

# Deterrence: Concepts and Approaches for Current and Emerging Threats

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## Abstract

By exploring and analysing the complexities associated with the development and application of the concept of deterrence in resolving conflicts, this chapter sets the context of the book. Deterrence has to do with maintaining the status quo by convincing an opponent or ally that the cost of an unwanted action is greater than the rewards. Deterrence, on the one hand can act as a delaying mechanism in dealing effectively with opponents, in which case the aim would be to contain a conflict and the focus is zero-sum and more short term. On the other, deterrence can have the role of a proactive mechanism, where the focus is longer term. To be able however, to make shifts from zero-sum to a positive-sum the deterring party needs to be aware of context specific variables such as the opponent's values' system, the mind-set, and decision making processes. Routinely, mirror-imaging influences decision making leading states to develop deterrence policies with limited impact and effectiveness, as deterrence requires an understanding of the other's as well as one's own motives, objectives, and decision-making processes. Mirror-imaging leads to questionable assumptions about opponents' values and how they will behave under pressure.

1.

## Introduction

By exploring and analysing the complexities associated with the development and application of the concept of deterrence in resolving conflicts, this chapter sets the context of the book. Deterrence has to do with maintaining the status quo by convincing an opponent or ally that the cost of an unwanted action is greater than the rewards. Deterrence, on the one hand can act as a delaying mechanism in dealing effectively with opponents, in which case the aim would be to contain a conflict and the focus is zero-sum and more short term. On the other, deterrence can have the role of a proactive mechanism, where the focus is longer term. To be

able however, to make shifts from zero-sum to a positive-sum the deterring party needs to be aware of context specific variables such as the opponent's values' system, the mind-set, and decision making processes. Routinely, mirror-imaging influences decision making leading states to develop deterrence policies with limited impact and effectiveness, as deterrence requires an understanding of the other's as well as one's own motives, objectives, and decision-making processes. Mirror-imaging leads to questionable assumptions about opponents' values and how they will behave under pressure.

The origins of the concept of deterrence can be traced back in antiquity. The Roman adage '*si vis pacem, para bellum*' (if you want peace, prepare for war) is found in Vegetius' (2012) *De Re Militari* (Concerning Military Affairs), but the principle it conveys can also be found in Plato's (2005) *Nόμοι* (Laws). In modern times, deterrence theory was predominantly a product of the Cold War. The concept has had to adjust to new threats and realities while building on past foundational principles. The core of deterrence is dealing effectively with a conflict. Although deterrence appears to entail a zero-sum game situation, this need not be the case, as an increasingly complex world has led to the need for fine balances, which require a more nuanced approach. For a non-zero-sum approach, a degree of common interest between the deterrent party and the deterred must exist and each side has to believe that more can be gained through compliance than by trying unilaterally to take what it wants forcefully. For deterrence to be able to effectively deal with current global complexities and to be an effective enabler in resolving a conflict, the balance has to shift from zero-sum, positive-negative endpoint to a more balanced positive-sum, win-win outcome. To set the context of the book, this chapter examines the evolution of the concept of deterrence, and it considers questions such as: How can a state achieve the above balance shift? In what way can the traditional concept of deterrence be expanded and adapted to deal with current complex realities? In what way can a state deter but not alienate?

2.

## Deterrence as a Foreign Policy and Conflict Resolution Tool

Deterrence does not exist in a vacuum. It entails conflicting parties, the issue of conflict, and a tense situation, and friction. One party aims to achieve a goal against another party. Consequently, deterrence is formed against one or more opponents, who also shape their own policy in order

to counter the former. The friction is necessary because it creates an interconnectedness between the conflicting parties, and each side's moves are closely connected with those of the opponent. Deterrence was originally envisaged as a foreign policy instrument reflecting a state's influence and power. The practice and effective implementation of deterrence complements other instruments states use to exert influence (Johnson 2004). Even though the concept of deterrence has its roots in past experiences, it has had to adjust to new threats and realities while building on past foundational principles. A state's policy may focus on maintaining or on altering the status quo, and either of these can be achieved by the threat or the actual use of force. As a general indication Table 1 below specifies that a state's policy may be classified as proactive and reactive, compellent and deterrent.

**Table 1**

Policy formation and deterrence

		<b>Political objectives</b>
		Altering status quo
<b>Means</b>	Use of force	Proactive
	Threat of force	Compellent

Understandably, what is defensive and reactive or offensive and proactive is viewed differently from the side that is on the receiving end of the deterrent threat. In theory, deterrence aims to maintain the status quo. Through the use of threat deterrence strives to dissuade opponents from attempting to achieve their objectives. The point is that once a deterrence threat is issued its impact can be long term, because once a threat is issued it cannot be 'un-issued'. After deterrence has taken place, and even though deterrence's aim is to maintain the status quo, the conflicting parties do not really renormalize and return to the status quo ante. The situation changes for all those involved. Moreover, in a complex and interdependent world the distinction between a proactive and a reactive approach is increasingly blurred. In reality, deterrence becomes a borderline between offense and defence.

The logic of deterrence is to act in a timely fashion and as early as possible in order to stop an escalation of a conflict before the balance of power tips in any decisive way and before the opponent gains a threatening advantage. A key challenge is that not only does the concept of deterrence have fluid boundaries, there are also conditions in order for it to be successfully implemented. George emphasised the infeasibility of

a universal theory of deterrence, and argued that both explanatory and policy relevant theory require context dependent conditional generalisations that were also informed by history (George et al. 1971). Deterrence is inherently imperfect. According to Morgan, deterrence does not consistently work and we cannot manipulate it sufficiently, and it must be approached with care and used as part of a larger tool kit (Morgan 2003: 285).

