

# Conventional Deterrence Redux: Avoiding Great Power Conflict in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

US national security strategy has increasingly come to focus on potential threats from Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, all states with whom fighting even purely conventional wars can be expected to be extraordinarily costly, making deterrence of such conflicts the foremost task of the Department of Defense. This article examines the problem of conventional deterrence—making the direct costs of military aggression appear to be prohibitively high—and the challenges associated with convincing potential aggressors that they will be unable to achieve their goals inexpensively. It then applies these principles to the current effort to deter a potential Russian invasion of the Baltic States, a great concern to US and allied strategists due to the potentially catastrophic consequences should NATO's deterrence fail.



*Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.*

—Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon*, 1946

Following the Allied victories of 1945, the United States faced a new era in which the scale of the potential conflict that dominated the strategic horizon—a third world war against the Soviet Union—led visionaries

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like Bernard Brodie to recognize even before the first Soviet atomic test that deterrence would become the central preoccupation of US national security strategy.<sup>1</sup> Although it is deceptive and dangerous to draw facile analogies between the Cold War and the present, today Brodie's warning in the epigraph above once again obtains.

After more than 25 years of conflicts against relatively weak state and nonstate enemies, the US in its national strategy documents now identifies four potential adversaries that US armed forces must be prepared to fight: China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran.<sup>2</sup> While the military establishment is charged with being able to deter and, if necessary, defeat them,<sup>3</sup> the likely costs of decisively defeating any of these states makes deterring them the more critical mission.

When the United States went to war against Panama, Iraq, Somali warlords, the Bosnian Serb Republic, Serbia, Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, Iraq again, Libya, and most recently the Islamic State, the decision makers always anticipated that the costs of achieving US objectives would be affordably low. Those prewar estimates were sometimes well off the mark in one direction or the other, and sometimes willfully so, but in each case the benefits of military success were expected to outweigh the price required to achieve it.<sup>4</sup>

The situation is different with today's adversaries list. In each of these four cases, to varying degrees, the likely direct and indirect costs to the United States of decisively winning a major war and achieving a satisfactory postwar outcome should be expected to far outweigh the benefits of victory.<sup>5</sup> Winning the war would presumably be better than losing it, of course, but waging even a very successful war against China, Russia, North Korea, or Iran would represent a massive failure of US national security policy. This is most obvious with respect to Russia and China—major powers capable of contesting every war-fighting domain in a conflict with the United States—which could easily inflict losses on US forces at rates they have not suffered since 1945 even in the absence of nuclear escalation and without taking into account other types of costs from a war between major global powers. Thus, the true measure of strategic success is *avoiding* fighting a war without sacrificing important US interests in order to do so.<sup>6</sup> In short, the goal is successful deterrence.

With Russia and China appearing to be increasingly inclined toward aggressive international actions, we have moved beyond the idyllic post-Cold War period when most great-power deterrence could comfortably

be left to nonmilitary instruments of power, at least on the surface. Yet the interests the United States is most concerned with protecting against attack by its rivals are not so vital that threats to use nuclear weapons in their defense are either desirable or likely to be credible. Therefore, conventional deterrence is the order of the day. This article examines the subject of conventional deterrence in the early twenty-first century as a somewhat informal primer for policy practitioners, focusing as its central case on the contemporary problem of making strategy to deter Russian aggression against the most exposed allies that the United States is committed to defend: the Baltic States.

### **Don't You Dare: The Idea of Deterrence**

Distilled to 140 characters, deterrence is causing someone not to do something because they expect or fear that they will be worse off if they do it than if they do not.<sup>7</sup> This can be achieved by making it appear unlikely that the action will succeed (deterrence by denial), by making the expected costs of taking the action appear prohibitively high (deterrence by punishment), or by a combination of both.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to deter—or to try to deter—all sorts of misbehavior (as any police officer, vice principal, platoon sergeant, or long-suffering parent can attest), but for the present discussion we will limit our scope to deterring countries from starting wars or committing other acts of military aggression.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than delve at length into deterrence theory, here we will merely note four key points that will be particularly germane to the discussion that follows. First, the goal of deterrence is to make the target *choose* not to attack even though it has the ability to do so. Disarming or destroying the opponent to prevent it from attacking, or doing something else that physically eliminates the threat, is not deterrence; instead it is what Thomas Schelling dubbed “pure” or “brute” force.<sup>10</sup> Brute force can be a useful way to solve national security problems, especially when the enemy is weak, but deterrence is usually cheaper if it can be achieved.

