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The Fallacy of “Deterrence by Detection”

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In 2021, then-Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David Berger, outlined a new way of thinking about deterrence, which he called “deterrence by detection.” Arguing that traditional forms of threatened punishment have been inadequate to deter aggression, Gen. Berger stated, “You could drive three aircraft carriers into the East China Sea, it’s not going to deter [China’s] coast guard or the maritime militia that is scaring away a fishing fleet.... The threat of punishment – conventional deterrence... I don’t think that works, it hasn’t, clearly, the last 10 years, last five years have shown that it will not work in all cases.”¹

Instead, Gen. Berger called for adopting what some have characterized as a “name and shame” deterrence policy, stating, “How do we deter by presenting an adversary with the perception – convincing them that there’s nothing they can do that we’re not going to see, and we’re not going to shine a big light on and make a big deal.”² In other words, he noted, “We have to have the capability to illuminate that.... Some portion of that is so that we can understand how they’re setting their pieces for battle. And part of it, frankly, is to bring it to international attention and expose it for what it is.... They can’t move, they can’t take a step without the world knowing about it.”³

Late last year, the former commander of U.S. Central Command, Marine Corps General Frank McKenzie (Ret.), argued that a policy of deterrence by detection could be useful against Iran. In an article co-authored with a colleague at the Middle East Institute, they noted that “Iran’s style of asymmetric warfare...is really hard to deter or contain because the Iranians are good at it....”⁴ However, they contend that “US deterrence against Iran’s gray-zone tactics is



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not a lost cause. In fact, the simple act of letting Iran know the US is paying attention may end up being the cheapest, most effective way of deterring their actions....”⁵

To support their hypothesis, the authors cite the U.S. use of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance drones in 2019 flying “above the heads of Iranian military personnel to let them know it [the United States] was watching their every move.” They also point to the public release of intelligence information last November suggesting Iran might attack Saudi Arabia or Iraq, noting, “In the end, no attack was launched.”⁶ Yet they acknowledge that “Neither of these two examples guarantees that deterrence by detection will always work with Iran, or any other adversary, particularly one geared up for more classical warfare.”⁷

And in recent months, the Biden Administration has sought to dissuade China from supplying Russia with lethal weapons in its war against Ukraine by publicly disclosing information about China’s plans. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, “We’ve been watching this very, very closely. And, for the most part, China has been engaged in providing rhetorical, political, diplomatic support to Russia, but we have information that gives us concern that they are considering providing lethal support to Russia in the war against Ukraine.” He further warned that “this would be a serious problem.”⁸ As one analyst noted, “Well, clearly, the United States has specific intelligence indicating that China is thinking about - not that it's done it - but is thinking about directly providing lethal aid.... And the United States is also sharing this intelligence with allies. So the NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg has also warned China that he sees evidence that it is considering providing lethal aid. And so NATO and the United States are warning China against taking this step.”⁹

Nevertheless, reports indicate that since June of last year, Chinese firms have shipped assault rifles, drone parts, and body armor to Russian companies, although the Department of Defense has seen no indication lethal weapons have been transferred “for use on the battlefield in Ukraine.”¹⁰ Yet published press reports highlighting the recent massive leak of classified intelligence documents state that China agreed covertly to provide lethal weapons to Russia for use in its war against Ukraine.¹¹ In addition, Chinese companies have reportedly shipped “tens of thousands of kilograms of smokeless powder – enough propellant to collectively make at least 80 million rounds of ammunition” to Russia.¹² And other reports suggest Moscow has been importing dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles from China for use in its war against Ukraine.¹³ This summer, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that “Chinese companies have supplied computer chips, jet-fighter parts and navigation and jamming technology to Russia.”¹⁴

Traditional deterrence theorists question the notion that simply letting an adversary know that we know what they are up to is sufficient to deter them from taking an action we don’t want them to take. For example, the Krasnoyarsk radar was a clear violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty but exposing it as such did nothing to deter the Soviet Union from cheating. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations made it clear to Russia that the United States knew Moscow’s development and deployment of the SSC-8/9M729 ground-launched cruise missile was a clear violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. But Russia simply denied the violation, falsely accused the United States of non-



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compliance with the treaty, and persisted in deploying its prohibited cruise missile, leading President Trump to withdraw from the treaty in 2019.