For Schelling deterrence is ‘persuading a potential enemy that he should in his own interest avoid certain courses of activity’ (Schelling 1960: 9). Influencing behaviour through fear is twofold: deterrence – ‘inducing an adversary not to do something’, and compellence – ‘inducing another to do something’ (Schelling 1982: 72). The former appears to be predominantly but not just reactive, while the latter appears to be more proactive. Based on the above definition, the one concept is the inverse of the other, as to deter someone from doing something will involve a number of coercive actions, while to compel someone to do something will entail a number of deterrent actions. In reality, as both concepts have to do with interpretation, influence, and perception, the boundaries between deterrence and compellence may become blurred. Likewise Luttwak distinguishes between active deterrence as the negative subset of coercion – preventing an opponent from doing something – and compellence, the positive subset, which is making an opponent do something they would not wish to do (Luttwak 1974). Moreover, there is latent and inherent deterrence, according to which a potential opponent is not specifically targeted, however potential opponents would be expected to draw conclusions about capacity and will, upon which to base their decision for future behaviour and action. Still, as already, in a complex political environment the boundaries of deterrence and compellence become blurred, since a lot depends on how action and inaction is perceived. After all, deterrence functions on a spectrum of conflict, and the aim remains the same, which is to prevent objectionable behaviour and to coerce an opponent to comply with one’s own choices.

Overall, deterrent threat is categorised into denial, retaliation, and punishment (Freedman 2004; Snyder 1961; Schelling 1966). The aim is that through the threat of force the opponent does not initiate an attack, for fear that the potential cost will far outweigh any likely benefit. Knopf identifies four waves of deterrence conceptualisation. He places the first wave at the end of World War II and the atomic bomb; the second wave originates in the 1950s with the ascendance of game theory at the epicentre of nuclear strategy; the third wave in the 1970s recognises the inherent imperfections of deterrence and the limits of its applicability

(Knopf 2010). With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the balance of power the applicability of the traditional concept of deterrence came into intense scrutiny. The current fourth wave, according to Knopf, reflects the context of asymmetric threats and emphasises non-state actors and the role non-military tools might play in deterrence. Noteworthy is that this categorisation is predominantly from a Western perspective, and it reflects the dominant school of thought.

3.

## Symmetry and Asymmetry

Governments aim to match capability with deterrence approaches fit to deal with symmetric and asymmetric threats, including terrorist and violent extremist threats. Adopting a stance able to reflect upon and interpret the weight and demands of value-based appeals can suggest targets for deterrent behaviour. Often there is a number of underlying assumptions when implementing deterrence (Paul et al. 2009). A key assumption is rationality, according to which actors are deemed to engage in objective win-lose calculations. Conventional deterrence theory is linked to Rational Choice theory, which suggests that actors are rational, and they prioritise preferences, and seek to achieve these preferences in a structured and orderly manner. In this context however, conflicting parties would have to weigh costs and benefits in a similar way, as without this common basis different importance would be attributed to different values which could lead to the escalation of conflict. However, within a complex and complicated context, actors apply logic as they understand it. When formulating a deterrence policy states and decision makers often forget or choose to ignore that the opponents they are trying to deter possess an independent will and employ a strategy of their own. For instance, retaliation and punishment might actually be considered by adversary networks as opportunities to boost their cause and their recruitment campaign. Hereby actors may use narratives of oppression and justification of violence as responses against the deterrent threat. Deterrence in this context becomes ineffective as it brings about outcomes that are opposite to those sought. Adler characterises this as a ‘deterrence trap’ where the asymmetrically weaker adversary gains from both possible postures – self-restraint or retaliation - by the stronger deterrent state. ‘Damned if you do and damned if you don’t’ is the way Adler describes deterrent strategies (2009). This had an impact on Rational Choice theory, which had to adjust and developed the concept of bounded rationality that provides for incomplete information, emotional state, and other variables

than can lead actors to a decision that does not result to the expected outcome.

What is more, the necessary friction and interconnectedness between the conflicting parties has a direct impact on choices and the effectiveness of a deterrence policy. The existence of an opponent will make a state form a deterrence approach through a roundabout route instead of launching a head-on attack, for instance. This paradoxical logic is encapsulated in the Latin dictum referred to in the introduction of 'si vis pacem, para bellum' (if you want peace, prepare for war). In the realm of deterrence this dictum is accepted as conventional wisdom, as it underlines the crux of the principle of deterrence by arguing that in order to discourage aggression a state must be or appear to be strong enough to defeat an attack, or to make it too costly to make it worthwhile for the opponent to initiate an attack (Luttwak 1987). Certain deterrent approaches may be meaningful before an opponent violates the status quo, but may not form rational choices after an opponent violates the status quo. Retaliation could maintain its deterrent value, as it can still imply grave consequences, but the rationality of its execution can be put into considerable doubt once an opponent actually 'crosses the line'.

