:I-1.)

Two of the other three requirements were for assured destruction capability and flexible targeting capability. The fourth was for

range and magnitude of capabilities such that everyone -- friend, foe, and domestic audiences alike -- will perceive that we are the equal of our strongest competitors [emphasis added]. We should not take the chance that in this most hazardous of areas, misperceptions could lead to miscalculation, confrontation, and crisis. (US Department of Defense 1975:I-14)

With its focus on equality and perception, this fourth "major requirement" is perhaps closer to what essential equivalence later came to mean than is Schlesinger's first requirement, which is explicitly designated essential equivalence.

Meanwhile, in Congress, the Senate remained committed to equivalence of intercontinental strategic forces. On May 5, 1976, the Senate reaffirmed the Jackson amendment with passage of the Allen-Byrd amendment, which repeated that equivalence is the only acceptable US-Soviet strategic force ratio, and the only basis for a permanent SALT agreement. (Lehman and Hughes 1977:1046) Also, in 1976, in the Presidential campaign of that year, candidate Jimmy Carter spoke of favoring "rough equivalence" of strategic forces. (Lehman and Hughes 1977:1046)

In the Joint Chiefs of Staff military posture statement for FY 1978, submitted in 1977, equivalence was again discussed. In the introduction to the document, the authors stated that "rough equivalence" had come into being as a result of the massive growth in Soviet strategic nuclear capability, and then spoke of the importance of maintaining this "rough strategic equivalence." (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 1977:1)

In the body of the statement, the concept of essential equivalence appeared as central to "US Nuclear Strategy." The paragraph immediately following that heading reads:

The basic military goal of the United States is to deter armed conflict. In support of this goal, our nuclear strategy is to maintain nuclear stability through a clearly perceived essential equivalence in strategic nuclear forces. By this equivalence, we expect to deter the use, or the threat of use, of nuclear forces against the United States, our deployed forces, our allies, and other nations considered essential to our security. We seek to create a situation where the Soviet Union will not gain an advantage from the initiation of strategic nuclear warfare. (US Joint Chiefs of Staff 1977:6)

This passage makes it clear that essential equivalence means essential equivalence in aggregate strategic forces, and also reiterates the idea that the equivalence must be perceived as equal. However, despite the prominence given to essential equivalence, the report does not clearly clarify its role. It would appear from the paragraph quoted that stability is the chief foundation of deterrence, and equivalence the chief foundation of stability, which would logically make equivalence of prime importance to deterrence. Indeed, the paragraph clearly states, "By this equivalence, we expect to deter the use . . . of nuclear forces" [emphasis added].

Actually, the massive literature on deterrence and the many official references to it make it clear that equivalence of forces has generally

not been considered a requirement for deterrence. Deterrence has, from the period just after World War II, been considered to depend on possession of an invulnerable retaliatory force, one that can survive a strike against it and still deliver unacceptable damage to the attacker. Mutual deterrence is believed to exist when both sides have such invulnerable forces. Equality or equivalence in the size of the forces has not been considered, and is not logically, essential to deterrence. Stability is a more complicated concept than deterrence, one on which there is less agreement. However, in a strategic nuclear context, it usually means a low probability of strategic nuclear war, and, specifically, a low probability that is achieved by the existence of highly invulnerable retaliatory forces on both sides and vulnerable societies (serving as targets for the opposing retaliatory forces) on both sides.\* Equivalence is far from the basic requirement for stability, so understood. Certainly equivalence of forces alone could not achieve a situation in which the Soviet Union could not "gain an advantage from the initiation of strategic nuclear warfare," as the last sentence of the quoted passage suggests, unless hardening, dispersal, and concealment of the retaliatory force are counted when the strength of forces is added up.

There is, however, an inevitable intuitive association between the size and effectiveness of one's forces and one's ability to deter attack. It seems certain that the Soviet military leadership views deterrence in this light. Soviet attitudes, and some relevant US analysis, are discussed

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\*See the author's papers on deterrence and stability, prepared for the Defense Nuclear Agency under the current contract.

below, pp. [18-24]. In any case, it appears likely that the authors of the FY 1978 Posture Statement did not mean to make their claims for essential equivalence as sweeping as they actually did.

Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, in April 1977, a few months after taking office, spoke about essential equivalence in an address at the University of Rochester. Brown listed deterrence, stability, and equivalence as three major objectives sought by the United States in its strategic planning. This listing indicates that Brown saw equivalence as an objective separate from deterrence and stability and roughly equal to them. James Foster, in analyzing Brown's statement said that the three objectives were listed as coequal and inferred that, since deterrence and stability are sufficient to fulfill the military task of strategic weapons, equivalence must be intended for international political purposes, to influence perceptions of the strategic balance. (Foster 1978) Brown did indeed mention the "significant political advantages" the Soviets might acquire if the two superpowers or other nations perceived "an unequal strategic balance." However, it is not entirely clear that Brown intended the three objectives to be equal and separate. They seem, rather, closely intertwined in his address.

Brown stated that the United States has "foregone the quest for a first-strike superiority over the Soviet Union" in the interest of stability, noting that stability requires a secure Soviet deterrent as well as a secure US deterrent. This is good, orthodox stability theory,\* and the United States had indeed renounced efforts to maintain a first-strike

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\*See the author's paper on stability, prepared for the Defense Nuclear Agency under this contract.

capability, both for reasons of stability theory and because of the great fiscal difficulty of maintaining such a capability in the face of the massive Soviet buildup.

