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Fundamental Deterrence Challenges and Tailoring

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Introduction

The bipartisan endorsement of adapting, or "tailoring," deterrence to the potentially unique characteristics of particular opponents and contexts is a milestone in the evolution of U.S. deterrence policy. It has tremendous implications for the character of the U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear force posture intended to support deterrence and extended deterrence to allies.

For example, the basic rationale for tailoring deterrence is recognition of the diversity of opponents' interpretations of what constitutes "rational" or "reasonable" goals and behavior. An overarching deterrence policy requirement designed to enable the United States to tailor its deterrence strategies and redlines across the range of opponents and potential contingencies mandates a force posture that can adapt U.S. deterrence strategies to opponents' divergent goals, value hierarchies, risk and cost tolerances, levels of determination, modes of communication, and perceptions of the United States—among the many factors that can shape enemy responses to U.S. deterrence threats and redlines.[1]

In 1995, without using the term "tailoring," two prominent scholars, Gordon Craig and Alexander George, presented the basic rationale for adapting deterrence strategies to the opponents' particular characters: "Not all actors in international politics calculate utility in

making decisions in the same way. Differences in values, culture, attitudes toward risk-taking, and so on vary greatly. There is no substitute for knowledge of the adversary's mind-set and behavioral style…."[2] Given this reality, tailoring is needed because, "…if one does not threaten the right target for the right reason, it may not matter how well one does it."[3]

A U.S. force posture consistent with a policy of tailoring deterrence to a variety of opponents and contingencies must be sufficiently diverse and flexible to hold at risk the potentially wide spectrum of assets that those opponents deem of highest value—potentially including numerous hardened, defended point targets. It also must be able to pose a credible deterrence threat to opponents who arise relatively quickly or are recognized belatedly. Consequently, tailoring mandates a larger and more diverse standing arsenal of forces supporting deterrence than is favored by those who advocate for what has been referred to as "minimum deterrence" or "easy deterrence."[4] It is this force posture implication of tailored deterrence regarding the number and diversity of U.S. nuclear forces that leads some who recognize the logic of tailoring deterrence, nevertheless, to reject it as policy guidance. They tend to place priority on facilitating lower U.S. force numbers over optimizing prospective deterrent effect.

Intelligence and Tailoring Deterrence

Recognition that opponents can vary widely in their perceptions of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence efforts correspondingly elevates the demands on U.S. intelligence and analysis that supports deterrence. The need is to understand the factors that inform and animate foreign leaderships in different circumstances and how those factors are likely to affect their perceptions of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence strategies. This need is a contemporary deterrence application of Sun Tzu's emphasis in *The Art of War* on the importance of knowing the enemy.[5]

This intelligence task is not "one and done" because opponents and crises can emerge rapidly and their respective responses to U.S. deterrence strategies can vary depending on the stakes and circumstances of a confrontation. The demand for continuing analysis of opponents and circumstances is seemingly unlimited and must be bounded in practice by the priority threats of the time.

Challenges to Tailoring

Various challenges to tailoring as a deterrence requirement are well-known at this point. They tend to focus not on the principle itself—which is self-evidently reasonable—but on the difficulties involved in knowing opponents and in applying that knowledge to deterrence in operational practice.[6] "Knowing" the opponent will always be incomplete and applying what is known to deterrence practice is an art—ever subject to uncertainties and change. The goal is for complete knowledge and deterrence certainty, but neither is achievable in practice; deterrence can never be ensured. The tailoring goal that is achievable is more modest: to make

fewer mistakes and reduce uncertainties so deterrence can "work" as effectively as may be possible.

The harsh reality is that the practicable deterrence goal of doing better with tailoring, even with its limits, should not be sidelined in favor of the unobtainable goal of deterrence perfection without challenges. Even with the most sophisticated and dedicated tailoring, the functioning of deterrence will not be fully predictable. That is an unavoidable reality that must be acknowledged and against which the United States must hedge. Indeed, given the inescapable possibility of deterrence failure, global nuclear disarmament would be a far better alternative if it were plausible.