The link between asymmetry and rational decision making during deterrence is not straightforward. In theory asymmetry should make deterrence particularly effective, as a threat by a stronger actor should deter a weaker and smaller actor. Barry advocates that 'the criterion for a power relation is an asymmetry between the parties, and under such conditions threats are always an exercise of power, rewards only sometime' (Barry 1976: 93). However, in practice more often than not strong states fail to deter weaker opponents because the latter can be highly motivated and fighting a perceived or real existential threat. There is a number of elements such as psychological, historical, contextual, discussed in more detail below, that influence decision making, and action taking. Asymmetry of power and motivations, misinterpreting the type and degree of the possible response, exploiting vulnerabilities and limitations, taking advantage of wider support, are but few of the reasons why a stronger state might not be able to deter a weaker one. What is more, inducements and concessions are not of equal value. Thus, successful deterrence relies on understanding what all actors involved really value, the value they put on inducements and threats, what each actor is willing to risk, and finally in communicating their position in an effective and persuasive manner. It is important for the actors to know their own as well as their potential opponent's values.

Weaker actors may have higher legitimacy and political will defeating materially stronger opponents. When legitimacy and control coincide they can determine the number of national choices available to a state and the maximum national value those choices can achieve (Schwartz and Kirk 2009). The power of motivation can be more important and more effective than physical might. As Clausewitz asserts 'the more powerful and inspiring the motives for war, the more they affect the belligerent nations and the fiercer the tensions' (Von Clausewitz 1976: 87). The element of symmetry between conflicting parties could make deterrence more influential and effective, as a failed deterrence could lead to devastation. On the other however, this symmetry can lead to a standoff and a lasting stalemate regarding the resolution of the conflict.

Asymmetry between the conflicting parties could also make deterrence more effective, as the deterrer might have the power and the ability to obtain low cost compliance. On the other however, this asymmetry may become irrelevant depending on the motivation of the weaker side.

A fundamental element of deterrence is identifying the key actors to be deterred. However, this becomes even more complex when aiming to deter non-state actors especially when the latter is part of a loose network instead of a structured and hierarchical organisation. On the other, the loose structure of violent extremist networks can be seen as an additional opportunity for deterrence, as there are multiple levels, from foot soldiers to fundraisers, to the leadership, and with different degrees of commitment to 'the cause' within a non-state group that can be the target of deterrence. After all, non-state groups are rarely homogeneous, instead often they comprise of sub-cultures, with even distinct elements willing to operate independently. Dealing with actors with different levels of resolve, motivation and value systems would require different approaches to deterrence. Certain members and followers of a non-state organisation may be more susceptible to deterrence than others, while some may simply be beyond the reach of deterrence and therefore require different treatment altogether. Moreover, different elements such as timing, the stage of operations, and access to resources will dictate a non-state's susceptibility to deterrence.

Attempts to deter non-state actors generally entail the building of a kind of a mutual deterrent relationship, in the sense that a decision has to be felt as relevant to the deterred in order to feel the pressure and the need to abide by it. This can be achieved by creating an expectation within the target to be deterred that they face very high costs for instance, through the intensification of legislation, and the introduction of new policies and measures. If successful, this should induce the receiving actor to refrain

from taking action. The idea is that mutual vulnerability could contribute to mutual security, that is if the conflicting parties desire peace, they would allow for some degree of vulnerability within their defence approaches. Still, in asymmetric conflicts actors often deliberately choose escalation, and an approach of provocation, what Marighella called ‘enraging the beast’ (1969). Thus, actors may choose to adopt a deliberate escalation of a conflict when the restraint required for deterrence is or is perceived to be an unbearable acquiescence to intolerable enemy force or to a losing strategy. The sum total of pressures on non-state actors once they adopt violent extremism as a strategy tend to create an escalation trap, which would make it resistant to deterrence (Neumann and Smith 2008: 76–92).

4.

## Negative and Limited vs Positive and Broader Deterrence in Conflict Resolution

Deterrence theory dominated the Cold War, to the point that it turned ‘narrow’ deterrence strategies into orthodoxy in the West (Freedman 2004: 1). Old narratives however, have to adapt in order to reflect new and complex realities, and today’s breadth and depth of challenges increases the complexity of formulating and communicating deterrence. In essence though, the objective of deterrence remains to persuade an opponent through the implementation of different means and methods that the costs of taking an action far outweigh the potential benefits that action might offer. Within this context, deterrence is threat-based and it appears to entail a zero-sum situation. This in turn may create an environment that precludes constructive and lasting conflict resolution. When deterrence is used in a negative way it has more limited outcomes as it focuses on zero-sum approaches. In this way, deterrence is used as a delaying mechanism during a conflict, mainly focusing on conflict containment. This approach however, has a limited and short term outlook regarding the resolution of a conflict, and deterrence becomes more reactive than proactive.

For deterrence to have lasting effects, a zero-sum situation would have to be transformed to a positive-sum. To this end, a degree of common interest between the deterrent party and the deterred has to exist or to be created with policies and measures, and each side has to believe that it can gain more by compliance than by trying unilaterally to take what it wants forcefully. On the whole, the concept of deterrence has a negative undertone, as the element of punishment is inherent in the notion of



deterrence. Embedded in much thinking on deterrence is the problematic idea that it is external to the deterring side and that only the other side needs to change. The specifics of a deterrence policy would depend on the mindset towards the conflict overall. If the aim is just to contain a conflict, then deterrence may be elevated to a strategy, an outcome and an endgame, but if the aim is to try and resolve a protracted conflict then deterrence becomes a means and a tactic. After all, deterrence is a tool in the toolbox of a state's policy making, and it depends on the state's aims as to how deterrence is designed and used. If deterrence is elevated to a strategy, it becomes not just part of what the deterring side does, but also part of who the deterring side is. In effect it validates who the deterring party is internally and externally, as the latter allows the deterring party to have routinized and normalised interactions with others, and the former allows them to hold a coherent narrative of their self (Lupovici 2016). However, as discussed this mindset towards deterrence nourishes and maintains the conflict between the parties, and thus provides the paradox that while attempting to avoid an overt conflict, this type of deterrence preserves the conflict.

