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In Defense of Deterrence

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The views expressed are the author's own.

Introduction: The Appeal of Deterrence

The concept of deterrence is congenial to Western democracies. As Lawrence Freedman put it, deterrence strategies "appeal to governments because they can be presented as being defensive but not weak, and firm but not reckless."[1] Deterrence implies that one can keep unwelcome developments at bay by remaining essentially passive: the mere show of force can substitute for military action. Military deterrence is essentially a status quo concept. It does not rule out political, social or economic change, nor does it rule out competition between states. However, it seeks to prevent an opponent from using force to achieve its antagonistic political aims, thus making major war less likely. To be sure, the concept has its share of logical inconsistencies and moral dilemmas. When effective, however, its gains far outweigh its costs.

An Anxious Re-Birth

As the international environment is characterized by increased competition, the concept of deterrence, after over two decades of having received scant attention in the West, has re-entered the strategic lexicon. However, this return of deterrence is burdened with a range of problems. On the nuclear level in particular, an international NGO-led effort seeks to de-legitimize the very concept that appears to have contributed to the "long peace" between the world's major powers. Arguing that nuclear deterrence is a myth, or that the system is too prone to failure, supporters of the Nuclear Ban Treaty and of nuclear disamament in general fundamentally challenge the tenets of established nuclear governance. The Ban Treaty will not lead to nuclear disarmament, nor will it spell the end of nuclear deterrence. However, it will seriously complicate the deterrence policies of, and nuclear cooperation among, Western democracies. By contrast, authoritarian "managed democracies" (V. Putin) will not take it seriously as a policy to follow.

Other familiar criticisms of deterrence focus on the difficulty of proving the concept's effectiveness; the ethical and moral tension between the mere threat of military reprisals and their actual implementation; and the risk that it locks its protagonists into a permanent adversarial relationship. According to deterrence critics, by interpreting an adversary's policies and postures as a threat that requires a resolute response, both sides are condemned to think in "worst case" and "action-reaction" categories, and thus remain unable or unwilling to explore pathways to overcome their hostility.

The end of the Cold War revealed the shaky intellectual foundations of such simplistic action-reaction models. The considerable military downsizing that followed the easing of East-West tensions brought home that once political relations change, so do force levels and postures. Many deterrence critics had misled themselves and others by their "negative militarism", i.e. by their belief that in order to change political relationships one first had to change military strategies and force levels. The actual historical evidence suggests that significantly reducing force levels could only follow changed political relations.

Deterrence critics again confused cause and effect when they tried to give intellectual credibility to the goal of nuclear disarmament, such as President Obama's "Prague agenda." This agenda was bound to fail for numerous reasons, yet in their desire to make it work, many analysts-turned-advocates employed rather tortuous arguments. Some compared abolishing nuclear weapons to abolishing slavery or even to kicking the habit of smoking. Others tried to prove that nuclear deterrence was a myth, even though their arguments often defied common sense.[2] Still others admitted that achieving a nuclear-free world "would require a fundamental change in geopolitics,"[3] yet some tried to create the impression that restructuring international relations was just a matter of sufficient "political will." Put simply, in the context of the Prague agenda, many deterrence researchers were willing to suspend serious research in favor of anti-

nuclear activism. In the end, however, the familiar international system and related need for deterrence proved more durable than these critics advertised.

A New Wave of Deterrence Research

However, it is not only the critics of deterrence, but also some of its supporters, that are making it hard to give that concept its rightful, reasonable place. As the international environment is growing more complex, with a increasing number of actors using an ever-broader array of tools to compete, much attention is now being focused on how to apply deterrence to non-traditional, non-kinetic, or hybrid threats. Of course, there is no *a priori* reason why deterrence could not be applied to the non-military realm. After all, deterrence is a psychological concept that permeates all human activity, from education to criminal law. However, this emerging new research, which labels itself a new – fifth – "wave" in that field,[4] stretches that concept beyond recognition.

The new research acknowledges that deterring non-kinetic, non-existential and sometimes non-attributable actions is far more complex than deterring an adversary's military action. Yet it argues that to deter an adversary from causing harm, the West does indeed have a considerable array of tools available: economic sanctions, freezing financial assets, cyber(counter)attacks, publicly naming and shaming the adversary for his malign actions, expelling dipomats, or closing legal gaps in order to deter illicit activities, to name but a few. These tools, if properly orchestrated, should provide Western nations with a rich menu of options for deterrence by punishment as well as by denial.[5] Others argue that in a world characterized by hybrid threats the punitive aspect of classical deterrence theory is becoming less relevant. Instead, much greater attention should be devoted to the study of incentives, i.e. how to encourage with incentives an adversary to do what one wants it to do.[6] In short, the "fifth wave" contends that the concept of deterrence can be adapted to reach far beyond existential military contingencies and military threats.

