

THE LOGIC OF THREAT AND DETERRENCE TODAY

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Summary

Deterrence is the practice of dissuading attack by promising retaliation severe enough to offset whatever benefits the attack might achieve. In the aftermath of World War II, during which nuclear weapons were first developed, willful mass destruction was considered to be a serious possibility. The number of nuclear weapons actively deployed was so large and their delivery systems were so capable that each force presented to the other not merely a dissuading threat of retaliation but also a provocative threat of preemptive destruction. The logic of deterrence would be self-defeating if a force attempting to embody that logic could be destroyed in a preemptive attack. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transfer of its nuclear forces to Russia fundamentally altered the context of deterrence but not the operational practice.

It seems evident that adequate deterrence requires very little beyond the knowledge of weapons design and the possession of fissile materials. The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons will assuredly endure as long as the knowledge of how to manufacture them is retained.

1. Introduction

Deterrence is the practice of dissuading attack by promising retaliation severe enough to offset whatever benefits the attack might achieve. The underlying idea is presumably as old as warfare itself, but the specific word and the formally declared security policy to which it refers has been primarily associated with the deployment of nuclear weapons. That association has many historical roots but one principal reason. Each individual nuclear weapon is destructive enough to be of strategic significance all by itself and no method of direct defense has been devised that could plausibly provide comprehensive protection. There are too many ways of delivering a nuclear weapon to a chosen target for there to be any realistic hope of blocking all of them all of the time. Because of that fact, the doctrine of deterrence emerged by default as the only viable basis for protection against the willfully aggressive use of nuclear weapons. In the aftermath of World War II, during which nuclear weapons were first developed, willful mass destruction was considered to be a serious possibility. As the Cold War emerged it was

presumed to be the predominant form of threat.

2. Practical Problems

In practical application the basic idea of deterrence has encountered several debilitating difficulties. The number of nuclear weapons actively deployed by the two original protagonists, the Soviet Union and the United States, was so large and their delivery systems were so capable that each force presented to the other not merely a dissuading threat of retaliation but also a provocative threat of preemptive destruction. The logic of deterrence would be self-defeating if a force attempting to embody that logic could be destroyed in a preemptive attack. Such a force would incite nuclear war rather than prevent it. In order to solve that problem, both sides developed monitoring systems to detect the onset of attack and rigged their forces to react before a preemptive attack could be completed, thereby undermining the confidence that the initiating side could have in the effectiveness of a preemptive attack. That development was considered sufficient to assure that the logic of deterrence would not have a perverse result, but it created a serious problem that escaped the bounds of that logic.

The two large forces operated by thousands of individuals in dispersed locations and programmed for mass attack on short notice might inadvertently trigger an engagement that no one actually intended. Because of that possibility, the two protagonists supposedly so dangerous to each other that they had to wield a continuous threat of massive destruction, had also to reassure each other that the forces so disposed would be managed without any misjudgment or managerial breakdown--that they would not retaliate by mistake. The display of extreme threat judged necessary to assure the deterrent effect simultaneously required a subtle form of collaboration significant enough to bring into question whether the practice of active deterrence was necessary in the first place.

In addition, the development of large deterrent forces by the two original protagonists posed the troublesome question as to how other societies were to be protected against the posited threat of willful mass aggression. If the United States, the Soviet Union and its major successor state, Russia, needed national deterrent forces, then why not everyone else? If many others did get them, could the world as a whole tolerate the volatile interactions of multiple deterrent relationships? China, France and the United Kingdom did deploy independent national forces more or less at the same time as the United States and the Soviet Union. But these forces did not involve themselves in continuous operational engagement to the same extent. Israel is widely assumed to have surreptitiously developed a substantial force but it is not actively displayed. Under the terms of the 1968 Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), 184 other countries formally agreed not to develop national forces with the understanding that they would not be threatened and would be protected by the other deterrent forces and that good faith efforts would be made to eliminate those forces eventually. In 1998 India and Pakistan each conducted a series of nuclear weapons tests and indicated that in the context of their highly contentious relationship they would deploy active deterrent forces. Although neither country was a party to the NPT, their actions reinforced a longstanding question as to whether the many additional states readily capable of developing national nuclear forces would indefinitely choose not to do so.

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