It appears that deterrence can only be tested negatively, whereby the success of deterrence is assessed by events that did not take place. In other words, a deterrent threat is measured by it not having to be implemented. However, it is not always possible to know that the absence of violent conflict was the result of deterrence or despite of it. It is very difficult however, if not impossible, to prove a negative and to determine with accuracy why something has not occurred. This in turn makes it difficult to assess whether the adopted policy was the best possible option. Shifting from a zero-sum to a positive-sum approach would make it possible to identify and potentially measure improvements that may discourage attacks against the state or its population. Deterrence can also have a positive purpose of reassuring allies that something is done against a potential opponent. Therefore, deterrence may play a simultaneous dual role: negative, focusing on the opponent, and positive, focusing on the allies. However, even this positive role has a negative undertone. In the sense that it may be fear of deterrence being applied on an actor that makes that makes a state remain an ally.

The transformation from zero-sum to a positive sum could be possible as deterrence is but a tool, and as such it depends on the attitude and intent of the deterring side as to how and why a deterrent message is issued and how it is implemented. For these shifts from zero-sum to a positive sum to be possible the deterring party needs to be familiar with context specific variables such as the non-states actors' value system for instance, as well

as their mindset and their decision making processes. The effectiveness of deterrence depends on defining what the target actor values, having the will and capability of holding it at risk, and for a state to credibly communicate a threat to the target actor. The problem is when actors appear to have no threshold beyond which violence and attacks are unacceptable by them or their own people. Furthermore, in the case of non-state violent extremism if an actor chooses to fight what it defines as an existential and nihilistic threat, then it is less likely for deterrence to be successful. Deterrence is difficult, if not impossible, when opponents perceive their own deaths as the ultimate gain, and who have little material they hold dear that they can be threatened in retaliation, and for whom the religious duty is to alter through the use of violence an intolerable for them status quo.

The difficulty to accurately assess the effectiveness of deterrence, combined with deterrence's inherent ambiguity and dependence on a number of conditions, makes it very challenging to expect deterrence to preserve peace over a long term, unless the conflicting sides actively commit to avoiding war. After all, it would be an oxymoron to have lasting emergency policies, in other words long term deterrence measures, as this would imply that a state has not been able to deal effectively with a threat. Consequently, deterrence is not just the outcome but mainly a process and a means that needs constant adjusting and adapting if it is to lead to a successful and lasting output.

5.

## Engaging, Influencing, Deterring: Influencing and Controlling Behaviour

Deterrence entails influence, persuasion, and coercion. Influencing behaviour and controlling cost-benefit calculations through fear involves deterrence – ‘inducing an adversary not to do something’, and compellence – ‘inducing another to do something’ (Schelling 1982: 72). Within the field of deterrence there is a distinction between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial (see Gearson 2012; Wilner 2011). However, the element of punishment is an overarching undertone of the concept of deterrence as such, and therefore the above distinction between punishment and denial at a conceptual and applicability level becomes more blurred.

Deterrence has to do with controlling behaviour by applying coercive leverages against opponents' assets, goals, and beliefs (Wilner 2011). Punishment or threat of punishment are at the epicentre of deterrence, but

only forms part of deterrence, and punishment is only a limited part of what effective deterrence entails. For instance, incentives, inducements, and rewards can also persuade and lead to the same extent as threats in order to alter and adjust an opponent's behaviour. As George and Smoke argue deterrent threats are most effective when they are combined with assurances and positive inducements (George and Smoke 1974: 590–591). A minimum assurance for instance is that if the opponent complies then the deterrent treat will not be implemented. In this sense, deterrence can have a more proactive and more positive role in dealing with conflict, and they can lead to persuasion, and voluntary compliance and alter in this way the attitude and the behaviour of a potential opponent. With this approach the focus is also more long term, which should be the ultimate goal of deterrence.

Apart from the military and economic power, which fall under hard power, states also employ soft power through cultural, ideological and other indirect influences. Although soft power has formed part of foreign and defence policy for many years, this type of power has historically been underrated, and often seen by decision makers as a weakness. When the aim of a war is to achieve a decisive victory, deterrence, if seen as a form of bargaining, was considered as a state's failure to achieve a compelling victory. Deterrence is better understood as a compound employment of multiple forms of diplomatic, military, economic means, which are also situational and contextual, and as such adjustable.

Deterrence requires active monitoring of a situation that constantly changes within the deterring state, within the state that is being deterred and within their respective broader environments. In effort to reflect complexity and the need for adjustability, Nye introduced the concept of smart power, which is the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies (Nye 2009, 2011: 22–23). This fits well the argument in this chapter that in a complex world deterrence has to be malleable and adaptive.

In order to be successful, deterrence depends on policies designed in advance of an opponent's efforts to influence the status quo. More precisely, decision makers have to develop, design, and effectively communicate a fitting policy, and consequently be able to respond in a timely manner to potential threats avoiding conflict escalation.