Second, since the target is choosing between attacking and not attacking, deterrence does not simply depend on making war look bad—it depends on making war look worse than the alternative. If the status quo is reasonably attractive, as it is for most states most of the time, deterrence is likely to be easy. However, a desperate actor may decide to attack even though it is not optimistic about the likely results of going to war, if it thinks that not doing so would be unacceptably costly or dangerous.<sup>11</sup> In

other words, the stakes are critical, as is the baseline against which policy options are being compared. Moreover, measures that are intended to deter by posing threats against aggressors can also undermine deterrence by making their targets feel less secure, reducing the expected value of not going to war.<sup>12</sup>

Third, there are many ways to make aggression appear less attractive than the alternative. Threats of punishment—increasing the expected costs of aggression—are the approach most strongly associated with deterrence and can involve nonmilitary as well as military action. Conversely, it is possible to deter by altering the adversary's expectations about how likely it will be to win (or achieve other desired objectives) if it attacks, usually called “deterrence by denial”; the line between punishment and denial can be ambiguous because taking steps to prevent an enemy from winning almost always includes imposing costs as well. War can also be made less attractive by increasing the appeal of not attacking through reassurance measures or promises of rewards that make not going to war more attractive; whether or not one calls this a form of deterrence *per se*, it is nevertheless part of the deterrence process.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, and most important of all, deterrence happens in the mind of the potential aggressor. What the enemy *believes* about the future is what matters, and what the costs and benefits of war will actually be are only relevant insofar as this affects the enemy's thinking. Objective reality will of course suddenly become very important if deterrence fails and war begins. Since decision makers can misperceive reality for many reasons, and because future events are often difficult to predict, many wars are started by states that probably would have been better off if they had not attacked.<sup>14</sup>

### **Is Conventional Deterrence Really a Thing?**

The systematic study of deterrence emerged from the advent of nuclear weapons, and for decades after 1945 deterrence theory focused heavily on nuclear subjects. Nuclear attack was the most important thing to deter—the only military threat that genuinely imperiled the survival of the United States then or now. Nuclear weapons were the most powerful tool for deterrence as well as the most obvious means for deterring nuclear war. Even today, someone who refers to a nation's “deterrent forces” is likely to be referring to nuclear weapons and their delivery

systems, and most readers will initially assume they are doing so even if this is not the intent.

In fact, deterrence has been part of international politics literally for ages and was especially prominent from the early years of the airpower revolution, since this appeared to make states vulnerable to grievous damage in war whether or not their enemies were able to defeat them on land or sea.<sup>15</sup> Scholars in the second half of the Cold War began to refer to “conventional deterrence” as a distinct subject of study and policy to distinguish it from the study of nuclear deterrence,<sup>16</sup> but it is nuclear deterrence that should be regarded as the special case, reflecting the same fundamental dynamics as other types of deterrence but with a number of peculiar—and hugely important—features that derive from the exceptional destructiveness of nuclear weapons.<sup>17</sup> Thus conventional deterrence is ironically just that, conventional: it is normal, typical, unexceptional deterrence, the military component of nonnuclear deterrence that keeps the peace most of the time between almost every country and the potential foes that could attack it if they chose to do so, but do not. Yet talking about “conventional deterrence” as a category is often worthwhile precisely because people so often still tend to think of deterrence only as something that one does with nuclear weapons.

### **Misunderstanding Conventional Deterrence**

Conventional deterrence is not simply another name for nonnuclear deterrence. There are many tools other than nuclear ones that can be used for deterrent purposes, including threats of economic sanctions, blockades, cyberattacks, diplomatic ostracism, and terrorist bombings. Leaders can even be deterred from starting wars by the fear that ordering aggressive action will cause history to judge them harshly.<sup>18</sup> None of these is what we generally have in mind when we refer to “conventional deterrence.” Instead, when strategists consider conventional deterrence their focus is usually on the deterrent effects of conventional war per se, the direct and indirect costs of events on the battlefield. These begin with casualties and materiel losses but may also include harm to civilians, domestic political problems or loss of regime or national prestige due to military failure, or a host of other secondary effects.

Nor is conventional deterrence synonymous with deterrence by denial, although the two are related. Denial involves making the adversary doubt that attacking will be successful. Conventional deterrence often

includes this, but it can also be based entirely or in large part on threatening to impose costs on an attacker by resisting its assault, invasion, or occupation; perhaps the clearest examples of this are the territorial defense strategies of states such as Switzerland and Yugoslavia during the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> This tends to be especially true when the potential attacker is much stronger than the defender, which may make it implausible to imagine being able to defeat the enemy. Threatening to make an aggressor pay a high price in blood and treasure on the battlefield even though you cannot hope to defeat it in the end is deterrence by punishment, just as threatening to launch punitive attacks against its homeland would be.<sup>20</sup> If the threatened punishment appears severe enough to outweigh the incentives for attacking, deterrence should hold.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, being able to defeat an attacker may not be necessary for conventional deterrence to work. On the other hand, it may not be sufficient. An enemy that is strongly motivated to attack by fear, desperation, a desire for martyrdom, or a mystical sense of destiny may be willing to go to war even if the chances of military success appear very small. Or an attacker may seek objectives that cannot realistically be denied because they are so limited or intangible.