With respect to Russia's actions in Ukraine, the failure of such a "name and shame" approach to deterrence is manifestly clear. Prior to Russia's invasion, the United States disclosed mountains of evidence about Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders, supported by satellite photography and an unprecedented amount of declassified information, all with the goal of exposing Russian President Vladimir Putin's objective of destroying Ukraine's independence and restoring Russia's control over the second largest country in Europe. One report, citing "current and former officials," called this "one of the most aggressive releases of intelligence by the United States since the Cuban missile crisis."¹⁵

Major media outlets in the United States and abroad ran daily news accounts of the buildup of Russian troops on Ukraine's border, the various invasion routes that Russian forces could take, and the estimated amount of casualties that would occur, including as many as 50,000 civilians killed or wounded, if Russia invaded.¹⁶ Reports that Russia was deploying stocks of blood supplies lent credence to the belief that Russia was indeed preparing for military action.¹⁷ Much of this information was attributed to U.S. government and intelligence sources, which raises profound issues over whether a policy of "deterrence by disclosure" – as one former U.S. government official has characterized it – can lead to "positive outcomes" or "negative consequences," including "the risk of giving away sources and methods."¹⁸

Despite this torrent of information disclosures, Putin was not deterred from recognizing the "independence" of two breakaway territories in Ukraine, Luhansk and Donetsk, and sent military troops into the region under the guise of "peacekeepers." Russia also illegally annexed the regions of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood," Putin declared, arguing that Ukraine "will serve as a forward springboard" for an attack on Russia and that "Russia has every right to take retaliatory measures to ensure its own security. That is exactly what we will do."¹⁹

Biden Administration officials reportedly believed that exposing Putin's lies and actions would prevent what has occurred. As one senior administration official reportedly stated, "Our theory has been that putting true information into the public domain, which was bearing out in real time because everybody can see what they're actually doing, was the best way to prevent the Russians and what they always do, which is to try to control the narrative with disinformation."²⁰

Instead, Russia's latest military aggression against a democratic neighbor whose sovereignty and territorial independence Moscow guaranteed as a party to the 1994 "Budapest Memorandum" exposed the fallacy of a "deterrence by detection" policy.

Of course, another rationale for exposing Russian misbehavior is to help ensure allied unity in responding to Russian aggression. This also appears to have been one of the Biden Administration's objectives.²¹ However, while the sharing of information with allies and partners is useful for helping to ensure solidarity among NATO allies *ex post facto*, it is insufficient to act as a deterrent to aggression *ex ante*.



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Critics of the Biden Administration argued that the imposition of harsh sanctions against Russia in advance of its military action would serve as a more effective deterrent to aggression than waiting until after Russia invaded Ukraine. Yet, the administration refused to act preemptively, arguing such a move would remove any disincentive for Putin to invade Ukraine and leave the United States with little recourse in that event. As then-Pentagon press secretary John Kirby argued prior to Russia's military assault, the threat of prospective sanctions had a "deterrent effect" on Russia, noting, "Right now we are not considering a preemptive sanction regime." As Kirby put it:

If it's a deterrent and you use it before the aggression is made or the transgression is made, then you lose your deterrent effect. If you punish somebody for something that they haven't done yet, then they might as well just go ahead and do it. So we believe there's a deterrent effect by keeping them in reserve and we have been very clear with the international community and with Mr. Putin about the severity of the economic consequences that he could face.²²

In response to Russia's invasion, which is a violation of international law and Russia's written commitment to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty, the Biden Administration issued an Executive Order banning U.S. investment in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (which Russia refers to as the "Luhansk People's Republic" and the "Donetsk People's Republic"). Initially, the European Union (EU) appeared more willing to impose harsh penalties on Moscow than the Biden Administration. In a statement, the EU indicated it was taking action against Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, targeting Russian banks and "those who were involved in the illegal decision" to invade.²³

Vice President Kamala Harris, speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2022 just days before Russia's invasion, stated that if Russia invaded Ukraine, U.S. sanctions on Russia would be "swift" and "severe," noting, "We will impose far-reaching financial sanctions and export controls. We will target Russia's financial institutions and key industries. And we will target those who are complicit and those who aid and abet this unprovoked invasion."²⁴ However, the Biden Administration's initial reaction was neither as "swift" nor as "severe" as promised, with U.S. policy remaining reactive, not proactive and the prospect of additional sanctions dependent on Russian actions. This approach allowed Moscow to set the terms of Washington's response by deciding for itself how far it was willing to go and how much risk it was willing to accept. Expressing frustration, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, criticized the initial U.S. wait-and-see attitude asking, "What are you waiting for?" and stating, "We don't need your sanctions after the bombardment will happen, and after our country will be fired at or after we will have no borders or after we will have no economy or parts of our country will be occupied. Why would we need those sanctions then?"²⁵

Members of Congress, on a bipartisan basis, criticized the initial U.S. response, and to its credit, the administration has been more forthcoming with significant military assistance to Ukraine in recent months. However, the United States has taken an incremental approach to giving the Ukrainians more sophisticated offensive and defensive weaponry for fear of