Consequently, deterrence should have a long term focus in design and outcome. Deterrence, as a method of influence, leaves the choice between compliance and defiance to the adversary, and there are conditions that must be met in order for deterrence to be effective. This becomes a threat that leaves something to chance, as Schelling advocates (1966: 121–122).

According to Schelling this characteristic of deterrence sets ‘the stage – by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation – and waiting’ (1966: 70–71). Thus, deterrence policy can be fixed with limited flexibility as the actions of the deterrent is determined by the choices of the deterred. The threat conveyed must be sufficiently potent to persuade the opponent that the benefits of compliance will far outweigh the cost of non-compliance. In the case of sanctions for instance, actors assess the risk of sanctions being applied, including their certainty and severity, against the benefits of breaking rules or ignoring warnings (Schelling 1966: 71). Subsequently, the deterrent party and the threat issued have to be credible and clear in the mind of the deterred. At the same time the deterred will have to feel assured that compliance will not lead to further demands. An additional challenge is that for deterrence to be successful the message conveyed often has to be combined with the offer of inducements, in order to achieve compliance, reinforcing the need for a contextualised approach. However, there is a spectrum of inducements ranging from symbolic actions up to the limited use of violence, the latter however risks increased negative consequences. A paradox of deterrence is that it aims to achieve certainty through uncertain means. However, when a state adopts deterrence as part of a broader planning and action-taking it could be able to determine, with some degree of confidence, that the policies and initiatives designed to deter certain behaviour have achieved the objective. It is not enough for policy makers to just decide to apply deterrence. Decision makers have to determine the most fitting means, and ensure that the desired conditions and demands are effectively communicated and understood by the target audience. Likewise, policy makers have to be able to assess an opponent’s behaviour and their probable counter moves as accurately as possible. The added complexity is the fact that a state operates within an existing political environment with a number of constantly changing variables which the states do not always control or even influence, but which limit a decision maker’s ability to reach optimal choices. Effective deterrence relies on the ability to obtain the knowledge and intelligence required to devise deterrent methods, but this information and knowledge is neither easily collected nor is it necessarily verifiable and reliable. For instance, calculating how best to deter non-state actors requires, among other things, assessing how individual groups decide on their target selection, how they evaluate successes, and how they weigh unsuccessful and foiled attacks in their utility calculations. This requires detailed information, data, and intelligence on the preferences of non-state actors (Richardson 2006). Only then will deterrence mechanisms be properly

tailored to challenge specific non-state actors. However, for democracies all this has to take place within the realistic constraints of the rule of law, something non-state actors do not have to worry about.

Another point to take into consideration is the extent to which the commitment, motivation and intent of the target affects their susceptibility to deterrence. Knowing which of the actors to target is not necessarily equivalent to knowing how to influence these actors. In the case for example, where the fight is against an apocalyptic organisation or a group that claims to be fighting an existential religious and ideological struggle, where there is nothing to hold at risk, deterrence is likely to have limited effect on the group as such, although it might be more effective on individuals within that group. Furthermore, credibility can be compromised by what Kroenig and Pavel call a 'lack of a return-address' (Kroenig and Pavel 2012). Identifying non-state actors and the ability to attribute attacks are prerequisites to a credible deterrence based counter terrorism approach. Even when intelligence can be reliably provided and assets identified, violent extremists exist and hide among the population governments seek to protect. Governments would have to customise deterrence and with tailored measures could better influence the behaviour and acts of terrorist organisations.

Deterrence therefore, is not monolithic, but instead forms part of a larger gamut including reassurance, compellence, and deterrence, and these have to be applied in the right way, at the right time, to the right people in order to create an effective and persuasive tension. Conflicting parties have different decision making processes, interests, and perceptions, and deterrence may target each conflicting party from taking specific actions under a wide range of circumstances. This highlights the importance of treating effective deterrence as a multi-phased approach: prior, during, and after an event.

6.

## Communicating in an Effective Manner: The Importance of a Clear 'Indirect' Message

Effective deterrence relies heavily on successful communication.

Information has to be communicated in a way that it is understood by those who it is aimed at. The threat has to be clear to those who issue it, but also to those who receive it. The deterred for instance, needs to be capable and willing to recognise the message and its consequences. This rests on the understanding that the target of deterrent actions can recognise the consequences and accept them. As Jervis notes the failure to

establish meaningful communication led the United States to use force on occasions where threats were inefficacious and fundamental messages conveyed shared meaning between adversary sides (Jervis 2009: 150). A related critical issue is that deterrence assumes the existence of bureaucratic structures of control able to define the coercive posture, to make decisions and to respond. Yet the idea is challenged in the case of non-state actors or rogue states where there might not even exist a well-structured apparatus nor be in full control of it. Furthermore, there may not even be a fully developed and unified set of interests to frame decisions (Morgan et al. 2009: 6–7).