Deterrence is not, therefore, a shortcut alternative to defense. There are certainly situations in which conventional deterrence can be achieved with smaller investment of military resources than would be needed to actually repel the aggressor, but strategists should not fall into the trap of thinking that deterrence is a surefire formula for inexpensively solving security problems that are too difficult to address by building capabilities sufficient to defeat the threat.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Reality of Conventional Deterrence**

Conventional (and other) deterrence involves making the value of aggression—its expected benefits minus the expected costs—appear worse than the expected value of not going to war, by either making the costs of victory look large, making the likelihood of success look small, or both. But this rather algebraic way of thinking about deterrence can be unsatisfying from a policy-making perspective because these costs and benefits and values are rarely quantifiable in practice, frequently leaving the key questions unanswered: what is needed to successfully deter, and how much of it is likely to be sufficient?

Predicting the answers in a particular case always involves uncertainty—and often a great deal of it.<sup>23</sup> This is not just because our intelligence about the adversary is incomplete but also because the answer will depend on conditions and decisions that are indeterminate until the crisis actually develops. But history still has a lot to tell us, starting with the fact that deterrence failures are rare. States mostly do not attack their neighbors, even when no one is trying especially hard to deter them. Even small and successful wars tend to be costly and destructive: they often unfold in unexpected ways, so starting them is inherently risky, and initiating wars now tends to be frowned upon by audiences that most leaders care about.<sup>24</sup>

Yet deterrence does still fail from time to time, and some states are more prone to breaking the peace than most of their peers even in an era of strongly declining rates of international conflict.<sup>25</sup> There is a vast literature examining the causes of war,<sup>26</sup> but with respect to the specific question of when deterrence tends to hold or to fail in the breach, no single work is as salient for the present discussion as John J. Mearsheimer's evergreen *Conventional Deterrence*. Examining twentieth-century conflicts in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Mearsheimer made the case that there exists something approaching a necessary condition for deterrence failure that is both simple and consequential: modern states as a rule do not launch wars against each other unless they see a path to achieving a quick and relatively inexpensive victory.<sup>27</sup> If they anticipate that a war will be a long, attritional struggle, even if they expect to prevail in the end, they will generally choose not to attack. (This is not to say that states will be unwilling to bear the burdens of long and costly wars if these are thrust upon them, only that they are unlikely to voluntarily initiate such conflicts.) This proposition is consistent with the standard cost-benefit calculus of deterrence, and the historical pattern fits it strikingly well, even when looking beyond the cases of twentieth-century mechanized warfare that are the domain of *Conventional Deterrence*.<sup>28</sup> The idea is that convincing a prospective attacker that aggression will inevitably be expensive whether or not it will ultimately be successful should generally be enough to make deterrence work.

There are two aspects of this conclusion that are important to note, however. First, this is not the same as saying that it is *necessary* to deny the prospect of a low-cost victory in order to deter. In fact, there are countless past and present examples of states that could win wars easily

and inexpensively nevertheless deciding not to start them—wars are exceptional events. Thus, deterrence strategists should not conclude that their efforts will be in vain if the adversary still imagines an inexpensive victory to be possible. But a strategy that eliminates that prospect should give the deterrer high confidence of success.

Second, believing that one can win quickly does not depend on actually being able to do so. Misperception and miscalculation—along with simple unpredictability—can make war look unrealistically attractive. Moreover, leaders who are strongly motivated to go to war are also likely to overestimate their prospects of success, as Japan famously did in 1941 when leaders who could not bear the prospect of calling off their war in China embraced the idea that it would be possible to defeat the Americans and British by launching a series of lightning attacks that would quickly demoralize their enemies into striking an armistice. Thus, the gold standard of conventional deterrence strategy is not simply placing an easy victory out of the adversary's reach but making it impossible for an enthusiastic enemy general or admiral with a gift for persuasive argument to tell a convincing story to the nation's leaders about how such an outcome is possible.

