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Great Power Deterrence Lessons from the Middle East War

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Introduction

With Russia and China as heavily armed and aligned nuclear foes, Washington faces an unprecedented deterrence context and looming threats. Given this new great power alignment, more than 30 states are at increased risk, namely, those allies directly covered by the U.S. nuclear deterrent and those partners greatly affected by the credibility of that deterrent, such as Taiwan and Ukraine.

Most U.S. civilian and military leaders who must pay attention to this challenge appear to recognize that the U.S. understanding of deterrence, largely based on its Cold War experience, must be reconsidered in this unprecedented context. The search for guideposts for that understanding is now ongoing. The current war in the Middle East appears to offer some tentative lessons in this regard.

Possible Deterrence Lessons Learned from the Current Middle East War

Some elements of the current Middle East War suggest broader lessons for great power nuclear deterrence. This may seem counterintuitive. Is not nuclear deterrence *sui generis*—a unique class of its own?



Nuclear deterrence is not *sui generis* because the instrument of the threat does not obviate the importance of other factors playing out in deterrence engagements. Deterrence is a function of conflicting perceptions, values, wills, goals, cultural norms, threats, calculations and communications, *not just the instruments of threat involved*. Consequently, an international event not involving nuclear threats may provide insight into the functioning of deterrence more broadly. This allows the examination of non-nuclear crises and conflicts for possible lessons that may apply to great power nuclear deterrence. Simply put, crises and conflicts that provide insight into when, why, how and to what effect national leaderships perceive, calculate and communicate can provide insight into the functioning of deterrence—whether the threats involved are nuclear or not.

There appear to be tentative lessons to be learned from the current Middle East conflict; hopefully, folks in pertinent positions are studying it for this purpose. The following presents only two such possible lessons based on a preliminary understanding of events that may be revised with later, more refined, knowledge of events.

1) *A Presumption That Deterrence Will Work Can Lead to its Failure Instead Because Opponents Often Behave in Ways That Defy Expectations and Defeat Deterrence*

First, the Israel-Hamas War demonstrates yet again that deterrence can fail in ways that shock and surprise a leadership that is accustomed to its ability to deter. This was true of the 1973 Yom Kippur War—Henry Kissinger said at the time that it was Washington’s belief that the Arab attack on Israel simply did not fit with Washington’s understanding of rational behavior.¹ The failure to anticipate such threats can contribute to the lack of pertinent security preparations to address them, and thus the failure of deterrence. A deterrer’s naivete, unwarranted optimism, or simply inattention to harsh realities has led to numerous past deterrence failures. This is not unique to Israel. Indeed, history is littered with attacks that deterrers thought opponents would never dare and thus did not prepare for adequately,² including, for example, the U.S. failure to deter the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

On October 7, 2023, Israel apparently failed to anticipate and adequately prepare for Hamas’ unexpected attack. This case demonstrates that opponents often behave in ways that defy apparent reason and expectation, and deterrence can fail—even when the deterrer has great familiarity with the opponent. It is hard to imagine a case in which the deterrer knew more about its opponent than Israel knows about Hamas’ leaders, goals, methods, and modes of calculation. And, yet, deterrence still failed catastrophically.

The lesson for Washington today is that opponents can move with surprising speed and aggression—in ways for which the deterrer has not adequately prepared, leading to deterrence failure. A deterrer should never discount the possibility of an opponent’s surprising aggression—no matter how accustomed the deterrer is to believing that an opponent would “never dare” to attack. Such a belief often is more convenient and self-serving than accurate. Hamas’ October 7 attack demonstrates the harsh truth that hedging against greater-than-



expected threats is prudent because opponents' seemingly implausible attacks are not unusual in history, but preparedness helps deter.

This is an important point because, even with an unprecedented constellation of dedicated, conspiring foes, the Biden Administration has actually eliminated hedging as a U.S. deterrence requirement.³ This is a potentially dangerous policy mistake. Washington should instead continuously and proactively hedge against potential gaps in its deterrence position created by confidence that an opponent would never dare an attack. Such confidence and attendant lack of preparation are a recipe for deterrence failure.

For example, many U.S. and allied officials appear still to consider a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies to be "unthinkable," so the United States can effectively discount the possibility. After all, Putin and Xi have agreed that "a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."⁴ Yet, basing any U.S. policy on such virtue-signaling comments by Moscow and Beijing magnifies the risk of deterrence failure because it provides an all-purpose rationale for Washington not to prepare adequately for nuclear threats.

What may actually be unthinkable for Xi is the continued independence of Taiwan – which carries some dark implications for the possibility of Chinese nuclear threats and employment, and the failure of deterrence.

In addition, a coordinated Sino-Russian attack, including limited nuclear employment, against the United States, allies or partners, is a possibility that deserves great attention and hedging in U.S. deterrence preparation. Yet, the Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* suggests that a combined threat is a remote possibility.⁵

The lesson from the Middle East conflict is *not* that Washington must prepare to deter *every* conceivable threat; some threats undoubtedly are much less likely than others and defense budgets must follow a process of triage. But Washington should be very careful about which threats it effectively labels too outlandish to prepare for, and thus consciously decides not to try to deter.

2) Conflicting Value Hierarchies Can Defeat Deterrence Regardless of the Balance of Military Power

A second lesson from the current Middle East conflict is that the high value that liberal democracies place on the welfare of their citizenry can create an extreme deterrence disadvantage because it will be exploited by opponents. The war has illustrated this reality that differing values can have a significant effect on the functioning of deterrence.