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escalating the crisis and out of concern that some systems would require U.S. trainers on the ground in Ukraine, may fall into the hands of the Russians, or may deplete U.S. stockpiles. These include the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMs), F-16 fighter jets, and sophisticated Gray Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles.²⁶ Recently, however, the United States belatedly approved the transfer of F-16s from Denmark and the Netherlands to Ukraine and will train Ukrainian pilots in the United States²⁷—another example of what may be criticized as the United States “leading from behind.” For nearly a year, the United States refused to supply Ukraine with Patriot air defense batteries, though only a single Patriot battery has now been provided to counter the massive swarms of Russian and Iranian-made drone attacks.²⁸ And although the administration early this year agreed to allow the transfer of Abrams tanks, they may only be provided to Ukraine starting in September given the production challenges endemic to a U.S. defense industrial base that is insufficiently geared to rapid response.²⁹

In short, a “deterrence by detection” policy failed to prevent Russian aggression. More broadly, such a policy is unlikely to result in actually stopping an opponent from committing aggression if the opponent’s behavior is motivated by factors that suggest the benefits of aggression outweigh the costs. Nor does exposure to the light of truth guarantee that misdeeds will be prevented, especially when bad behavior is a hallmark of authoritarians and authoritarian regimes that have no compunctions against violating established norms and rules of behavior and choose to operate outside legally established boundaries.

This is not to argue that deterrence by threat of punishment will always work. Nor is it to suggest that exposing an adversary’s anticipated actions in advance in order to influence an opponent’s decision-making calculus will always be futile. Indeed, administration officials have spoken of using intelligence as an “instrument of [state] power,” and that declassifying and publicly releasing intelligence information has helped to throw “our adversaries off their game” —including forcing Russia to change its tactics and disrupting Russian propaganda and disinformation efforts.³⁰ But a realistic assessment must recognize that states will act to achieve their own goals and objectives and will not be deterred from aggressive actions if they perceive the benefits outweigh the costs. Indeed, Putin expected the West to impose sanctions, saying, “We are being blackmailed, they are threatening us with sanctions. But I think they will impose those sanctions.”³¹ Yet Russia was not deterred from invading Ukraine by that prospect. In fact, deterrence can only be expected to work when the costs of aggression are seen by the aggressor to outweigh any conceivable benefits. In the case of Ukraine, this condition clearly was not met.

Russia’s actions have been driven by a desire to reconstitute lost empire and to overturn the existing security framework in Europe. And Putin is willing to sacrifice Russian (and Ukrainian) lives in the process. Indeed, it was Putin who referred to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century.”³² It will take more than simply exposing Russia’s nefarious activities to convince Putin, a former Soviet KGB officer, to change course.

NATO and non-NATO countries alike, especially the Baltic NATO states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, are rightly concerned that Putin’s appetite may be whetted if he is ultimately successful in conquering Ukraine. Moreover, China is watching how the West



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responds to Russia's actions, as it seeks to eliminate Taiwan's autonomy and incorporate it under Beijing's political control. Indeed, Russia and China have made common cause, and their Joint Statement of February 4, 2022 declares that "Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, [and] intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext...."³³

History may not repeat itself in identical form, but there are significant parallels between Russia's actions today and Germany's actions in the 1930s. As one analyst noted, "Putin may not be Hitler; Ukraine in 2022 isn't Czechoslovakia in 1938; and French president Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, and their western colleagues aren't some sort of collective Chamberlain. But 1938 does carry important lessons: the most important being that deterrence may seem more expensive and risky than accommodation today, but it is essential for Europe's long-term security."³⁴

Despite the expressions of unity by the Western allies, there are disquieting indications of dissonance beneath the surface. This dissonance may increase as the war drags on. To quote the aforementioned analyst:

Deterrence will be impossible, however, if leaders keep telling Putin what they are not prepared to do, or if they turn up the pressure on him so slowly that he can always adapt. Biden has said that he won't send US forces to fight in Ukraine; the German foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, has publicly expressed doubts about cutting Russia off from the global payments system Swift; the [then-]Italian prime minister, Mario Draghi, has said that sanctions should not hit gas imports from Russia; and the EU, US and UK have already indicated that the recognition of the "people's republics" looks unlikely to trigger full-scale economic sanctions at this stage, despite Putin's deployment of troops.³⁵

Without a more serious and unified response to Putin's aggression, "Europe will be destabilized for decades.... If he is to be deterred from going farther, even at this late stage, the west needs to make him uncertain that the gain will be worth the pain. Everything must be on the table."³⁶

Indeed, "deterrence by detection" may seem like an inexpensive solution to the difficult problem of preventing adversary aggression. But it is a mirage. Deterrence can best be achieved by convincing an adversary that the costs of aggression are not worth the price to be paid. This requires a demonstrated commitment and credible resolve to counter the nefarious actions and behavior of an opponent. The failure to forcefully confront aggression generations ago led to world war. Hopefully, the lessons of a prior generation will not be lost on this one.



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