### **Conventional Deterrence in Northeastern Europe**

This brings us to the challenge of deterring a Russian attack against NATO's northeastern flank in the 2020s. This has become a matter of central concern for US and allied strategists since the 2014 Russian invasions of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, given the operational difficulty of effectively defending the Baltic States against a Russian invasion. Admitted to the alliance in 2004, when Western leaders imagined that Russia's days of menacing its European neighbors were behind it, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are together the size of West Germany during the Cold War yet have a combined population only one-tenth as great. Most significantly, they lie on Russia's border where they could be invaded on short notice by a relatively large force, and it would be difficult for their distant NATO allies to send reinforcements once a conflict was under way due to Russia's ability to interdict movement across the Baltic Sea or through the narrow overland corridor connecting Poland and Lithuania.<sup>29</sup> Now that Russia has reemerged as a sometimes belligerent and potentially aggressive great power, NATO faces the problem of preparing to fulfill its commitment to protect its most exposed members.

Deterring a possible Russian attack in the Baltics is important for several reasons. Not standing up to an invasion would potentially imperil the existence of the Atlantic Alliance by demonstrating its inability or unwillingness to provide the security guarantee that is the central pillar of the North Atlantic Treaty. It would certainly be a craven abrogation of a solemn national commitment by the United States.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, if an attack on the Baltics became the opening battle in a longer and wider war between Russia and NATO, the costs to both sides could be enormous, particularly given the potential for nuclear escalation in any sustained major conflict involving Russia, a state with considerable though potentially brittle conventional military capabilities but a large and robust nuclear arsenal.<sup>31</sup>

Fighting to defend the Baltics could well entail launching substantial attacks into Russian territory to reduce the effectiveness of enemy air defenses and long-range rocket and missile forces, thus crossing a potential Russian escalatory redline.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, were Russia to invade the Baltic States and then find that things had gone badly wrong for its gambit, the incentives to try to escalate their way out of a deteriorating situation might well appear irresistible to Russian leaders facing a choice between accepting a conventional military defeat that would be very expensive in military terms and might be even more so politically and a possibility that employing nuclear weapons could lead to a more satisfactory outcome (though it might instead result in an even greater disaster). In short, a Russian victory in a war in the Baltics could be a strategic catastrophe for the United States and NATO, and a Russian defeat could be far worse: unlike the enemies the United States has faced in the wars of the last several decades, Russia genuinely does have the ability to destroy the Republic.

### **Why Deterrence in the Baltics Should Be Easy**

To say that a Russian invasion is important to avoid is not to assert that it is likely. In spite of some belligerent rhetoric since 2014, such an attack does not appear imminent, and there is good reason to believe that Russia does not currently have active revanchist ambitions regarding the Baltic States. Moscow appears to regard them as being less in its natural sphere of influence than Belarus, Ukraine, or the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and central Asia.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a Russian attack on one or more of the Baltic States would risk a ruinous prolonged

war with a larger and far wealthier Atlantic Alliance that Russia is not well prepared to fight, and it would be highly disruptive to the Russian economy whether or not the West and China united to punish Russia for its actions.

Thus, the incentives for Russia not to attack its Baltic neighbors are strong. On the other hand, a successful attack against one or more of the Baltic States—seizure of significant territory either temporarily or permanently that NATO was unwilling or unable to reverse—could represent a notable strategic gain for a country that consistently identifies NATO as a principal threat to its security and might be an attractive prospect for a government seeking to bolster its domestic support by achieving a conspicuous military success.<sup>34</sup> Could such considerations actually make aggression in the Baltics appear to be worth the gamble for Moscow?

Historical experience suggests that the possibility is one to take seriously. It is hard to imagine that a Russian regime—barring a scenario in which it feared that NATO was preparing to launch an attack against it—would expect the benefits of a successful attack in the Baltics to outweigh the costs and risks of a prolonged major war with NATO's leading powers. However, it does not strain credulity to imagine circumstances under which Russian leaders might come to believe that striking one or more of the Baltic States would not lead to such a concerted response and therefore that a fast and inexpensive victory could be achieved while the Alliance dithered. Russian analysts and leaders might believe—correctly or incorrectly—that in the breach NATO members would decide that fighting to defend their Baltic allies, or especially to liberate their territory after a *fait accompli* occupation, would be prohibitively costly or dangerous. Indeed, it is not difficult to find this sentiment being expressed in the West, even setting aside the potential behavior of domestic political actors in NATO member states that might be beholden to Russian sponsors. In addition, it is possible that a Russian conventional attack in the Baltics, although originally unplanned, could occur as a result of an escalatory spiral in a crisis that began with so-called gray zone actions that were intended to occur below the threshold of overt military action.

None of these possibilities sounds particularly attractive for Russia, and under virtually any circumstance aggression in the Baltics would be considerably more dangerous for Moscow than invading Ukraine was.