Hamas shows a reckless disregard for the lives of the general population of Gaza as it uses civilian human shields and assets to protect its military actions and equipment. In contrast, Israel consistently demonstrates the high value it places on Israeli lives. This asymmetry in the value placed on a general population can have a decisive effect on the perception of a leadership's vulnerabilities, and on the will and options available to each side – and thus affect the functioning of deterrence, perhaps decisively.



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It is for this reason that Hamas has been able to shape Israel's behavior and options by taking hundreds of Israeli civilian hostages. For example, it appears that Israel knowingly accepted a disadvantageous "pause" in its military operations to secure the release of some hostages taken by Hamas—and the Israeli release of a much greater number of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons for various serious crimes.

Hamas certainly recognizes and has exploited to its advantage the great value Israel puts on its citizenry. Israel does not have a comparable coercive tool to control Hamas' behavior and options given Hamas' obvious willingness to sacrifice the lives of the Gaza population. Hamas' expectation that civilian hostages would provide a powerful tool to control Israel's post-attack options and actions very likely contributed to Hamas' calculation that the October 7 attack entailed acceptable risks, and to the consequent failure of deterrence.

The lesson for Washington today is profound. For over a century, America's opponents have been tyrannical authoritarian leaderships or dictatorships. The asymmetry in the value attributed to civilian populations by tyrannies and liberal democracies almost certainly shapes Washington's vulnerabilities, will and options. It provides potentially powerful threat options for opponents that do not exist for the United States.

The asymmetry separating tyrannies from liberal democracies in this regard is undeniable. Recall that in public and private, Hitler, Mao, and Stalin showed a shocking disregard for the lives of millions of Germans, Chinese and Russians, respectively—not to mention the behavior of the Kim leadership in North Korea or the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. An academic review of Communist tyrannies globally, for example, reveals the intentional slaughter of approximately 100 million lives internally to advance domestic political agendas.⁶

Opponents' potential exploitation of this reality will likely shape whether and how deterrence functions. Yet, much classic and contemporary deterrence analysis is essentially apolitical. It ignores the significance of asymmetrical values and treats nuclear deterrence as a mechanistic balancing act based on the size and composition of nuclear arsenals.

This mechanical conceptualization of deterrence is reflected in the current push by some academics to move U.S. deterrence policy back to include the intentional targeting of civilians as a basis for the U.S. deterrent position—as if targeting opponents' civilians holds the same deterrent effect for tyrannical foes as it does for Washington.⁷ It almost certainly does not, which is one of the reasons Washington rejected intentional civilian targeting as the basis for deterrence five decades ago.⁸

In addition, official U.S. statements and academic commentaries regarding deterrence frequently suggest that the Chinese nuclear buildup is not yet an urgent concern because the United States still retains more strategic nuclear weapons than China—as if China's current lack of a nuclear parity at the strategic level equates to a less capable/threatening Chinese strategic deterrent, and thus Washington need not take urgent action. This mechanical conceptualization of what constitutes the basis for deterrence simply ignores the reality that an asymmetry in values, rather than the size of an arsenal, can determine if and how deterrence functions, and that a much smaller Chinese nuclear arsenal may have outsized coercive effect on Washington given the asymmetry in values.



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More broadly, given the fallacy of this mechanical view of deterrence, the traditional U.S. notion that a parity in nuclear capabilities promises stable mutual deterrence is fundamentally questionable. When leadership value structures are highly asymmetrical, assurances that “parity” or “essential equivalence” in deterrence posturing and tools will provide comparable, mutual deterrence effect are likely hollow. Yet, Washington’s conceptualization of strategic deterrence and arms control has been built on this presumption over decades. A parity in capabilities sounds balanced in a mechanical sense, but deterrence is not mechanics, and a parity in posturing simply may not provide Washington the necessary deterrent effect depending on the opponents and contexts.

In short, given the asymmetry of values frequently separating liberal democracies from tyrannies, Washington should always build for credible deterrence effect, not according to the mistaken notion that “parity” provides an informed standard of adequacy. This caveat cuts equally across traditional Democratic and Republican administrations’ policy positions.

Conclusion

In summary, the current Middle East war offers some lessons about deterrence that should be considered as Washington tries to understand how to navigate safely through an unprecedented, great power deterrence context. The two most obvious initial lessons at this point are that: 1) a presumption that deterrence will work can instead lead to its failure because opponents often behave in ways that defy expectations and defeat deterrence; and, 2) conflicting value hierarchies can defeat deterrence regardless of a balance of military power. Neither of these lessons is unique to the current Middle East war. But the conflict illustrates once again that these realities must be taken into consideration as Washington seeks guidelines for deterrence in a dangerous new world.

¹ Then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, “Our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of [Egypt and Syria] starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect. There was no defense against our own preconceptions.” Henry Kissinger, *Year of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1982), p. 465.

² See the discussions in, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. vii-15, 39-114; and, Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp 79-119.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), pp. 3, 7, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

⁴ See, White House, *Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapons States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races*, January 3, 2022, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>.

⁵ *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 12.



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⁶ See, Stephane Courtois, et al., *The Black Book of Communism* (Cambridge Press: Harvard University Press, 1999), passim.

⁷ Keir Lieber and Daryl Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, pp. 3, 6.

⁸ See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne, "Deterrence Via Intentional Civilian targeting: A Dangerous Cold War Anachronism," National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, No. 569 (December 12, 2023).

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