

Conceptualising deterrence: An escalating problem

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Abstract. This paper briefly explores the origins and defining features of deterrence theory and examines two fundamental weaknesses associated with the contemporary Western conception of deterrence. Perceiving the role of deterrence as maintaining the status quo and labelling certain military capabilities as constituting ‘a deterrent’ are limiting and can provoke unintended consequences. Deterrence and escalation are inherently intertwined and any single attempt to deter can result in de-escalation or escalation. A new conceptual framework is proposed, which conceives deterrence as a strategic way to achieve a broad spectrum of political ends including de-escalation and escalation, through positive and negative means.

Introduction

Deterrence is a much studied concept (Morgan, 2003; Freedman, 2004; Long, 2008; Oswinga & Sweijs, 2021). While it has not always been understood or recognised as a distinguishable construct, deterrence has been an integral element of conflict for as long as humans have interacted. Since ancient times, humans have attempted to deter their enemies by threatening either action or taking revenge (Gat, 2006, p92-94). Contemporary deterrence theory has evolved from the learnings of the Cold War, and is generally defined in terms of discouraging others from taking unwanted actions by threatening costs and/or imposing risks which outweigh benefits (Howard, 1982, pp309-324; George & Smoke, 1974, p11; Mazarr, 2018, p2). Deterrence also appears to be of increasing importance to Australia (Arbon, et al, 2021), given our worsening strategic circumstances and the 2023 Defence Strategic Review's

focus on deterrence (Department of Defence, 2023).¹

A key feature of deterrence is the fact that it relies heavily on the receiver of the threat choosing to be deterred. It is the target of deterrence (not the sender) that is empowered with the choice to respond to the threat. Literature also distinguishes deterrence from an opposing concept of escalation. Whereas deterrence seeks a continuation of the status quo, escalation, on the other hand, is understood from the Spiral Model² to be what occurs if deterrence fails (Huth, 1999, p28). While some have argued that deterrence is largely irrelevant in the post-Cold War era (Friedman, 2002; Gray, 2003 and Krauthammer, 2002), the reality remains that actors with both the capability and willingness to use force continue to exist. Moreover, these actors invariably communicate deterrence postures which seek to avoid forms of escalation such as arms races, grey-zone competition, and war.

¹Deterrence or its variations is mentioned 33 times (i.e. an average of once every 3.5 pages) in the Defence Strategic Review (Department of Defence, 2023).

²The Spiral Model theorises that conflicts arise from punishment applied in the false expectation that it will elicit better behaviour from the other side, when in fact it elicits worse behaviour (Van Evera, 2018; Jervis, 1976).

Deterrence, the status quo and military deterrent capabilities

A fundamental weakness of the contemporary Western conception of deterrence is that its basic role is limited to maintaining stability and the existing state of affairs. Deterrence and escalation are considered separate, even mutually exclusive, conditions. Chapter 3 of Jervis (1976) provides a detailed examination of deterrence and the Spiral Model. Some analysts argue that particular threats will provide a deterrent effect but dismiss or ignore any considerations that these threats may in fact escalate the situation, for example in relation to Australia's future nuclear power submarines (Herzinger, 2023), future long range strike capabilities (Hellyer and Nicholls, 2022) and a forward Defence in depth posture emphasising space and cyber operations (Davis, 2022). These arguments are too simplistic. It is entirely possible, depending on context, that escalation is an unintended result of making threats. For example, the conduct of Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea risks escalation with China, rather than deterring it from pursuing its current activities.

Deterrence and escalation can occur simultaneously. A threat communicated to a target may succeed in deterring that actor, but may be viewed by a third party (an 'unintended recipient' which also perceives the action as a threat) as escalatory.³ So, even if FONOPS succeeds in deterring China from certain actions, they may give rise to tensions within the broader Indo-Pacific community who view Western involvement as unwanted and unhelpful foreign interference. This response may lead to China being less deterred. Deterrence can manifest at regional or local levels, and could take multiple forms including: deterrence among great powers in the region; deterrence among great powers and regional powers; deterrence among states other than great powers; and deterrence among states and non-state actors (Mehmetcik, 2015). Given the complex dynamics of regional environments, these manifestations can compound or compete such that any single attempt to deter results in both de-escalation and escalation.