Dealing with complex issues often requires fine balances, and deterrence is no exception to this. Coercing powers must also be able and willing to recognise when it is appropriate not to use an instrument, as this can also backfire, and can undermine the credibility of a deterrent (Byman and Waxman 2002: 124). To this end a deterrence policy has to be rigid enough to be meaningful, and vague enough to leave room for manoeuvre. A too rigid or a too ambiguous message can send the wrong signal to the opponent. Often there is ambiguity regarding the exact type and degree of the punishment to an opponent, but there can be no uncertainty about the possibility of a response. Thus, ambiguity can be effective when there is uncertainty regarding the degree of the response, and not the possibility of the response itself. The role of ambiguity in deterrence success depends on the attitude of the target actor vis-à-vis risk taking. On the one hand, ambiguity about the kind of response to an opponent's attack increases the chances of deterrence success by complicating the opponent's calculations and replies. On the other, the impact of ambiguity depends on the risk-taking inclination of the target country and actor. For instance, risk-averse countries tend to view ambiguity as increasing the risk associated with the action they are contemplating to take, hence enhancing the chances of success of deterrence. Whereas risk-prone actors may interpret ambiguity as a sign of weakness, which can be translated as an opportunity to exploit rather than a risk that should be avoided.

Enforcing policies and assuring compliance can be approached in a number of ways, and all share a communication element, which is why fear-based messages have received particular attention (Johnston et al. 2015). Adler asserts that 'detering an opponent depends not only on a threat to increase the cost of violent action for the target; it also involves a promise that abstaining from violence will remove the threat' (Morgan et al. 2009: 88). Coercion and persuasion are main elements of deterrence and their success is also based on messaging, and effective communication, which relies on a number of variables. Conveying a

message depends on strategic narratives. According to Freedman, narratives are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously, but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current (Freedman 2008). Narratives become instruments for structuring information, and they play a central role in constructing and symbolising experienced reality at the level of sense-giving and sense-making. Narratives can help capture the numerous complex relationships and events that are integral to everyday life and to make sense of seemingly unconnected phenomena (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 5). Both, deterrent capability and narratives rely on credibility and commitment. Strategic narratives facilitate the effectiveness and augment the persuasiveness of messaging and communication. Thus, strategic narratives can help the deterrent and the deterred to contextualise a situation and make them think holistically and shape their behaviour. Moreover, strategic narratives may catalyse understanding and through generating analogies they may create a common ground and facilitate common engagement in the implementation of narratives. If deterrence is to have lasting effects the deterred party would have to adapt both, its attitude and its behaviour to reflect its compliance to the message and the intent of the deterring party. Still, the challenge is that it is quite impossible to prove and to know that somebody's attitude has permanently changed, making it easier to focus on assessing short- to medium-term changes.

Although it is of high significance for a deterring party to have a strategic narrative it is of equal importance how this narrative is articulated. As mentioned already, deterrence is linked to persuasion and as such it has to do with the ability to convey a message efficiently and effectively.

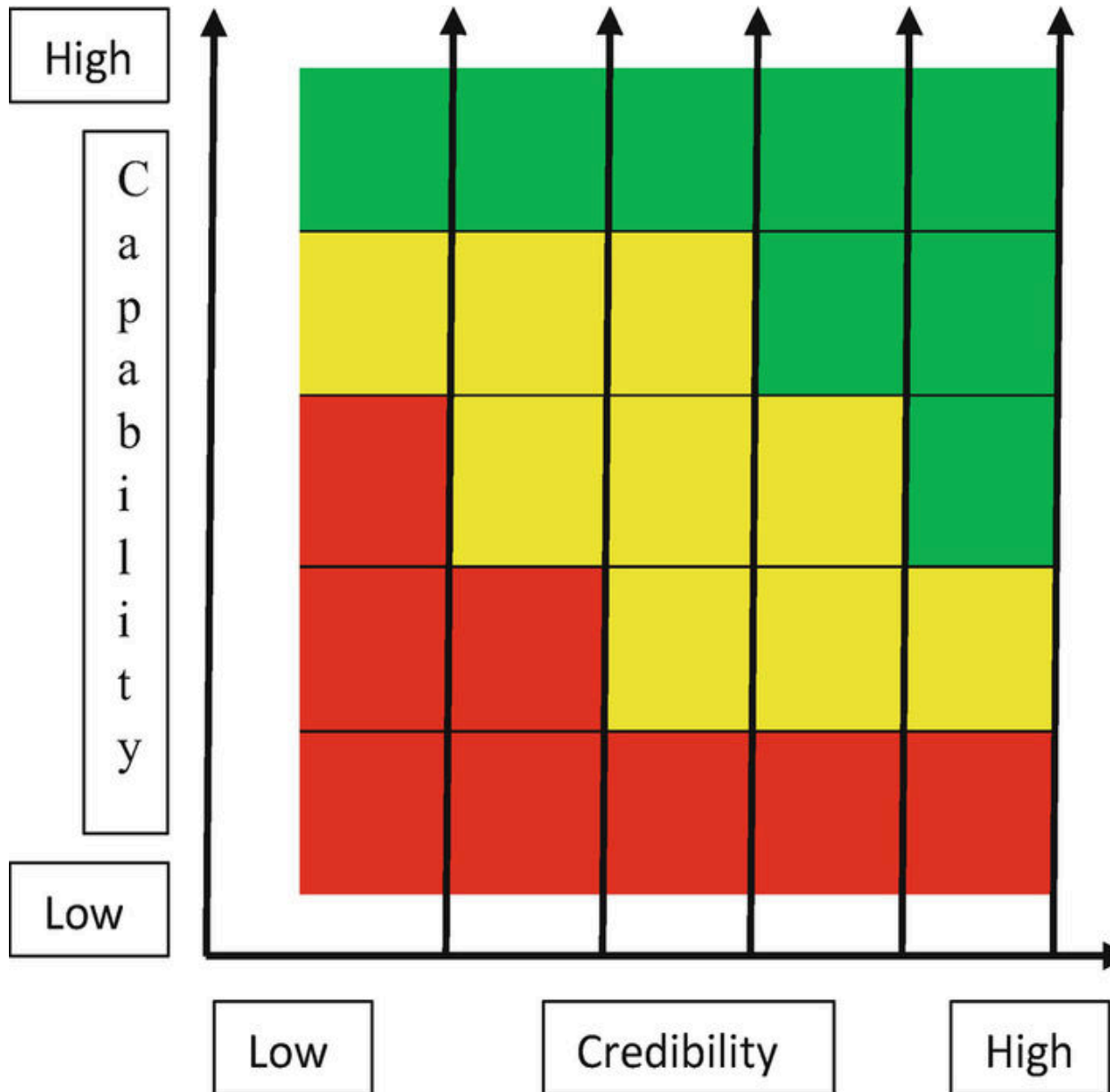
According to Knopf 'overly complicated messaging may simply become "lost in the noise"' (Knopf 2010: 9). For a message and a narrative to be persuasive it has to be adapted to the respective audience, and the most fitting language has to be used. This can be done for instance, by highlighting the values of the narrative, and by emphasising how the narrative presents ideals worth pursuing. If the strategic messaging and narrative are too demanding it is likely to be met with resistance by the recipient, whereas if the strategic messaging, where possible, is articulated using an inclusive language that links the deterred to the message, and this could facilitate compliance.

