# **Essay 4.** *Is deterrence dead?*

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## *Past and present*

For most of the cold war era the concept of deterrence was one of the dominant ideas, if not the most dominant, in the intellectual consideration of international security. Libraries were filled with explanations and explorations of its nature, significance, working, requirements and morality. In recent years, however, it has seemed to lose ground, and the apparent loss has gained increasing speed, at least in one powerful school of geopolitical thought. There has continued to be verbal acknowledgement of the place of deterrence as one of the available instruments of security, and the scale of strategic nuclear weaponry still to be retained under the 2002 US–Russian Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty[1]—around 2000 weapons for both Russia and the United States and an open-ended right to keep many more in reserve—is far from suggesting its abandonment. However, 11 September 2001 was a brutal reminder of its limitations. Beyond that, and not just in reaction to it, in and around the Bush Administration there has been an accelerated drive for direct defence against ballistic missiles, a new salience given in policy utterances to the option of pre-emptive action and, not least, the decision to deal with the problem of Saddam Hussein and Iraq by regime-changing invasion. Even if in some of these instances one may suspect an occasional measure of ulterior motive for not wanting to accept reliance on deterrence, the aggregate of the instances suggests that there has been a substantial decline in confidence in its relevance or dependability in the post-cold-war environment. How far is this justified?

From one viewpoint the shift is understandable. Deterrence was not a frequent feature in the vocabulary of most people before 1945. It was brought into common usage by the huge shock of the nuclear revolution, as recognition deepened that the fearful magnitude of the new destructive force, coupled with the penetrative power of modern delivery systems, meant that classical direct defence—the physical warding off of attempted attack—could no longer suffice for security in the face of great-power hostility. In a dangerous and confrontational world, prevention by deterrence had to step forward as the only practicable alternative to appeasement and eventual surrender. The side effect of this, and of its centrality in the intensive security discourse of 40 years, was that in popular perception the idea of deterrence became almost inseparable from nuclear weapons and the structure of the cold war stand-off. It should not be surprising that these associations are not easily shaken loose, but they are nevertheless, in a strict sense, accidental and not intrinsic.

The concept of deterrence rests ultimately on a simple and enduring reality about human behaviour—a reality which is used and relied upon, in one way or another, in many aspects of ordinary life. That reality is that human beings, with only very rare exceptions of personality or circumstance, refrain from deliberate actions which they foresee as apt to bring upon them more harm than the benefit achieved. People exploit that reality in order to induce others not to embark upon courses which they believe will damage them. They seek to place before the minds of others the prospect that such courses will have certain or probable outcomes to their net disadvantage or, at least, will entail significant risk of costing them more than they can afford to lose. This is an idea of enormously broad application; and a due awareness of that breadth needs to be maintained as one thinks about its targets, instruments and conditions in the context of international security in the 21st century.

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[1] The text of the treaty is available at US Department of State, URL <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/2002/10471pf.htm>.

### *How deterrence works*

Western security arrangements during the cold war focused above all on constraining the Soviet Union, which was a very large and in many ways highly developed entity and, accordingly, would have had a great deal to lose if war leading to nuclear exchange were to break out. Current policy has to consider not only the residual possibility of such opponents but also, in increasing albeit not entirely novel degree, threats that may be posed by less advanced states under leaderships actuated by different values and by non-state terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Commentators have tended to suggest that both these latter two categories—not just the last—may lack either the rationality or the 'much-to-lose' character needed for deterrence to obtain purchase, but the supposition that states such as Iraq offer no such purchase is hard to square with clear reflection or recent history.