Deterrence and escalation can become inherently intertwined. The classic case is nuclear weapons, which appears to constitute the ultimate deterrent and able to deter in all circumstances.⁴ However, nuclear weapons arguably caused both deterrence and escalation during the Cold War. Nuclear weapons were a powerful deter-

rent to conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, but were also the subject of an arms race which grew arsenals from fewer than 1,000 weapons in 1952 to over 60,000 by 1985 (Roser, Herre & Hasell, 2013). Such quantities served no practicable purpose, being able to destroy the entire world many times over. This escalation occurred, paradoxically, because it created greater deterrence through maintaining a credible second-strike capability, in the face of growing first-strike capabilities (Kugler, Organski & Fox, 1980). Some experts argued de-escalation through disarmament would weaken deterrence because as weapon stocks reduced, a first-strike attack might have been viewed as more likely to succeed (Kavka, 1987). During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence led to simultaneous escalation, resulting in greater deterrence, and as such, they were inherently intertwined.

Non-Western deterrence policies illustrate deterrence can be used as a deliberate strategy to escalate or de-escalate. And such deterrence can be achieved through carrots as well as sticks. Depending on the circumstances, incentivising targets from action may be both cheaper and more cost effective. Positive actions may also induce less 'collateral escalation' from unintended recipients. For example, Chinese doctrine suggests deterrence is both defensive and offensive, meaning it can be used to maintain the status quo and also coerce an opponent (i.e. seek to change the status quo) (China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022, pp128-131). 'Strategic deterrence' encompasses not only military power but also 'political influence, diplomatic ability, cultural attraction and national cohesion (China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2022, pp128-131).' This view suggests deterrence can be employed not only to threaten punishment, but to offer mutually beneficial opportunities. China has used positive measures to deter effectively both domestically (Smith, 2022) and in the Pacific region (Frederick & Shatz, 2022). The Russian doctrine at the turn of the 21st Century associated deterrence with de-escalation, through the concept of 'escalate to de-escalate' or 'expanded deterrence'. If Russia, or her interests, were subjected to a non-nuclear attack that could not be defended with conventional means, 'de-escalation' of the conflict would occur by conducting a limited nuclear strike (Ball, 2022; Sokov, 1999). While this would be viewed as straightforward escalation by the West, the Russians saw escalation as an interim step, on the path to de-escalation. Many Western strategists viewed the Russian policy as being difficult to counter, demonstrating it did have some re-

³The nature of the threat perceived by the third party may be different from that perceived from the target, and is obviously different from the message intended by the sender, which presumably had benign intent with respect to the third party.

⁴So-called General Deterrence argues that the risk of mutually assured destruction for both the sender and receiver of the threat, due to inability of any first-strike attack to cripple a second-strike response, means any actual use of nuclear weapons is astrategic—no rational political objective worth fighting for could ever be acquired after a nuclear holocaust. This is, however, a contestable concept. It relies on rational decision-making in circumstances of extreme pressure. Furthermore, even nuclear weapons may be unable to deter in all circumstances. For example, against the actions of terrorists who are difficult to target and who do not seek traditional political objectives.

straining effect on Western actions (Giles, et al, 2022).

Another serious weakness of the Western conception of deterrence, is that deterrence is often, and mistakenly, used as a synonym for certain military capabilities which are labelled as 'a deterrent' or being 'able to deter'. For example, the F-111 bomber (Scrafton, 2020); the B-21 bomber (MacCallion, 2023); and submarines (Medcalf, et al, 2020). Such an analogy clearly infers the stated capability has a propensity to deter or perhaps an inherent ability to provide deterrent effects. The logical corollary, whether intended or not, is capabilities not-so-labelled have no such ability to deter. The conflation of deterrence with capabilities is problematic because no capability has inherent deterrent value. As mentioned earlier, deterrence relies on the receiver choosing to be deterred: it is the response of the receiver to the threat that determines whether deterrence is achieved, not the existence of capabilities able to carry out the threat. Deterrence hinges on the receiver's understanding of not only the sender's capability, but also the credibility of the threat (a function of capability and will) and whether the sender communicated the threat in a way the receiver could understand. The response also hinges on how much suffering the receiver is willing to endure. Conflating the capability with deterrence confuses military means (e.g. capabilities) with strategic ways (e.g. deterrence) to achieve political ends. Making an analogy between deterrence and capability also ignores the issue of whether the target needs to be deterred in the first place. The target may have no intention of undertaking actions considered undesirable by the subject.