However, the often-suggested disarmament alternative to deterrence—despite its superficial appeal—is not a serious option. It would require the prior transformation of the international order and human relations the likes of which have never been known in all of recorded history, and hardly appear to be on the horizon.[7] In 2009, America's original, bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission rightly concluded: "The conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order."[8] An option that is not now remotely plausible is not an option. Unless or until that dramatic transformation takes place, we must make deterrence as foolproof as is possible. Tailoring can help.

Fundamental Challenges and Tailoring Deterrence

Not often discussed are the fundamental difficulties that attend tailored deterrence—and *any* form of deterrence, whatever its title. This difficulty is as true for tailored deterrence as it will be for any future approach to deterrence, and as it has been for all previous approaches to strategic deterrence, whether the Johnson Administration's "Assured Destruction," the Nixon Administration's "Schlesinger Doctrine," the Carter Administration's "Countervailing Strategy," or the Biden Administration's "Integrated Deterrence." The names change, as do some key points in the concepts of operation, but the general principles of deterrence have endured for thousands of years, as does the fundamental challenge facing deterrence strategies regardless of their particular methodologies and titles.

This ubiquitous difficulty is that deterrence can fail regardless of the underlying concept, operational approach, forces assigned for that purpose, or the excellence in its presentation. There is no set of threats and redlines that, "of course," has predictable deterring effect, regardless of the skill in application. Why so? Because for deterrence to function, there must be sufficient "space" in opponents' decision-making for U.S. deterrence strategies to function. That is, for deterrence to "work," opponents must be open to pragmatically or grudgingly standing back from the goal or purpose that would otherwise animate their provocation. For example, opponents with the goal of territorial expansion, or with fears that would otherwise drive them to a pre-emptive strike, must have the pragmatism and felt freedom of decision-making to stand down from attack in favor of abiding by the demands placed on them by U.S. deterrence redlines and threats. The problem, of course, is that opponents may not have that

pragmatism or felt freedom to stand down—regardless of the character of the U.S. deterrence strategy. This is an inconvenient truth confronting tailored deterrence, and any other form of deterrence.

Examples in history of opponents who appear not to have had the felt freedom to pragmatically stand down, even in the face of highly lethal threats, are many and varied. In some cases, leaders have been *unwilling* to stand down from decisions and actions that appear to have been irrational given the potential consequences they faced. The reasons spurring leaders on in such cases have been, *inter alia,* spiritual, ideological, the preservation of national pride/honor, and/or deeply personal.

It is attractive to believe that leaders will not behave in this fashion, i.e., that some form of deterrence can be made to "work" because foreign leaders ultimately will prove to be rational, in a familiar/predictable manner, and "every nation has its price when it comes to being deterred."[9] But that appears not to be the case.

As noted above, leaders can define rational or reasonable behavior very differently, and thereby make decisions that follow an idiosyncratic thought process and appear to be irrational. Experience throughout history offers many vivid examples, including, *inter alia*, the islanders of Melos in 416 B.C., Adolf Hitler and his reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, the Japanese War Minister in 1945, the Cuban leadership in 1962, Arab leaders in 1973, and Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 1991.[10]

In short, historically, it appears that opponents' decision-making dynamics at work have periodically rendered deterrence inherently unpredictable and problematic regardless of the redlines and plausible consequences. The frequent assertion that a rational opponent will be an inherently deterrable opponent is a dangerous misnomer. In some cases, opponents' decision-making may effectively be immune to external deterrence threats and redlines. Indeed, in extreme cases, leaders actually have made decisions that appear intended to contribute to the destruction of the societies for which they were responsible, including Adolf Hitler in the "Führer Bunker" in 1945.[11]

It is critical to emphasize that this challenge to deterrence has to do with the insulation of some opponents' decision-making to deterrence threats, not the specifics of the threat. This is the most fundamental challenge to successfully operationalizing tailored deterrence, and any other deterrence strategy. The incomparable strategist Sun Tzu identified effective deterrence as the highest form of strategy: "Achieving victory in every battle is not absolute perfection: neutralizing an adversary's force without battle is absolute perfection."[12] However, deterrence of any form is not always practicable. This suggests the great potential value of hedging deterrence strategies by casting as wide a net as is reasonably possible, including via conscious tailoring, but also to hedging against the real possibility that deterrence will fail or simply not apply given opponents' decision-making parameters. The critical questions in such potential cases are: is the opponent likely to be subject to deterrence effect under the circumstances of the engagement? how prepared is the United States for deterrence failure? how much should be invested, and in what ways, in that preparation? and, how should those preparations be

integrated with tailored deterrence strategies, i.e., strategic deterrence/defense integration? The open history of U.S. planning in this regard is a decidedly mixed bag.

