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Deterrence: A New Paradigm

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December 2003

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When I was asked to think about how we might reconsider deterrence from the past to the present, I thought back to the early 1990s when, with the collapse of the soviet union, the evil empire, it seemed, at least to some, that the need for deterrence, particularly nuclear deterrence, was a thing of the past. A number of retired senior officers and civilian officials made highly-visible speeches about the absence of any need for nuclear deterrence in the new world order.

Since then, the rise of hostile rogue states, armed with weapons of mass destruction, has eliminated most of the talk of a new world order, and highlighted our continuing need for a capability to deter attacks. Indeed, in this emerging environment, a single deterrence failure involving weapons of mass destruction could inflict casualties a thousand times greater than those we suffered on 9/11.

So, the need for deterrence, once again, is obvious. But the fundamental question for this second nuclear age is, how can we deter these new threats? Some suggest that our Cold War understanding of deterrence worked well during the Cold War, and remains valid today. The essentials remain unchanged, they say, so “don’t fix what ain’t broke.” And indeed, the basic mechanism of deterrence indeed remains the same: it’s about making threats to control others’ behavior, without fighting that much, as Admiral Ellis pointed out earlier, goes back to Sun Tzu. But, to put it simply, compared to the Cold War era, our deterrence goals now are very different. What we want to deter is different. Those we want to deter are different. How we’re able to deter is different. And the contexts within which our deterrent must operate are different. In this environment, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that much of our Cold War-derived thinking about deterrence now needs to be reconsidered.

An important starting point in any rethinking and reconsideration is to recognize that our Cold War notions about deterrence were a reflection of those specific conditions of the Cold War. They were not timeless truths. Unfortunately perhaps, what we believed about deterrence in the Cold War is of questionable value now because the specific details of time, place, culture, politics, leadership decision-making and even personality—what I call key local conditions—can be decisive in determining if and how deterrence operates. Because these local conditions typically differ so dramatically over time and place, an approach to deterrence that was effective against an old foe in the past may be wholly ineffective for future foes.

During the Cold War, we tended to assume that local conditions would favor the predictable functioning of deterrence, and that the lethality of our nuclear deterrent threat would wash out the significance of any local condition that might otherwise work against deterrence. Our confidence in nuclear deterrence was so high that man in the civilian leadership called it “existential deterrence.” Short of insanity, it was said, the balance of terror couldn’t fail to deter.

¹ Presented at The 34th IFPA-Fletcher Conference on National Security Strategy and Policy, *Security Planning and Military Transformation After Iraqi Freedom*, December 2-3, 2003.

Let me offer a conclusion up front. The Cold War conditions that gave rise to such confident notions about deterrence have changed dramatically, and a result of these changes, much of what we believed were timeless truths about deterrence, is now an anachronisms. What were the basic principles of our cold war approach to deterrence, and why are they now anachronisms? First, we defined strategic deterrence largely in terms of the interaction between U.S. and Soviet nuclear forces. That is, we believed that the way to ensure a stable deterrence relationship was to choreograph U.S. and Soviet retaliatory nuclear capabilities to ensure mutual vulnerability, i.e., a secure “balance of terror.” This became the working definition of what constituted a “stable” U.S. strategic deterrence relationship.

And because we came to define strategic deterrence and stability largely in terms of nuclear forces, we generally debated which nuclear forces would ensure deterrence, not whether the nuclear force posture really determined stability, and how deterrence might function. Some advocated more nuclear capability, others less. But most shared the belief that deterrence could be managed with great confidence by adjusting nuclear force postures. This comforting belief was made possible only by the simplifying assumption that the local conditions in the Soviet Union would be conducive to deterrence working reliably, or simply would be overshadowed by the lethality of our threat.

These local conditions, again, have to do with time, place, culture, politics, and leadership decision-making. Let me remind you that for deterrence to work predictably and reliably, requires the presence of:

1. Leaders who understand the U.S. deterrent threat, and will choose to subordinate whatever else might motivate them to that threat;
2. Leaders who are capable of taking in and assessing information about the external world in a fashion that is sufficiently accurate to support reasonable cost-benefit calculations;
3. Leaders who are capable of linking means to ends in their decision-making, that is, they do cost-benefit calculations, and understand when tradeoffs must be made;
4. Leaders who are attentive to and understanding of the intentions, interests, commitments and values of the opponent, and can communicate with each other;
5. Leaders whose cost-benefit calculations can be dominated by the type of physical threats that we can make; and
6. Leaders who operate in a political system that allows individually rational cost-benefit calculations to establish corresponding state policies, that, in turn, determine actual state behavior.

In our Cold War approach to deterrence, we generally just assumed that these six local conditions were present in or relations with Moscow. But, to risk understatement here, let me note that these conditions, necessary for deterrence to function predictably, are hardly universal. Indeed, several of them frequently are absent in international crises. That absence does not mean that deterrence can't work. What it means is that deterrence cannot function predictably as we confidently believed in the Cold War.

Our optimistic Cold War assumption about local conditions and Soviet decision-making may have been appropriate during the Cold War, but, we have no basis for assuming the presence of those necessary conditions in our attempt to deter various contemporary rogue states, nor can we be confident that the lethality of our deterrent threat will be universally decisive in the decision-making of the willing martyr, the desperate gambler, the incommunicado, the ignorant, the self-destructive, the foolish, or those rogue leaders who are motivated by absolute, immaterial goals and immaterial goals. We simply are insufficiently familiar with the myriad of pertinent local conditions to assume that deterrence will “work” predictably. Consequently, the typical confident Cold War assertions about how deterrence will operate are now little more than hopeful guesses against contemporary foes.