Professor Michael MccGwire, a renowned critic of Western deterrence theory, argued it had remained improperly static since the Second World War, due to a rigidity in underpinning attitudes and ideas:

Deterrence dogma [has] imposed a rigid framework on our [Western] thinking that prevented our view of the world from evolving with new information and more relevant hindsight and yet also became a form of intellectual valium, its sophisticated logic imparting a sense of false certainty and inhibiting attempts to challenge the underlying assumptions (MccGwire, 1985).

A new conceptual framework

The weakness of Western deterrence theory suggests that a new conceptual framework is needed, which conceives deterrence as a strategic way to achieve a broad spectrum of political ends including de-escalation and escalation, through positive and negative means. In terms of the classic ends-ways-means triptych, deterrence can be reconceived as a strategic

way through which political objectives may be achieved. Doing so removes the stark distinction between deterrence and escalation and emphasises deterrence can be applied to a broader range of objectives than simply maintaining the status quo. Conceiving deterrence in this way also clearly distinguishes deterrence (as a strategic way) from defence capabilities (which are military means that may be used to execute deterrence). It also means that the success of deterrence should not be measured in terms of its ability to maintain the current state of affairs as it is unlikely for deterrence to achieve this. Status quo powers rarely exist, meaning deterrence will always work against a tide of actors attempting to change the international environment to suit their interests (Mearsheimer, 2003, pp29, 53-54; Kennedy, 1987).

At the strategic level, where deterrence operates, the tide is both powerful and dynamic, meaning any 'existing state of affairs' will rarely be stable enough to be maintained.⁵ There is much evidence to support this assertion. For example, recent Western efforts to contain Russia and China from a range of aggressive actions have demonstrably not succeeded (Veebel, 2015; Shulsky, 2000). Escalation and/or de-escalation are the more likely outcomes of deterrence, and they may occur simultaneously for reasons explained earlier. Deterrence is better defined in terms of discouraging others from taking unwanted actions by attempting to influence the rate of change (either retarding or accelerating), and/or the magnitude of change, in the strategic environment. Achieving this can be done in more ways than issuing threats to impose costs that outweigh benefits. Alternate options include offering inducements or benefits that might be accepted in return for not pursuing certain actions, or removing existing threats and costs in an effort to influence desired changes.

This new conceptual framework can be adopted by Australia to achieve its grand-strategic objectives. There is much commentary around military deterrence, in light of the recently published Defence Strategic Review (Department of Defence, 2023; Bassi and Schrimton, 2023; Karp, 2023; McLaughlin, 2023). But in a compelling speech to the National Press Club, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong argued for a coordinated approach to deterrence using all levers of national power (Wong, 2023). Minister Wong stated that such an approach would best contribute to the goal of a 'strategic equilibrium', achieved through the peaceful resolution of issues rather than through 'the threat or use of force' (Wong, 2023). In effect, Wong's argument can be translated as aspiring to a desirable and stable state of affairs (cleverly, this leaves open the chance of movement away from the status quo), but without the application of deterrence as it is currently conceived by the West. Wong's argument is coherent if the de-

⁵Emphasising this point, many scholars have introduced a new term to describe the international environment: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) (Kraaijenbrink, 2018; Grint, 2022).

terrence posture she envisages is different to that currently conceived. The framework above provides that new conception. Specifically, the framework does not focus on maintaining the existing state of affairs, and it is readily applicable to a whole-of-government deterrence posture because it recognises all tools of national power that are relevant to deterrence, not just military power. Further, it maximises opportunities to achieve stability in the region by engaging with actors cooperatively, as well as competitively.

Conclusion

The current Western concept of deterrence is an escalating problem. It fails to account for the relationship between deterrence, escalation and de-escalation and is too narrowly focussed on maintaining the status quo. The current conception also counterproductively seeks to attain that condition through threats alone. Finally, it conflates certain military capabilities with deterrence. The result is a variation of the classic, but contrarian, thesis *si vis pacem, para bellum* (if you want peace, prepare for war) because deterrence becomes a self-defeating strategy biased towards competition and escalation, through military means. It arbitrarily shrouds a range of positive, non-competitive, actions that could be employed to deter actors and achieve political objectives. As a middle power with limited means, Australia must reconceive deterrence in a manner that utilises all levers of national power and applies deterrence in the broadest-possible way. The very essence of deterrence is negotiation, not intimidation. To seek to deter is to engage in diplomacy, not threat-making.

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