Secretary Brown went on to say that while we have relinquished superiority we will accept nothing less than equivalence. This is an unexceptionable statement, but it implies that it is superiority in numbers that produces a first-strike force, whereas a first-strike force requires a force much larger in numbers, and possessing several other characteristics that enable it to disarm the opponent's strategic forces. The choice is not really between a first-strike force and a not-less-than-equivalent force, as it seems to be here.

Further, on the subject of deterrence, the Secretary's address stated that US forces will "continue to provide a deterrence that . . . produces perceived equivalence," so that equivalence here seems to depend upon deterrence, rather than vice versa, as in the FY 1978 posture statement.

To analyze the Secretary's entire discussion of equivalence would be an unnecessarily intricate exercise. Suffice it to say that, in this address, the three concepts of deterrence, stability, and equivalence seem closely interdependent in ways that are not very clearly defined.

What seems clear is that not much importance should be given to the fact that in the posture statement deterrence appears to depend upon stability and stability upon equivalence, while in Secretary Brown's address the three objectives are listed in a way that makes them appear, at first glance, to be considered equal and independent. To note this is not to criticize it. Official statements are not likely to be clear and logical,

since a little fuzziness provides for more freedom of interpretation and action. George Quester has recently made a strong case for President Eisenhower's effectiveness in foreign affairs, an effectiveness achieved in part by deliberately keeping policies somewhat vague.\* However, it does seem important that policy makers and influential members of the defense community have some clear and shared idea as to what these concepts mean, if policy is to be based on them.

A culminating example of juggling the relationships of deterrence, stability, and equivalence may be noted. The terms of reference for the National Defense University Conference on Equivalence, Sufficiency, and the International Balance (1978) referred to equivalence as the "essence" of US strategic policy, entailing crisis stability, the balancing of US and Soviet strategic force advantages, the universal perception of equality in strategic capabilities, and the denial of nuclear forces as instruments of political leverage, coercion, or military advantage. (Foster 1978:24-25) To make essential equivalence the "essence" of US strategic policy and to subsume crisis stability and what sounds like deterrence under the heading of essential equivalence would suggest a revolution in strategic thinking if the authors of these terms of reference really meant what they said.

Secretary Brown, in his FY 1979 annual Defense Report, made the clearest presentation of essential equivalence, up to that time, that has been found. After discussing deterrence, Secretary Brown stated that nuclear capabilities

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\*"Was Eisenhower a Genius?" International Security 4:159-79 (fall 1979).

are not solely instruments of deterrence, but also have other functions. They are the backdrop for international politics and play a role in international diplomacy, as a threat or as an inducement to seek alliance with their possessor. Theoretically, the forces necessary for deterrence should be enough, but practically, other countries may not assess forces in this way, and may think the United States is weak if it does not possess forces essentially equivalent to those of the Soviet Union in "strategic offensive capabilities." (US Department of Defense 1978:56)

The report went on to define essential equivalence as

a condition such that any advantages in force characteristics enjoyed by the Soviets are offset by other U.S. advantages. Although we must avoid a resort to one-for-one matching of individual indices of capability, our strategic nuclear posture must not be, and must not seem to be, inferior in performance to the capabilities of the Soviet Union.

It then listed four purposes of essential equivalence, the first of which was to keep political perceptions of strategic weaponry as high as the "military realities" and prevent an opponent from using his strategic forces to seek political advantage over the United States. The others were to contribute to stability by reducing the chances that either side would "become vulnerable to charges of a bomber or missile gap"; enhance crisis stability by reducing the incentives for either side to strike first or preempt; and make it more sure that future SALT agreements will codify equivalence and not some existing imbalance of forces. (US Department of Defense 1978:56-57)

From this treatment of essential equivalence, certain features emerge fairly clearly. Although it is not stated specifically, it seems clear that the chief reason for maintaining (or regaining) essential equivalence is

the international political role played by the ratio of US to Soviet forces. It is other countries' perceptions of relative US and Soviet strategic nuclear forces that require essential equivalence. However, the report makes it clear that what is to be achieved by the United States is not merely the semblance of equality -- the US posture "must not be, and must not seem to be, inferior [emphasis added]." The ways in which equivalence is to be measured are, probably purposely and probably wisely, left undefined, but a reasonable assumption would be that "force characteristics" includes both qualitative and quantitative factors.

The relationship between stability and equivalence is a little hard to make out. The point about crisis stability is fairly clear, but the phrase "become vulnerable to charges of a bomber or missile gap," is not. Apparently, what is referred to here is arms race stability; i.e., if essential equivalence exists and is universally recognized, there is little danger that either side will fear it suffers from a bomber or missile gap, and thus little danger that it will undertake a huge weapons acquisition program to make up the suspected gap.

A final point may be noted about this report. The references to "one side or the other" and "either side" suggest that equivalence is considered a desired condition, preferable to US superiority as well as preferable to Soviet superiority. This is not stated, and may well not be intended, but it is an inference that may logically be drawn.

The Defense Report for FY 1981 also deals at some length with essential equivalence, which is listed as the first of four "other objectives" of US strategic policy, following deterrence, the "most fundamental objective."