Nevertheless, highly confident generalizations about deterrence remain par for the course, including with respect to the rogue states. Those who oppose U.S. deployment of ballistic missile defense, for example, typically insist that there is no need for missile defense because deterrence will work. Others offer equally confident claims that our nuclear deterrent is no longer credible, and therefore we should step back from nuclear deterrence altogether.

Such confident generalizations—whether that deterrence study will work, or that it will not—reflect no more than intuitive guesses in the absence of a close examination of local conditions. These assertions are based on the old Cold War simplifying assumption that we can make confident predictions about deterrence based simply on the character of the military threats involved. We cannot. The problem is that those local conditions I’ve described can be decisive in the functioning of deterrence; and unfortunately, we probably will not know in advance how those local conditions will affect the functioning of deterrence.

In the emerging security environment, there is an irreducible level of uncertainty that will attend the deterrence, not because rogue leaders are irrational, as is sometimes suggested, but because we don’t know when or how local conditions are going to shape the functioning of deterrence.

The most vivid historical illustration of this problem was captured by the exchange between Cuban and Soviet leaders during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. We now know what we did not even suspect at the time: Fidel Castro and Che Guavara encouraged the Soviet leadership to start a nuclear war, using the missiles stationed in Cuba. Castro and Che demanded that the soviets use their nuclear weapons against the United States, with an apparent willingness to accept Cuban national martyrdom as an acceptable price for destroying capitalism. Soviet Vice Premier Mikoyan’s response to these Cuban demands offers an important lesson for thinking about deterrence in the post-Cold War period. Mikoyan’s response to the Che Guevara was, and I quote, “we see your willingness to die beautifully, but we do not believe it is worth dying beautifully.” Shown here are the very different types of calculations of a relatively cautious Soviet leadership, and Cuban ideological zealots. Both were rational, but they had different priorities, and only one was deterrable. In 1962, the deterrable Soviet leadership was in control of the nuclear weapons. In the future, however, the zealots willing to die beautifully may be in control of the weapons of mass destruction.

Where does this discussion lead For the Second nuclear age? One, our view about deterrence should be very different than it was during Cold War: deterrence remains important, but its functioning now is uncertain to a degree that may not be predictable. This conclusion carries a number of very significant implications for how we think and prepare to deter.

First, we should immediately challenge any force posture recommendations that come from a highly confident assertion about how deterrence will work. Confident assertions that nuclear weapons no longer are credible for deterrence are as hollow as assertions that nuclear weapons can ensure deterrence. We need to recognize that opponents will evaluate the credibility of our deterrent threats differently than we do. Perceptions of what is and isn't a credible deterrent are driven by culture and context, i.e., those local conditions I mentioned. During the first gulf war, for example, we attributed little credibility to our nuclear deterrent, but it was highly credible to Saddam Hussein, and it worked.

Second, we should stop defining the concept of deterrence stability in the narrow Cold War terms of mutual societal vulnerability, i.e., the balance of terror. In some cases that Cold War approach might be stable. In other cases, it may be irrelevant. And in some cases, it may actually engender conflict. There are alternative approaches to deterrence stability that may now serve U.S. and allied security interests far better, including vis-à-vis China.

Third, we no longer have the past luxury of calculating deterrence requirements by reference to a single opponent; we may need to deter across a wide spectrum of local conditions and contingencies. Keys to making U.S. deterrence policy all it can be will be flexibility, adaptability, and a wide spectrum of deterrent threat options. In some cases, non-military approaches to deterrence may work, in others, conventional force options may be adequate. In still other cases, nuclear deterrence may be necessary to deter. Having such a spectrum of capabilities and threat options will not ensure deterrence. Nothing can do that. But, it may help to ensure that we will have the capacity to tailor our deterrent threat to the extent possible across a very diverse range of foes and contexts.

Fourth, because we can no longer assume that deterrence will operate reliably, we no longer have the past luxury of focusing so exclusively on deterrence as the determinant of our force requirements.

For example, in recognition of the potential for deterrence failure or irrelevance, we must not only seek to deter, we must also prepare seriously to limit damage to our civil society, our forces, and our allies in the event deterrence fails. This point may seem prosaic, but it's a dramatic departure from the U.S. Cold War approach to deterrence, where we consciously codified the condition of mutual vulnerability through the 1972 ABM Treaty.

Finally, to make deterrence all it can be, will require that we understand the local conditions for each opponent, to the extent possible, before we address the secondary question of how we should attempt to deter them. In the absence of examining local conditions, little confidence can be attributed to any assertion that a particular threat option will or will not deter, or that a particular condition will or will not be stable.

The Bush Administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review was a significant initial effort to take into account these various changes in the strategic environment. This may be most obvious by the subsequent presidential decisions to integrate a broader range of deterrent threat options, including nuclear and non-nuclear options, and to deploy missile defense. Each of these initiatives is critical when deterrence is important but also uncertain, when our capabilities for deterrence will need to adapt over time as circumstances and local conditions change. The NPR was a major step forward in this regard.

The NPR heralded a much needed and overdue paradigm shift away from our Cold War model and toward a much more adaptive approach to deterrence. Now, it is true that all the details of this paradigm shift have not been spelled out. But, recall that our Cold War deterrence paradigm matured over a 25-year period of intense debate.

Much work remains to be done to develop approaches to deterrence and threat options that are better suited to the emerging security environment than that which we inherited from the Cold War. We are indeed still in the early stages of shaking off the baggage of Cold War thought and identifying the outlines of a new deterrence paradigm. The NPR was a very good start, but I fear that we don't have 25 years to get it right this time. We need to move forward as fast and as thoughtfully as we can. Thank you.