What Advantage Tailoring?

What is a potentially unique advantage of efforts to tailor deterrence given this fundamental challenge to deterrence in general? That advantage may, on occasion, be profoundly important. The efforts to understand opponents in context mandated by tailoring, as described above, can help us to recognize when and why an opponent may *not* be subject to our deterrence tools. Expecting deterrence to "work," when, in fact, only physical control of the opponent would advance U.S. goals, can lead to placing priority on the wrong strategy for the opponent and occasion. In such cases, confidence in any plausible formulation of deterrence to achieve U.S. goals could be a lethal mistake—other strategies must take precedence.

Efforts to tailor deterrence can help us to recognize when deterrence should, or should not, be the priority strategy. Key questions to address in this regard include, *inter alia*: do we know with whom we need to communicate and can we communicate reliably with them? does the target of our communication understand our redlines and fear the associated threats? are our redlines and threats *as perceived by the opponent* credible (or as Herman Kahn put it, "not incredible") both in the operational sense and as the opponent perceives our will to execute those threats? does the opponent have the "space" in its decision-making to stand back from the behavior we seek to deter, or is pragmatism by the opponent unlikely under the circumstances?[13]

If even one of the answers to these questions is "no," the prospects for deterrence functioning as we envision are likely to be reduced; if many of these questions are so answered, deterrence may not be the optimal strategy. The crucial question then is, what is the alternative to deterrence?[14] Recognizing the difference is no small advantage and efforts to tailor deterrence can help us to recognize that difference.

Should we expect to be able to address any of these key questions with complete confidence? Of course not. As this author concluded in 2001, "Accumulating pertinent information about a challenger will never be complete, and the relevant information is likely to change over time."[15] This is the norm. Few questions in the realm of national security can be answered with complete confidence, yet significant decisions hang on our best approximations. For example, we likely do not know precisely how many nuclear weapons Russia, China or North Korea possess, or their respective war plans for nuclear employment. But we plan, nevertheless, based on what we conclude is most likely. That said, there are indicators of how the key questions noted above may be addressed and answered to the imperfect degree possible—of course, we must actually look for those indicators.

In short, tailoring is not a magic wand that can ensure the predictable functioning of deterrence; nothing can do that. Nevertheless, it is a practicable option that is valuable for its potential to increase the opportunities for recognizing when deterrence may not apply, and to reduce the probability of deterrence failure that follows from failing to understand, to the

extent possible, how to deter those enemies whose decision-making is susceptible to deterrence.

Previous Approaches to Deterrence

The value of tailoring becomes more compelling when compared to the previous U.S. approach to strategic deterrence. That approach, in broad terms, presumes that there exists a universal mode of thinking that makes a single form of deterrence predictably reliable; as a consequence, all rational opponents will adhere to similar interpretations of, and responses to, U.S. deterrence strategies.

An example of this past presumption regarding deterrence can be seen in the unmitigated confidence that U.S. officials and academic commentators had that holding opponents' societal assets (e.g., population and industry) at risk would effectively deter any "sane" opponent—as if all opponents would reason similarly and be deterred by a similar threat.[16] On the basis of such an expectation, the U.S. strategic force arsenal could be reduced to those forces required to threaten retaliation against an opponent's society—typically considered a modest level of capability given the extreme vulnerability of societal assets to nuclear weapons. And, indeed, Secretary of Defense McNamara employed such a declared measure of force adequacy, which he referred to as "Assured Destruction," to constrain and limit U.S. spending on strategic forces.[17]

Similarly, some contemporary critics of tailoring deterrence tend to seek a reduced definition of U.S. force adequacy. Consequently, they find fault with tailoring as a requirement and harken back to the expectation that a less demanding standard of adequacy will provide effective deterrence reliably against and "sane" opponent. The inherent risk of such an approach, of course, is that some opponents are likely to be deterred most effectively by threats to values other than highly-vulnerable societal assets and, consequently, the more demanding measure of adequacy associated with tailoring is required for U.S. deterrence capabilities.