There may well be differences in mindset, in readiness or ability to make cool 'expected-value' assessments of future outcomes. For example, some leaders—especially autocrats not well supported by candid counsellors—may be apt to let over-optimism or even fatalism cloud their sense of the dangers of medium- or long-term penalties as compared with near-term ones such as losing face domestically. Such possibilities have to be borne in mind by others seeking to build frameworks of deterrence to constrain states such as these, but it does not follow that frameworks cannot be built at all. The values and calculations by which Saddam Hussein governed his subjects were repugnantly alien to the rest of the world, but he nevertheless knew that he stood to lose a great deal that he prized if he over-provoked powerful external adversaries. His abstention from using biological and chemical weapons in the 1991 Persian Gulf War—at a time, moreover, when he desperately desired to enrage Israel into military involvement, disrupting the broad US-led coalition against him—vividly illustrated his recognition of that.[2] It is difficult to recall, or to imagine, any coherent political society that values nothing which others could damage or destroy. That is true even of North Korea in its extremity of beleaguered deprivation.[3] The problem facing the world community as it seeks to modify that regime's behaviour is not that deterrence can have no leverage, but that the proximity of South Korea as a quasi-hostage generates counter-deterrence against at least some of the possible coercive options.

Terrorist groups are naturally much more difficult to deter, since in material terms what they have to lose is, at best, far more limited in extent and harder to identify and assail. It does not follow, however, that deterrence can make no contribution to dealing with such groups. It is in practice hard for an organization with the capability to inflict grave damage far afield to function without support or at least acquiescence from a harbouring state, and deterrence can in principle be brought to bear upon any such state. The fate of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan surely transmitted a message to other actual or potential harbourers; and even hosts, suppliers or

[2] See chapter 16 in this volume.

[3] See chapter 15 in this volume.

paymasters less blatant than that regime have to reckon with at least the possibility of discovery.

*Conditioning factors*

'Possibility' recalls another aspect of deterrence. In ideal circumstances deterrence is provided by *certainty* both that misbehaviour will be promptly detected and that adequate retribution will ensue. This partnership of assurances is, however, not always available. During the cold war, for example, respected voices questioned the inevitability of retribution ('Would the United States really sacrifice Chicago for Hamburg?'), and similar uncertainty may exist today about unmistakable and indisputable detection. Nonetheless, deterrence can function with less than certainty. Substantial *possibilities* in either dimension, provided that they are not manifestly incredible, can still place before a would-be malefactor a level of danger unlikely to be ignored even by such a risk-taker as Saddam Hussein had in the past shown himself to be, for example had he contemplated putting weapons of mass destruction in terrorist hands.

The next aspect of deterrence is the range of instruments available to pose it. It is plainly mistaken to suppose that only nuclear weapons can serve, or even that only military force in its many other possible forms can do so, although this is where attention habitually concentrates. The prospect of economic disadvantage can sometimes contribute, and so can political disapproval and condemnation if widely mobilized. Harsh experience has demonstrated that some regimes are highly resistant to such action, but it need not be assumed that they are always and wholly impervious. The unanimity of the United Nations Security Council in endorsing Resolution 1441[4] was a significant element in the pressure upon Saddam Hussein at least until France and Russia seemed to draw back from resolute follow-through. The prosecution of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic sends another deterrent message for the future, however much one may regret that the current US attitude to the International Criminal Court (ICC) risks diminishing its scope and impact.[5] In the long run, even societal outlooks may play some deterrent part. Islamic terrorists—including suicidal ones—can at present expect, and be heartened and indeed motivated by, the prospect of widespread admiration and support from within their communities. Nonetheless, it is not inconceivable that—as has happened to some degree in other terrorism-beset environments, like Northern Ireland—community reaction might gradually come (if mainstream and moderate Islam truly commits energetic effort in that direction) to be felt as more penalty than reward and to gain deterrent effect accordingly.[6]