Analytical Confusion

The intellectual effort devoted to this new deterrence research is impressive. However, as with probably every "new" research field, it tends to overestimate its own relevance. For example, simply listing the actions that one might be ble to apply to cope with a hybrid adversary does not turn them into reality or even suggest if or when they could credibly contribute to deterrence: in non-existential contingencies, governments simply may not wish to make good on previously made deterrence threats, since this may be perceived as incurring other, and possibly much higher, political or economic costs. After all, unlike traditional military deterrence, where the adversaries' militaries stay away from each other, this new ("modern")

deterrence, which is supposed to stretch across the cyber, economic and social domains, takes place in precisely those areas in which the adversaries are most closely entangled. Moreover, much of this research seems to proceed from the assumption that once an attacker is exposed, it will stop attacking. This is optimistic at best: exercises seem to reveal that most of the "softer" tools do not stop a determined aggressor. In short, the inherent assumption that a smaller, non-military challenge can somehow be deterred by an equally small non-military threat, as long as that threat is smartly "tailored," is likely to be proven wrong by the harsh reality of warfare in the grey zone.

And there is more. Among the most important findings of traditional deterrence research was that one had to look not only at the opponent's capabilities, but also at its interests, and that an opponent's actions could well be the (inadvertent) consequences of one's own. In other words, both sides interact on many levels. By contrast, the debate on deterring non-kinetic, hybrid threats thus far remains a one-way street: it postulates malign actors that seek to maximize harm on the West while minimizing cost to themselves. By acting in a grey zone that the West finds much harder to utilize for advancing its own strategic interests, and by using many tools that are off-limits to Western democracies, these adversaries appear even more ruthless and risk-prone than the opponents the West faced during the Cold War.

However, hyping non-existential threats while also hyping deterrence as an appropriate response dramatically drives up deterrence responsibilities and requirements. If deterrence is responsible for preventing every possible malign act an adversary might pursue, be it cutting undersea cables, orchestrating fake news campaigns, or hacking smartphones, deterrence strategies must be organized so as to prevent a nearly unending list of hostile behavior. If the deterrence challenge posed by adversaries is not just to the West's security, but in fact to the West's "way of life,"[7] then deterrence as a concept needs to be all-encompassing. Such an endless set of deterrence goals and threats, and such a perfectionist yardstick virtually ensure deterrence failure at some level. In a similar vein, if the West is seen as being in a permanent state of low-level, non-kinetic war with mischievous adversaries, seeking quid pro quos with these adversaries may appear both naïve and futile. Such a view would narrow Western policy options, as it implies a degree of inevitability of conflict that could discourage the search for political solutions. By contrast, traditional deterrence theory, which centers more narrowly on ruling out the use of military force, leaves room for political accommodation—as demonstrated to some extent by the ending of the Cold War.

Getting Back to Basics

The current state of affairs has one school of thought dismissing the value of deterrence, and another setting up unrealistically expansive expectations. These two extremes hinder rather than help efforts to devise plausible, credible deterrence strategies for an increasingly

competitive international environment. However, the "deterrence extremists" are not likely to prevail. Three reasons stand out.

First, since any major debate about deterrence always reflects the prevailing general political mood, one can assume that much of the alarmism that marks the current discussion on deterring non-existential, hybrid threats will wane, just as the nuclear disarmament camp had its proverbial 15 minutes of fame during in the "yes-we-can" euphoria of President Obama's first tenure. Back then, some observers sensed a window of opportunity to change the global security discourse – an opportunity that made even some hard-boiled realists suddenly believe in the feasibility of nuclear disarmament. However, the issue quickly disappeared from the headlines once its complexities became apparent, particularly including the harsh realities of Russian and Chinese behavior, and once other important challenges demanded the Administration's attention. Today's attempts to deter new, non-military threats proceed against the backdrop of a debate about the decline of an increasingly divided West. Much of this debate rests on the implicit assumption that the authoritarian, revisionist states are somehow "winning", and that the West needs to scramble in order to avoid defeat. Once the formidable challenges of deterring non-traditional attacks become clear, however, and once it also becomes clear that the West's opponents are not as "successful" as they currently seem, the nervousness of the current debate will subside. In short, the extremes in the deterrence debate are not likely to have enduring influence on Western policy.

