

THE COLD WAR IS COLD POKER

By Oskar Morgenstern

The cold war is sometimes compared to a giant chess game between ourselves and the Soviet Union, and Russia's disturbingly frequent successes are sometimes attributed to the national preoccupation with chess. The analogy, however, is quite false, for while chess is a formidable game of almost unbelievable complexity, it lacks salient features of the political and military struggles with which it is compared.

Chess is, to begin with, a game of complete information. That is, the chess opponent has no unknown cards, no means at his disposal which the other player cannot see and know all about. Every move is made in the open; consequently (AND THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT); there is no possibility of bluffing, no opportunity to deceive. Obviously, these conditions are far removed from political reality, where threats abound, where the threatening nation has to weigh the cost not only to its enemies, but to itself, where deceit is certainly not unheard of, and where chance intervenes, suddenly favoring first one side, then another.

These strategic elements, lacking in chess, are basic to poker. Oswald Jacoby, one of its ablest players and interpreters, has called **poker** "a game of wile and artifice," and this thumbnail description accurately conveys one of its fundamental distinguishing features: 'THE BEST HAND NEED NOT WIN.

Card strength is not necessarily decisive. With ordinary cards, the consistent winners rely on their ability to perceive opportunities offered by each changing situation, and on artful deception through bluffing. Chess may be on a higher moral plane, but poker describes better what goes on in political reality where countries with opposing aims and ideals watch each other's move with unveiled suspicion. Today a new hand is being dealt in the cold war that is a game of cold poker between the **Kremlin** and the Administration in Washington.

If chess is the Russian national pastime and poker is ours, **we ought to be** more skillful than they in applying its precepts to the cold-war struggle. Yet paradoxically the use of "wile and artifice" on an international level seems seldom to have occurred to us: to be, somehow, against our national instincts.

In shooting wars, we have traditionally relied on brute strength --on overwhelming the enemy **by** a massive accumulation of power. In foreign policy we have tended to place similar faith in moral strength, occupying unassailable legal positions in the sometime mystical belief that doing so will in itself guarantee a favorable outcome for ourselves and the "free world."

A policy of accumulated military strength is a sound strategy when the enemy is distant (as he was during the first two world wars) and *can be* held in check by allies while we gather our forces...Relying on "rights" may be equally strategic when peacetime antagonists share our system of values and are capable of being influenced by moral pressure. Even when this is not the case, it is desirable to maintain high moral standards in national policy. But, granting such standards, a fully developed strategic approach is still essential.

The present cold war situation makes this need for strategic perception not only apparent but imperative, Thermonuclear disaster might be triggered at any time by a few false steps which become increasingly difficult to avoid as new conflict zones, Like Cuba and Congo, arise. Furthermore, nuclear weapons are spreading ominously to more nations while the ability to deliver them anywhere, from any point on earth, is already in the hands of the two superpowers.

With bluffs so much easier to make and threats so much more potent than at any previous time in history, it is essential not only for our own State Department but for the entire world to understand what bluffs and threats mean; when they are appropriate; whether they should be avoided at all costs; in short, that is the sanest way to play this deadly, real life version of poker.

In the--relatively--harmless parlor game, it has been demonstrated time and again that experience counts; no matter how the cards fall, good poker players eventually win, poor ones lose. But even the experienced player is well advised to stick to a carefully thought out policy based on firm principles. Yet what principles? What constructive generalizations can be made about specific tactics and overall strategy in a game that is characterized by such dramatic shifts of fortune?

The first thing to recognize is that bluffing is indispensable. It is important to know the probabilities of being dealt or drawing various hands, such as a straight or flush: but if you acted wholly on the basis of these percentages, automatically raising with strong hands and folding with weak ones, your opponents would *soon* discover your strategy and bluff you out of the game.

Putting this principle in reverse, it is all-important not to reveal your entire strategy: to combine your use of cards and betting in such a way as to keep your opponents in the dark about your true strength. This means bluffing.

Bluff enough to be found out. While bluffing is an essential tactic it should not be used with every hand (since that strategy would become expensive and transparent), but often enough to have the bluff discovered occasionally, thus

planting precisely the kind of uncertainty you are striving for in the minds of your opponents.

Looked at in this way, bluffing has little if anything to do with "risky" offensive playing. On the contrary, it becomes an important defensive, indeed a downright precautionary measure. It not only prevents your opponents from recognizing patterns in your strategy, but by throwing them off balance tends to enforce caution and rigidity on them, and thus reveal their individual patterns of play.

The second major principle is not to call all bluffs. For all astute players bluff selectively, but no one will bluff against an opponent who calls whenever he is convinced that he is being bluffed. By following that strategy you give away your own pattern of play, serve warning to your opponents in advance, and deny yourself the sometimes very high winnings that can come from successfully calling bluffs by others.

A third principle for the wise player is to drop out when he has consistently poor hands, and to realize that an opponent with a winning streak is especially dangerous. In the first instance, he has no choice but the unacceptable one of being rigid in his tactics; in the second, he is opposed by cumulative strength when the opponent enters his most dangerous phase.

These basic principles tend to support an "optimal strategy;" that is behavior which guarantees the safest (not necessarily the most) winnings; or to put it another way, which minimizes the worst that others can do to you. This is the general, overriding objective. Each player wants to maximize his gains, of course, but it is usually at this point that he begins to take irrational risks. The important thing in poker is to maintain flexibility as prescribed by a firm optimal strategy. In poker there is never a question of motivation. It is simply that each player wants to win the pot, and to make the other players build it up as high as possible. Bluffing without motivation would be pointless, since no "threat" would be believed, and the game would fall apart unless all players were equally motivated.