Beyond the factors of target and instrument there is a third aspect of deterrence less regularly considered: the political framework in which it is brought to bear. Effective deterrence requires that the 'deterree' understand unquestionably what are the actions from which he must abstain, the boundaries he must not cross. The breakdowns of deterrence most evident to the West have been in episodes such as Cuba in 1962, the Falkland Islands in 1982, Kuwait in 1990 and Kosovo in 1999. In almost all such instances, the cause of the breakdown has lain not in failure to display plainly the availability of powerful corrective capability, but in failure to communicate strongly enough and far enough in advance exactly what action would be regarded as intolerable and thus call the capability into action. The Iron Curtain, for all its inhumanity, was in this regard a good fence, making if not for good neighbours then at least for the avoidance of misunderstanding about minimum neighbourly conduct required. There remains nevertheless a trap to be avoided in this context. The clarity needed relates to perception of what is intolerable, and to will and ability to exact redress; it does not have to specify the particular means of redressal. It is usually unnecessary, and may indeed be counter-productive, to purport to define closely in advance the form of the rectifying action. Once due regard is had to limits set by international law and treaty, it is rarely helpful to deterrence to prescribe beforehand, for example, what classes of weapon definitely will or will not be used in military response.

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[4] UN Security Council Resolution 1441, 8 Nov. 2002.

[5] The ICC is discussed in appendix 3A in this volume.

[6] See Stepanova, E., *Anti-terrorism and Peace-building During and After Conflict*, SIPRI Policy Paper (SIPRI: Stockholm, June 2003).

### *Legitimacy*

The Iraq crisis highlighted—although to what extent is still not fully apparent—another dimension that partners clarity in establishing deterrence: the dimension of legitimacy. Quite aside from its value in helping to build a long-term framework of international order, legitimacy is often a significant component of credibility. That may be increasingly so in settings in which the deterrent relationship is not between parties of similar power in symmetrical confrontation, as in the cold war, but between states of widely disparate character and capacity and over issues less clear-cut than direct and open military threat to homeland. Perhaps paradoxically, an overwhelming global power such as the United States may sometimes, on a long view, have greater need for evident legitimacy than more limited actors would. It may well be the case that the deterrent fence around Saddam Hussein was sufficiently robust after 1991 to have constrained him from renewed external adventure, even if not from brutal internal oppression. The warrant provided by the high-profile engagement of the UN Security Council plainly provided extra buttressing, and other ways of exploiting this effect could have been explored, such as, for example, an explicit commitment to act conclusively against any use, threat or transfer of debarred weapons. If interest in ways of mobilizing the Security Council's deterrent potential survives—or perhaps is even strengthened by—reflection on the Iraq experience, other and wider applications of that approach might be considered, for example in relation to the threat of biological weapons more generally.

A further factor in legitimacy may have become more prominent: the concern that the use of force should be perceived as both discriminate—harming the innocent as little as possible—and low-cost in terms of lives lost by the punitive party. Democratic societies now have more demanding expectations in these respects than was customary in earlier times, even though Saddam Hussein in his 1990–91 gamble overrated the extent or force of such expectations as constraints upon the resoluteness of US response. Technology and training are making both precision and invulnerability less difficult to achieve in most situations, and this can reduce risk to the credibility of deterrence.

### *Conclusions*

It remains true that deterrence is nonetheless only one of several techniques available for providing international security. Even in the more diverse and flexible forms outlined here, it must rank alongside, not above, other possible approaches such as removing hostile motivations or fears; offering positive incentives; preventing or slowing the acquisition of threatening capability, either by physical means or by dissuasion; pre-emption; direct defence; or the ability to alleviate undesirable effects. Deterrence has strengths and limitations, as have all the other options in the array of techniques for providing international security, which is why they must often be mobilized in combination. The contribution of deterrence may well be less conspicuous than it was during the great and stark confrontation of the cold war (although it is by no means a corollary of this that pre-emption should step forward in countervailing proportion). There is, however, no reason to discard or despair of deterrence, to downplay its value as a partner to and underpinning of other approaches or to impoverish what it can offer by over-narrow interpretation of its meaning and forms. It is still a positive, powerful and flexible instrument for policy makers to exploit.