For example, the need for a more expansive definition of nuclear force adequacy can be seen in the Carter Administration's conclusion that to deter Moscow most effectively required that the United States hold at risk what Moscow's leaders valued most: their political control and military assets.[18] This conclusion regarding the necessary type of threat to deter Moscow appears to have been carried through in U.S. policy application and has been reaffirmed repeatedly since.[19]

The fundamental question now is not whether tailoring is the preferred policy guideline. That much has been decided. The questions posed by a requirement to tailor deterrence are: 1) how broadly should the adequacy standard be for U.S. forces to be deemed adequate to tailor deterrence per the range of opponents and threats?; and 2) how do we operationalize the needed deterrence threats, i.e., create and communicate the threats deemed most effective for deterrence? The answers to those questions will shape the breadth and scope of the U.S. force posture mandated by the requirement to tailor deterrence.

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The Need for Tailoring: A Long History

It should be recognized that "tailoring" deterrence is not a new or even recent idea. The need to "tailor" by name generally was not seen until the 1990s and its adoption as operational guidance can be found in unclassified U.S. Strategic Command documents a decade thereafter.[20] Beginning in the early 1980s, this author advanced the rationale for deterrence strategies to be predicated on an understanding of opponents' unique characteristics, i.e. tailoring, and, in 1989, used historical illustrations in an unclassified article to help explain the need to do so.[21] However, the policy direction to adapt strategic deterrence to the particular goals and perceptions of the Soviet leadership can be seen earlier, including in the (now declassified) 1974 "Schlesinger Doctrine" and related nuclear employment policy,[22] and in the Carter Administration's Presidential Directive-59 and Countervailing Strategy.[23]

The intellectual roots of the need to adjust U.S. policies to an understanding of the unique decision-making factors underlying enemy behavior can be seen decades earlier. In 1964, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry's study entitled, *Psychiatric Aspects of the Prevention of Nuclear War*, concluded that deterrence strategies predicated on the presumption of universal behavioral patterns and rationality rest on "dubious psychological assumptions."[24] And, as early as 1951, an incomparable scholar at RAND, Nathan Leites, authored a ground-breaking study assessing the unique factors underlying the Soviet leadership's decision-making and the importance of understanding them for U.S. policy. [25]

In short, the use of the term "tailoring" goes back several decades; U.S. operationalization of the concept appears decades earlier, and the intellectual roots for doing so go back to the early years of the Cold War. The full history of this profound evolution in the conceptualization of deterrence and in U.S. policy is yet to be written, although several partial endeavors to do so have been published recently and are now ongoing.[26]

Does Deterrence Tailoring "Work"?

Has tailoring made the difference in U.S. deterrence working or failing? We do not know the answer to that question because effective deterrence often provides little evidence to enable a conclusion about causation. When deterrence "works," nothing much may appear to happen, and the explanations for a provocation that did not occur can be varied and undisciplined by evidence.

That said, we know that strategic deterrence has not failed catastrophically since the U.S. adopted tailoring as a stated or unstated deterrence requirement, including through some stressful periods. Any recommendations to move now in a different policy direction should, somehow, offer a convincing rationale as to why it would provide a more effective basis for deterrence. There are contemporary recommendations for change that essentially ignore or dismiss the need to tailor deterrence. Instead, they appear intended to reduce the adequacy standard for U.S. force posture requirements as the route to lower U.S. nuclear force numbers.[27] None of these offers a plausible explanation of why/how the recommended change would

serve the priority task of strengthening deterrence in a challenging time—indeed, that does not appear to be the goal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the history of the evolution of U.S. deterrence policy to include tailoring has not yet been written, but its origins run far earlier than most commentaries recognize—as does U.S. operationalization of the concept. Tailoring has limitations and unavoidable challenges, as do all approaches to deterrence; it is not a "silver bullet." In addition, to the consternation of some, tailoring deterrence suggests the need for more diverse nuclear capabilities than under past concepts, such as "Assured Destruction." That acknowledged, tailoring is an innovation in U.S. policy, accepted on a bipartisan basis, that has the potential to help Washington avoid making mistakes in its efforts to deter, including in discerning when deterrence may not be the optimal strategy. Given the zero tolerance for strategic deterrence failure, helping to avoid mistakes via tailoring U.S. deterrence strategies is a high priority. A separate, related priority is to integrate tailored deterrence with measures that hedge against its possible failure.