But wars have been started based on prospects that appeared similarly dubious to skeptics in the past. And while Russia appears not to intend to attack the Baltics at present (in spite of frequently exploring such operations in military exercises and war games), such intentions can shift relatively quickly, as the change in Crimea's fortunes between the 2000s and 2014 illustrates.<sup>35</sup>

### **Why Deterrence in the Baltics Might Be Difficult**

If Moscow decided that the idea of aggression in the Baltic States was appealing, it would certainly have the means to undertake such an operation. Russia has demonstrated in military exercises the ability to mobilize a considerable force of army and airborne units in its Western Military District relatively quickly, and they have capabilities that appear sufficient to advance deep into Baltic territory in short order thanks to a combination of favorable geography, low NATO force density in the sparsely populated Baltics, and impressive Russian investments in long-range fires, ground-based air defenses, and other anti-access/area denial capabilities.<sup>36</sup> During the 1980s, West Germany's frontier with the Warsaw Pact was defended by nine mechanized corps with additional forces not far behind.<sup>37</sup> The Baltic States' border with Russia and Belarus is approximately the same length, but they would be defended by a total ground force of fewer than nine (mostly lighter) brigade equivalents. To be sure, the Russian army is far smaller than the Warsaw Pact's forces of yore—it might invade the Baltics with a force on the order of some 22 brigade equivalents,<sup>38</sup> but this does not solve the problem of a very low force-to-space ratio preventing the defenders from being able to block all the potential avenues of advance toward the Baltic capitals. Being able to reach their key territorial objectives in a matter of a few days would give NATO little opportunity to use its superior airpower to inflict attrition against the invaders,<sup>39</sup> especially given the risk posed to fourth-generation aircraft by Russia's extensive, multi-layer air defenses, and Moscow thus could reasonably anticipate a short and at least initially victorious war, a situation Mearsheimer identified as conducive to conventional deterrence failure.

In short, Russian leaders would have a viable theory of rapid victory at low cost—in fact, they might have several, including ones corresponding to each of the strategy categories that Mearsheimer identified as attractive alternatives to slow wars of attrition in *Conventional Deterrence*.

First, the non-Baltic NATO members might not resist an invasion at all due to political lethargy, subversion, averseness to casualties, fear of Russian nuclear escalation, or some other factor. Second, NATO forces seeking to defend the Baltics might generally be bypassed by the invaders, resulting in their rapid, blitzkrieg-like arrival in Tallinn, Riga, or Vilnius and Kaunas. Third, the invaders might simply crush the defenders thanks to superior firepower and the protection afforded by their air defense umbrella. Fourth, particularly if Moscow lacked confidence in its army's ability to successfully execute a more ambitious attack, it might expect to achieve a worthwhile victory through a limited-aims attack to seize more easily defensible territory along its border.

NATO would have a variety of available ways to increase the costs to Russia of launching such an attack if it decided not to accept the result of the offensive. In addition to the economic punishment that could be inflicted against it,<sup>40</sup> Russian forces in the Baltics could be subjected to sustained bombing by NATO air forces, attacked by partisan resistance (including bypassed regular forces), and ultimately struck by a counteroffensive once NATO deployed its numerically superior but mostly slow-mobilizing ground forces. The problem with each of these responses from a deterrence perspective, however, is that their deterrent power would depend on Moscow believing that NATO would have the will to carry on the fight for months or years following an initially successful Russian advance. If Moscow expected that the Alliance, or a sufficient number of its key members, would be unwilling to bear the costs associated with such a sustained effort to restore the territorial integrity of the Baltic States, it might plausibly anticipate that it could achieve a *fait accompli* in the Baltics at relatively low cost. Moreover, it might expect to be able to undermine NATO's determination to stand and fight through means ranging from subversion and propaganda in the West to threats of punitive attacks against Alliance members or of nuclear escalation if NATO refused to make peace on terms acceptable to the Kremlin.

This illustrates the central challenge of conventional deterrence as discussed earlier: To have a comfortable degree of confidence that deterrence will prevail, it is (or at least may be) necessary not only to make an inexpensive victory actually unachievable for the opponent but also to deny the adversary the ability to construct for itself any narrative theory of victory describing how aggression could be expected to pay off at

relatively little cost to itself. What is needed to accomplish this will depend at least in part on what that theory of victory might be.