Although the situations are not completely identical in poker and the cold war, they are similar enough so that something substantial can be learned from good poker principles. Corresponding to each player's cards and chips, you have the quantity and quality of a country's weapons, the disturbance which one country can cause another, and the changes in national plans that can be imposed.

Bluffs correspond to the numerous threats being made with increasing frequency on the contemporary international scene. Calling a bluff corresponds to the showdown in concrete instances, which may involve "pots" (issues) of varying sizes (importance).

Using the world as a table, we and the Communists have played an extremely active game since the end of World War II, and especially since Stalin's death. Toward the end of his life, Stalin's strategy became so rigid that his pattern of play could be anticipated by the West. Since he seldom bluffed, and almost always based his moves on actual strength, there was no question of disagreement among his opponents as to his motives. Any Communist threat had the effect of alarming and unifying the West, which was exactly opposite to the result Russia desired.

This Allied unity was an important card in our hands when the Communists attacked South Korea. In initiating that action, the Communists might be said to have raised our bid to protect the country. By sending in troops, we called the Communist bluff. We won the pot: militarily, because at the end of the war we still held South Korea; in propaganda terms, since world opinion agreed that we had stopped a conqueror.

But we won it only because the Russians had foolishly discarded one of their best cards by walking out on the U.N. and allowing our troops to defend South Korea under the auspice of the world organization.

By playing a much less rigid and more astute game Khrushchev had reversed the losing streak which characterized Stalin's last years. Unquestionably the most successful bluff, by either side, during the past five years was the Soviet Union's threat in 1956 to rain missiles on England unless she stopped her action in Egypt.

Whatever the merits are of the British attack on Suez, it is clear that it was called off, not in response to Russian threat but because of American pressure on her ally. Yet world opinion was persuaded that the Russians had secured peace by making a threat--a threat, moreover, which they could never have carried out without involving the United States and thereby insuring devastation to their own homeland.

This threat was a propaganda bluff, and as such it worked. It was believed. Since the true distribution of power in 1956 was completely different from what the Russians made it appear to be, they scored a great gain in the cold and propaganda war.

The proposal for the cessation of nuclear tests is another instance where the Communist have scored. They succeeded in combining simultaneously an ultimatum with negotiations--a unique achievement. The ultimatum concerned Berlin, and was issued while we were sitting at the table of Geneva negotiating a nuclear test ban. It did not even occur to us immediately to break off these talks as long as we were threatened in Berlin. As a result, our attention was divided.

The pot --a large one --went to the Russians. Berlin is no more secure as a result of those talks, but by prolonging negotiations on condition that no tests would take place while they were going on, the Russians have obtained what amounts to a cessation of tests without inspection.

This outcome is entirely contradictory to our avowed aims not to grant arms limitations without adequate inspection. We have been maneuvered into a position in which we ourselves may not even hold underground tests, with no assurance whatsoever that the Russians are not **secretly** continuing them to develop small nuclear arms. To avoid being put at a serious military disadvantage, we should openly resume nuclear underground testing as speedily as possible; yet, if **we** do, the odium of resumption is upon us.

It is shocking to contemplate the dilemma in which we have been caught, and the naivete which prevented our leaders **from** seeing how the cards were being reshuffled by our adversary. This is probably our single most poorly handled maneuver since the Cold War began, but it is not the only "hand" we have misjudged.

Berlin is another case in point. Breaking the Communist blockade by airlift has been hailed as a great accomplishment, and it is true that the **airlift itself was technically** magnificent. But it was a tremendously costly and a quite inappropriate response to a simple roadblock costing the Communists exactly nothing.

There were equally simple and more direct means to overcome it, especially at a time when our total nuclear power was so much greater than that of the Soviets. For example, as some military authorities suggested at the time, we could have broken through the roadblock using no more than a few tanks-- and gotten away with it. We held strong cards but did not know how to use them. We fell a bluff that was easy to recognize as a bluff, even at the time.

On the other hand, there is no question that America has already won a number of cold-war "hands," either by bluffing or by calling Communist bluffs. To the Korean "pot" and Berlin, Quemoy and Matsuo could be added.

Neither side has bluffed or **called** bluffs constantly, yet each has bluffed successfully and, on occasion, allowed its own bluff to be discovered. If the Communist seem to be superior players to date, it is perhaps not so much because of their tactics in playing any particular hand, as because of their firmer adherence to sound optimal strategy.

In poker, as we have seen, bluffing and calling are meaningless tactics unless they implement a steady strategy. Flexibility is important in cold war as in poker, but strategic principles must be followed nonetheless. Too much vacillation,

whether or not it is rationalized as flexibility, is almost sure to end in defeat. On the other hand, absolute rigidity is no better, since it prevents adjustment to physical changes within one's own and the enemy's position--as if, in poker, all cards had the same value.

Yet, the United States has, with some justice, been criticized for being alternately too uncertain of its line, as at the second Geneva conference, and too rigid, as in our refusal to recognize Red China--the most populous country in the world, and in few decades, sure to be one of the most powerful.

In contrast to these evidences of confusion in Western policy, Khrushchev behaves as if he himself personified the purposeful flexibility of Communist strategy: alternately acting the clown, the bon vivant, and the ogre, yet never stepping completely out of character and managing to keep his non-Communist audience in a state of chronic uncertainty about whether to boo or applaud, take heart or lose hope.