[1] See for example, Keith B. Payne, "Understanding Deterrence," in, Payne, ed., *Understanding Deterrence* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 3-37.

[2] Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.188.

[3] Peter Karsten, Peter Howell, and Artis Allen, *Military Threats* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xii.

[4] See for example, Keith B. Payne and James Schlesinger, *Minimum Deterrence: Examining the Evidence* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2013), pp. 3-8, 9-13.

[5] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Research and Reinterpretation by J. H. Huang (New York: William Morrow, 1993), pp. 52, 161.

[6] See for example, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 98-114; and, Sean P. Larkin, "The Limits of Tailored Deterrence," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 4th Quarter, Issue 63 (2011), pp. 47-57.

[7] See the discussion in, Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023).

[8] See, William J. Perry and James R. Schlesinger, et al., *America's Strategic Posture* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), pp. xvi, 17.

[9] See the testimony of Gen. Eugene Habiger in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Department of Defense Authorization For Appropriation For Fiscal Year 1999 And The Future Years Defense Program, Part 7*, Hearings, 105th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 494.

[10] For lengthy discussions these examples, see, Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), chapters 3 and 4; and, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 39-73.

[11] Ibid., pp. 71-72.

[12] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, op. cit., p. 48.

[13] In 1996, a longer list of such key questions was originally presented in, Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

[14] As discussed in, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 107, 109-110.

[15] Ibid., p. 101.

[16] See for example, McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), p. 9. See also, Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (Winter 1979-1980), p. 618.

[17] As discussed in, Henry S. Rowen, "Formulating Strategic Doctrine," Commission on the Organization of the Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy, Volume 4, Appendix K, *Adequacy of Current Organization: Defense and Arms Control* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, June 1975), p. 227.

[18] See, testimony by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and the "Administration's Responses to Questions Submitted Before the Hearing," in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear War Strategy*, Hearings, 96th Congress, 2nd Session (Top Secret hearing held on September 16, 1980; sanitized and printed on February 18, 1981). (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1981), pp. 10, 16, 25, 29-30.

[19] See, for example, President's Commission on Strategic Forces, *Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces* (April 1983), http://web.mit.edu/chemistry/deutch/policy/1983- ReportPresCommStrategic.pdf. See also, Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et al., *The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, https://www.ida.org/- /media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx.

[20] Department of Defense, *Deterrence Operations: Joint Operating Concept* (DO JOC), Version 2.0 (August 2006), pp. 3, 25, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_ deterrence.pdf.

[21] See Keith B. Payne and Lawrence Fink, "Deterrence Without Defense: Gambling on Perfection," *Strategic Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1989), pp. 25-40.

[22] See the discussion in, Kyle Balzer, "'Knowing Your Enemy': James R. Schlesinger and the Rise of Tailored Deterrence," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2024) pp. 39-54.

[23] See, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in, *Nuclear War Strategy*, op. cit., pp. 10, 16.

[24] Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, Committee on Social Issues, *Psychiatric Aspects of the Prevention of Nuclear War*, Report No. 57 (September 1964), p. 268.

[25] See Nathan Leites' RAND study from 1951 in, Nathan Constantin Leites, *The Operational Code of the Politburo* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2007).

[26] See for example, Sarah Faris, *Tailoring Deterrence: What and Why?*, National Institute for Public Policy, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 5, No. 11 (November 2025); and, Balzer, "'Knowing Your Enemy': James R. Schlesinger and the Rise of Tailored Deterrence," op. cit., pp. 39-54.

[27] See for example, William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, *The Button* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2020). See also, Stephen Walt, "The Quest for Nuclear Superiority Makes No Sense," *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/06/25/nuclear-arsenal-modernization-weapons-no-sense/; and, Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "US Strategy and Force Posture for an Era of Nuclear Tripolarity," *Issue Brief*, Atlantic Council, April 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/us-strategy-and-force-posture-for-an-era-of-nuclear-tripolarity/.

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