In the case of conventional deterrence in the Baltics, the response to this challenge that has attracted a number of US analysts and, on a more limited scale, US and NATO military leadership in the past several years has centered on increasing the presence or availability of NATO armored and mechanized forces in the Baltic States capable of interposing themselves in front of a Russian invasion. In principle this should be complemented by improvements to US and NATO air forces' capabilities to attack invading mechanized forces in spite of Russian air defenses and threats against European air bases.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of such a military posture would be to increase the expected costs of an attack through combat on the ground and, by slowing the invaders and forcing them to mass, enabling NATO airpower to inflict heavy attrition against them before they could reach territorial objectives such as being able to surround or overrun the Baltic capitals.<sup>42</sup>

Much as Mearsheimer argued that NATO's conventional forces on the Central Front in the 1980s were potent enough to credibly threaten prohibitively heavy punitive losses against a Warsaw Pact invasion,<sup>43</sup> the threat posed by deploying NATO mechanized forces to the Baltics is not that they would be sufficient to defeat a Russian offensive but that they would present Moscow with an inescapable realization that aggression would entail heavy losses to the invaders and that achieving Russian success on the battlefield would require inflicting serious casualties on the armies of major NATO powers who would then likely be unwilling to acquiesce to successful Russian aggression. If such a deterrence strategy created in the minds of Russian leaders a firm expectation that even a successful invasion of the Baltic States would be extremely costly to its army, the prospects for successful conventional deterrence should be strong.

Whether such measures are worth undertaking remains a matter of considerable debate, particularly surrounding the question of how much weight NATO strategists should give to Russia's apparent disinterest at present in attacking the Baltics and to its capabilities to carry out such an operation were Moscow's intentions to change in the future.<sup>44</sup> Even advocates of an enhanced conventional deterrence posture in north-eastern Europe tend to accept the proposition that an invasion of the

Baltic States is inherently unlikely, but the potential for major escalation of such a conflict (particularly but not only the use of nuclear weapons) is a powerful argument in favor of investing at least limited resources to minimize the chance that it might occur.

## **Conclusion: The New Primacy of Deterrence**

*Peace is our profession.*

—Strategic Air Command motto

This article began with the proposition that a war with any of the states identified in the *National Defense Strategy* as the primary sources of threat to US security would be much worse to win than to deter. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of Russia, given the threat of nuclear escalation in such a conflict, but the same can well be said of potential wars with China and, for that matter, Iran and North Korea. Deterring wars with these countries is not the only function of America's armed forces, but it is the most consequential one.

In the wake of Russia's attacks against Ukraine, it is easy to look askance at deterrence as a weak reed upon which to base national security policy, but this is an error to avoid. Deterrence did fail in 2014, but the West had not made much of an effort to deter aggression against Ukraine (neither, for that matter, had Ukraine itself).<sup>45</sup> More importantly, the fact that deterrence sometimes fails does not mean it does not work or that we do not understand it.

Deterrence in the twenty-first century presents some new challenges to strategists, most notably in developing a sound understanding of cyberwarfare as both a threat to deter and a tool of deterrence. But there is little basis for thinking that our problems with deterrence derive from our well-developed theories about it being obsolete. Deterrence does fail, because it can be hard to convince people who are strongly motivated to go to war that doing so is a bad idea, especially if one does not correctly understand their expectations and fears, and this has always been true. Knowing how deterrence works is an essential starting point for making good strategy, and if a potential aggressor can be persuaded that going to war will be difficult and costly, the prospects for successful deterrence will be good. But identifying that objective is just the beginning of the journey. 

## Notes

1. Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).
2. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
3. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017).
4. For example, in 1991 and 2001, victory against Iraq and the Taliban, respectively, came more quickly and less expensively than many in Washington expected. In contrast, when planning the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration instructed US military planners not to prepare for the uncomfortable possibility that the war might become a protracted conflict; see Nora Bensahel, Olga Oliker, Keith Crane, Rick Brennan Jr., Heather S. Gregg, Thomas Sullivan, and Andrew Rathmell, *After Saddam: Prewar Planning and the Occupation of Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG642.html>.
5. The costs of a war on the Korean peninsula can (and should) also be expected to be shockingly high given the size and nature of the North Korean arsenal, although US allies would suffer most of the friendly casualties (see Michael J. Mazarr, Gian Gentile, Dan Madden, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, and Yvonne K. Crane, *The Korean Peninsula: Three Dangerous Scenarios* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE262.html>). It is perhaps easier to imagine that a war with Iran would be an attractive proposition, but given that the Iraq war cost the United States thousands of lives and trillions of dollars yet produced unimpressive results, in spite of the smaller size and greater fragility of that enemy, prudent decision makers should not embrace such fancies.
6. “Master Sun says . . . It is not the pinnacle of martial achievement to fight and win a hundred battles. It is the pinnacle of martial achievement to win without fighting.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Jonathan Clements (London: Constable, 2012), 48.
7. There are many other definitions of deterrence, some of which are just as valid as this one and most of which are longer, but they seem to generate less debate today than they did a generation ago. Readers interested in more discussion of these definitional issues than appears here and in the other articles in this volume should see among many others Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); and Michael J. Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE295.html>.
8. Deterrence is a subset of coercion, which is causing someone to behave in a way that you want by making the value of misbehavior look too low to be worthwhile. If you want the target *not* to do something, the coercion is deterrence; if you want them to do something they wouldn’t otherwise do, it is what Thomas Schelling dubbed “compellence.” See Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), chap. 1.
9. These are not boundaries to be too fussy about at the margins. Most of what is true about deterring states also applies to nonstate actors that have some degree of state-like characteristics, and deterring other sorts of intensely hostile acts has much in common with deterring armed aggression.
10. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. Similarly, in policing, threatening people with punishment if they commit crimes is deterrence, locking criminals up so they don’t have the opportunity to break the law is brute force; see Mark A. R. Kleiman, *When Brute Force Fails: How to Have Less Crime and Less Punishment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