Deterrent threats and assurances have to be constructed with the opponent in mind. This introduces the need to understand in detail the actors involved, their determination, their motives and their value systems. Only then can the right combination of policies and measures be brought into

effect to achieve the desired deterrent outcome. For a message to be persuasive the target audience, in this case the deterred party has to be exposed to a clear message. However, it is not always obvious what type of deterrent declarations and messages are more effective: vague and general or specific and explicit (Gearson 2012). In addition, the message has to be understood by all sides involved and it has to be perceived as personally relevant by the deterred party in order to feel the need and pressure to comply with the demands of the deterring party. The perception of personal relevance is fundamental, despite its subjectivity, and behavioural or attitudinal change engendered by fear is often contested for this very reason. According to Johnston et al. the juxtaposition of a fear-appeal message with a sanctioning rhetoric may induce persuasion in enhancing personal relevance (Johnston et al. 2015). In this sense, social structures can play a protagonistic role in fear-based communications' strategies, while social networks and informal social learning environments could be seen as loci where strategic messages are communicated and implemented.

The real test of the effectiveness of strategic messaging occurs during its implementation phase. The deterring party has to be seen as acting out the message in order to build credibility within their environment and vis-à-vis the deterred party. On the one hand the deterring party has to convey a message that is believed to be within its capability, and on the other the potential adversary can gauge the magnitude of the deterrent (Gearson 2012). Furthermore, credibility reflects the intention and commitment of implementing the deterrent. This intention is eroded by each instance where the deterring party's posture is challenged and yet the deterrent is not used. However, once a threat or deterrence has been issued, the more aggression from an opponent is tolerated, the more the deterring party loses credibility. This in turn, may lead to the development of a credibility gap between capability and will. If a state does not implement its deterrence policy this may develop a gap between politico-economic and military capability and will. The matrix below highlights the relationship between capability and credibility and the likelihood of effective deterrence.





A state's past behaviour is usually a fitting indicator of the balance between capability and credibility. For instance, if a state has bluffed on a number of occasions in the past, the relationship between capability and credibility will be low. If on the other, a state has a history of executing its threats, capability and credibility will be strongly linked, making the effectiveness of deterrence more likely. The point is that capability without credibility will eliminate persuasiveness and will render deterrence ineffective. After all, it is possible to have capability, but no credibility. In this sense deterrence would become a hollow threat, a 'paper tiger' as Mao Zedong characterised it, and future opponents would not be deterred because of the lack of previous state responses to challenges. Moreover, in democracies it is important for capabilities to

remain subordinate to policy, and not dictate policy making. Whether credibility or capability is more important will depend on the weight actors put either on the relationship or on the contested issue. In the sense that it depends whether a state cares more about the relationship with the other state or if it cares more about the contentious issue rather than relationship.

7.

## The Psychological Element

The ideas discussed above highlight that deterrence is a psychological process in which subjective elements such as fear, pressure, and influence inform how calculations are made and decisions are taken to abide by the issued threat of punishment (Berejikian 2002). Threat and fear are at the epicentre of deterrence, because deterrence as such is a state of mind. However, these two elements are not necessarily conducive to the resolution of protracted conflicts. Compliance depends heavily on psychological factors. The opponent has to feel and believe that the threat from the deterring party is credible and that the latter has the will and the commitment to see its threat through. As discussed, the aim of deterrence is to reduce an opponent's willingness to engage in a conflict, rather than just its material capability to do so. The means of achieving this is by creating a capability imbalance short of going to war. This imbalance may be created by eliminating capabilities of an adversary or by increasing the capability of one's own state. As stated by Schelling

It is a tradition in military planning to attend to an enemy's capabilities, not his intentions. But deterrence is about intentions – not just estimating enemy intentions but influencing them...A persuasive threat of war may deter an aggressor; the problem is to make it persuasive, to keep it from sounding like a bluff (1977: 35).