Second, deterrence thinking is constantly evolving. Traditional deterrence theory, for example, has long left behind the overly optimistic expectations that characterized its earlier days, when some held the view that that a "balance of terror" would not only deter virtually every kind of conflict among great powers, but also provide ample compellence leverage. Today, it is widely accepted that deterrence – nuclear or conventional – is not a panacea, and that it only works under certain conditions. Among these are that the interests at stake are truly significant, that the opponent's goals, culture and perceptions are taken into account, and that one communicates with an adversary in order to signal clear "red lines" but also to provide possible "off-ramps" for de-escalation. There are indications that the "fifth wave" will undergo a similar evolution. For example, after having started with rather abstract deterrence concepts that were uncritically applied, this research is now getting more concrete. Terms like "hybrid actor" are being replaced with the names of the real countries or terrorist organizations that challenge the West. This allows for a move away from an indiscriminate all-hazards approach and towards a more realistic evaluation of how deterrence might (or might not) work in specific instances.

A third reason for optimism is the broader focus on resilience. While enhancing the resilience of, say, national cyber or energy networks should be seen as a kind of deterrence by denial, deterrence is not the key consideration in the resilience calculus. Rather, it proceeds from the assumption that attacks will happen and, consequently, the stricken company, nation, or alliance must be able to take the hit and bounce back. This does not diminish the value of

exploring new ways of deterring such non-kinetic, non-military attacks, in particular those that threaten existential interests.[8] However, as deterrence research in these domains becomes more refined, the opportunities and limits of this concept will become more apparent, and resilience may well emerge as the more useful paradigm for coping with most non-military challenges. Rather than trying to stretch or re-define deterrence to make it more applicable to today's more complex lower-level threats, resilience contemplates the possibility of deterrence failure. This may strike some observers as fatalistic, yet it is the most plausible approach for prevailing in an emerging multi-player world.

Conclusion: Defending Deterrence

Defending deterrence against its most ardent critics is a never-ending story. Despite its common sense appeal and demonstrated great value, the concept – notably its nuclear dimension – contains too many risks and moral challenges to remain uncontested. However, pending a fundamental transformation of the global system, deterrence will remain a major factor in international politics. At the very least, it should serve as a "time-buying strategy" until such fundamental political changes occur. This requires supporters of mainstream deterrence to walk a fine line between defending the concept without trivializing its risks. When it comes to deterring non-military, non-kinetic, and non-existential threats, however, even greater care must be taken not to oversell the concept. Classic deterrence is implemented by governments. The idea that the private sector, financial institutions and other players can be integrated into a coherent, multidimensional deterrence concept against a host of non-military threats risks promising much more than can be delivered. As paradoxical as it may seem, deterrence needs to be defended against not only its critics, but against its unrealistically demanding supporters.

1. Lawrence Freedman, *The Limits of Deterrence*, in Becca Wasser et al. (eds.), Comprehensive Deterrence Forum, RAND (CF345), Santa Monica, 2018, p. 25, available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/CF300/CF345/RAND_CF345.pdf.

2. For a typical example of attacking strawman arguments on nuclear deterrence see Ward Wilson, *Five Myths About Nuclear Weapons* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

3. William J. Perry, James R. Schlesinger (eds.), *America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington., D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press 2009), p. xi, available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/America's_Strategic_Posture_Auth_Ed.pdf.

4. The first three waves focused on strategic nuclear deterrence, the fourth wave examined how to deter terrorists, see Jeffrey W. Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No.1 (April 2010), pp. 1–33, available at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13523261003640819?needAccess=true.

5. Vytautas Keršanskas, *Deterrence: Proposing a more strategic approach to countering hybrid threats* (public version of the "Deterrence Playbook"), The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Helsinki, March 2020, available at https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Deterrence.pdf.

6. Stephan De Spiegeleire, et al., *Reimagining Deterrence: Towards Strategic (Dis)Suasion Design*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), March 2020. See also Frans-Paul van der Putten, et al., *Deterrence as a security concept against non-traditional threats*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations (Clingendael), June 2015, available at https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/deterrence_as_a_security_concept_against_non_traditional_threats.pdf.

7. Elizabeth Braw, "We must learn what to do when the lights go out," *The Times*, 10 May 2019, available at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-must-learn-what-to-do-if-the-lights-go-out-xlcph6cqt.

8. NATO Allies have declared that a cyber or hybrid attack can trigger Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review hints at the possibility of a nuclear response to a major non-kinetic attack.

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