11. Japan deciding to attack the United States and the British Empire in 1941 is the classic example of such a case. Peace can be unappealing for a variety of reasons, ranging from domestic politics to fears that a deteriorating security situation means that not fighting now will simply mean fighting on less favorable terms later; see Karl P. Mueller, Jasen J. Castillo, Forrest E. Morgan, Negeen Pegahi, and Brian Rosen, *Striking First: Preemptive and Preventive Attack in U.S. National Security Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG403.html>.

12. This is the “security dilemma.” See Robert Jervis, “War and Misperception,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 675–700, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/204820>.

13. See David A. Baldwin, “The Power of Positive Sanctions,” *World Politics* 24, no. 1 (October 1971): 19–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009705>. Theorists often like to argue about which of these policies is “really” deterrence—many people recoil at calling reward and reassurance measures “positive deterrence,” but some also pedantically insist that deterrence by denial or using economic punishment is not proper deterrence. The important thing to keep in mind is that all of these factors influence a state’s decision to go to war, so whether you choose to call them deterrence or not, they should all be taken into account in making deterrence strategy.

14. The converse is also true: states also often forgo opportunities to take military action in situations where war might well have served their interests, as in Britain’s refusal to go to war with Germany to defend Czechoslovakia in 1938.

15. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); George Quester, *Deterrence Before Hiroshima* (New York: Wiley, 1966); and Uri Bialer, *In the Shadow of the Bomber* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980).

16. Most prominently, John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983). See also John J. Mearsheimer, “Maneuver, Mobile Defense, and the NATO Central Front,” *International Security* 6, no. 3 (Winter 1981–82): 104–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538609>.

17. See Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 18–24. By the same token, cyber deterrence (see Martin Libicki’s article in this issue) is also a realm of deterrence that is fuzzy around the edges but has many differences from noncyber deterrence. The case for “space deterrence” being a subject that can be useful to discuss in isolation from other deterrence is less clear-cut; see Karl P. Mueller, “The Absolute Weapon and the Ultimate High Ground: Why Nuclear Deterrence and Space Deterrence Are Strikingly Similar Yet Profoundly Different,” in *Anti-Satellite Weapons, Deterrence and Sino-American Space Relations*, ed. Michael Krepon and Julia Thompson (Washington, DC: Stimson, 2013), 41–59, [http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/Anti-satellite\\_Weapons.pdf](http://www.stimson.org/images/uploads/Anti-satellite_Weapons.pdf).

18. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy famously declared his reluctance to order an invasion of Cuba because he did not want to be compared to Tojo. Among other things, this example serves as a reminder that deterrence outcomes are not simply driven by deterrers’ policies and actions.

19. See, for example, Adam Roberts, *Nations in Arms*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1986).

20. The distinction is not always this clear-cut in practice. If an invader defines victory as defeating the enemy at low cost, threatening to make the cost of victory high can be seen as threatening to deny the attacker its objectives, though that phrase more often refers to territorial or political goals. Nevertheless, denial fundamentally involves threatening an attacker with frustration or disappointment, while punishment involves threatening to inflict pain or loss, regardless of whether those suffering are civilians or soldiers.

21. This dynamic is not unique to conventional deterrence. Smaller nuclear-armed states have based their deterrent strategies against superpowers on similar “marginal cost deterrence” principles. Britain or France could not credibly threaten to destroy the Soviet Union with

their modest nuclear arsenals, but they could threaten Moscow in the hope that Soviet leaders would not be willing to sacrifice their capital as the price for overrunning London or Paris. Charles de Gaulle called this the ability “to tear off an arm” of an attacker. See André Beaufre, *Deterrence and Strategy* (New York: Praeger, 1965).