Therefore, any imbalance will have limited deterrent and coercive power unless it is underlined by the political will to use it. However, establishing whether the willingness to implement a deterrence policy is real it is ultimately a subjective decision. According to Stein, cognitive style and culture are important determinants in understanding how actors will interact in a deterrence relationship. The initial default setting for those directly involved is to be hot and emotional rather than reasonable and rational (Stein 2013). This makes behaviour difficult to predict.

The dependence of effective deterrence on communication highlights the role and importance of perception, state of mind and psychology. Deterrence is above all a psychological tool and process in which

subjective elements, such as fear and coercion, inform how decisions are taken. Effective deterrence has to do with influencing the perceptions of actors. The main elements of inducement include commitment of the deterrent to materialise the issued threat, capability and perception of capability, and credibility of the deterrent. This is summarised to perception, ability, credibility, and will. Psychological factors as well as the elements of feeling and belief are emotive and subjective, and all these introduce perception, and interpretation into the equation, which render a deterrence planning, and an accurate evaluation of the effectiveness of deterrence even more challenging. The number and type of the above variables makes deterrence complex and therefore, difficult to predict. The above challenges in combination with complexity problems, are augmented by miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Successful deterrence takes place in stages, but it can also fail in stages. These different phases may provide the conflicting parties with an opportunity to adjust their policies and behaviours, and to strengthen or loosen their approaches accordingly. The different stages however, also pose an additional challenge, as a sequential procedure can lead to the collapse of the whole process. According to George and Smoke nearly all of their 11 case studies of deterrence failure are characterised by the sequential, gradual failure of deterrence (George and Smoke 1974: 103). The effectiveness of deterrence becomes even more challenging owing to the different levels a deterrent has to appeal to. Ultimately, deterrence is usually aimed at the leadership of a potential opponent, with whom decision making rests. However, deterrent action may also target and affect the wider public and its support for its leadership. For instance, a deterrent may target a population which in turn could undermine its leadership's decision to continue with a specific course of action. On the other, a population facing deterrence may rally towards its leader, and this support could strengthen its leadership rendering deterrence ineffective. Relating to multi-level deterrence this requires the deterring state to use different language to the different levels with a potential opponent in order to increase the chances of a successful deterrence. As Schelling argued 'such circumstances may require a deterrence strategy that pairs promises of restraint with threats of severe cost-imposition' (Schelling 1960: 131–134).

8.

**Fine Balances: Pragmatism and the Best Option Available**

From the above it can be deduced that deterrence as a method has to strive for fine balances, and it has to be context specific and proportionate.

Deterrence provides a middle ground between the alternative defensive and offensive control methods, appearing at the same time tough and forceful without being reckless and thoughtless. It is difficult however, to frighten and reassure an opponent at the same time. A deterring party has to appear credibly threatening to an opponent but also reassuring that once the opponent complies with the demands of the deterring party the threat will be removed. The concept of deterrence loses effectiveness when it is 'overstretched' to the point of making it too general and irrelevant to the targeted group. Instead of being an overarching, all-purpose, and permanent policy, deterrence has to be limited to being an occasional stratagem that gives time to opponents to be reconciled or the ideals pressed by deterrence to be internalized.

If the balance is tipped to one side deterrence may become nonsensical and it may yield opposite outcomes to those sought by the deterrent. After all, there is a fine line between deterring an opponent and actually provoking an attack. When a state prepares itself for war and overreacts, it can lead to contradictory outcomes, as for instance, it can inspire fear but also mistrust, which in turn can lead to compliance but it can also provoke a preemptive strike by the opponent, and in effect fulfil the prophesy. On the other, if a state underreacts and appears weak it can precipitate an attack. The added challenge is that it is not just the importance of the message itself, but also how this message is meant and how it is perceived. An over-reaction for example, may lead to retaliation of the deterred and the issuing of a threat might actually be seen as an opportunity to boost recruitment or give a positive impetus to the campaign of a non-state organisation.

Even a well-formulated deterrence might not be a fitting approach to a specific threat. As such deterrence cannot be applicable to all situations. Certain opponents may not be deterred by any means at the disposal of democratic states. Containment or even eradication may also be an option at times. The aim is that a context-based and broadly-informed deterrence should limit the number of opponents that cannot be deterred.

9.

## **Conclusion: Limits and Strengths of Deterrence**

Although the concept of deterrence is simple, its implementation in a complex and uncertain world is not. Especially as the fact that absolute security is a chimaera, is not palatable. Deterrence depends on a number of conditions which inevitably, makes it imperfect in its formation and

implementation. Since deterrence depends on constantly moving delicate balances, as well as a number of implementation conditions, it is more vulnerable to friction and luck than other foreign policy and military tools.

Still, deterrence has been a tool of foreign policy since antiquity, but it remains subject to a number of limitations. Deterrence entails a common basis for certain actions, and a continuous scrutiny of constantly changing situations, through effective channels of communication across psychological and subjective boundaries. This underlines the need for a state to strike a balance between adaptive deterrence and not losing its political identity. The limitations and conditions of deterrence discussed in the chapter, support the argument of the elusive nature of a universal theory of deterrence, but the chapter sheds light on the conditions that can improve deterrence. For deterrence to stand better chances of success policy makers have to realise, accept and take into consideration the need for qualified and customised approaches, with and internal and external actor-specific behavioural mode, contextually grounded, and bounded by scope conditions.

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