22. Clausewitz, though he focused on compellence rather than deterrence, was an emphatic proponent of the importance of denial, which he often equated with disarming the enemy: “If the enemy is to be coerced you must put him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make. . . . [I]f you are to force the enemy, by making war on him, to do your bidding, you must either make him literally defenseless or at least put him in a position that makes this danger probable.” Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 77, 91–99.

23. Making good deterrence strategy depends on being clear about who is being deterred, from doing what, and under what circumstances, because no single, generic deterrence strategy will be well suited for every case. This has recently become known in some circles as “tailored deterrence,” but good deterrence has always been tailored.

24. Prior to the past century this last point was much less generally true because waging war had an air of virtue about it; see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989). On the pervasive unpopularity of military action among financial sectors in all nations, see Jonathan Kirshner, *Appeasing Bankers: Financial Caution on the Road to War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

25. Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010).

26. A good point of entry is Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

27. Mearsheimer quite properly characterizes this as a strong tendency rather than an absolute rule, but none of the cases he examines in *Conventional Deterrence* violates it.

28. *Conventional Deterrence* focuses on the Second World War and subsequent conflicts; on short-war expectations in 1914 see Van Evera, *Causes of War*; and Jack L. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

29. David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1253.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html). Ground transit from Poland into the Baltic States would need to transit the narrow “Suwalki Corridor” between Belarus and Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave and naval transit from the western Baltic Sea would face a severe threat of interdiction from Russian land- and air-launched antiship cruise missiles. See Ben Hodges, Janusz Bugajski, and Peter B. Doran, *Securing the Suwałki Corridor: Strategy, Statecraft, Deterrence, and Defense* (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, July 2018), <https://www.cepa.org/securing-the-suwalki-corridor>.

30. Remarks by President Obama to the People of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia, 3 September 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/03/remarks-president-obama-people-estonia>: “Article 5 is crystal clear: An attack on one is an attack on all. So if, in such a moment, you ever ask again, ‘who will come to help,’ you’ll know the answer—the NATO Alliance, including the Armed Forces of the United States of America, ‘right here, [at] present, now!’ We’ll be here for Estonia. We will be here for Latvia. We will be here for Lithuania. You lost your independence once before. With NATO, you will never lose it again.” Sacrificing the Baltic States to their fate rather than trying to defend them in the event of an invasion might nevertheless be sound policy, but that is a debate that falls outside the scope of the present discussion.

31. Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE231.html>.
32. Regarding similar risks vis-à-vis the Soviet Union during the Cold War, see Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
33. Andrew Radin and Clinton Bruce Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1826.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html).
34. Such diversionary wars are not commonplace, but they certainly do occur; the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 is a classic example.
35. It is worth noting that there is an important difference between saying (as here) that a low-probability event is worth hedging against and falling into the trap of trying to prepare for every contingency that it is possible to imagine, since the supply of the latter is virtually infinite. Many threats that are not literally impossible are nevertheless so unlikely that prudent policy makers should not expend significant resources preparing for them.
36. Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Yvonne K. Crane, *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe: Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2402.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2402.html).
37. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 167–71.
38. Boston et al., *Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance*, 7–9.
39. Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*.
40. The magnitude of this would depend significantly on whether China decided to provide an economic lifeline to the Russians.
41. David Ochmanek, Peter A. Wilson, Brenna Allen, John Speed Meyers, and Carter C. Price, *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World: Rethinking the U.S. Approach to Force Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1782.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1782.html).
42. Ochmanek et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces*; and Shlapak and Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence*. The forces deployed to eastern Europe to date under the US European Deterrence Initiative and NATO's multinational Enhanced Forward Presence effort comprise two mechanized brigade equivalents. It is unclear whether the size and posture of these forces would be sufficient to fundamentally alter Russian expectations about their ability to achieve a fait accompli; see Elbridge Colby and Jonathan Solomon, "Facing Russia: Conventional Defence and Deterrence in Europe," *Survival* 57, no. 6 (December 2015–January 2016): 21–50, <http://doi.org/gd32rm>.
43. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, chap. 6.
44. Michael Kofman, "Fixing NATO Deterrence in the East or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love NATO's Crushing Defeat By Russia," *War on the Rocks* (blog), 12 May 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/fixing-nato-deterrence-in-the-east-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-natos-crushing-defeat-by-russia/>; and Karl P. Mueller, David A. Shlapak, Michael W. Johnson, and David A. Ochmanek, "In Defense of a Wargame: Bolstering Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank," *War on the Rocks* (blog), 14 June 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/in-defense-of-a-wargame-bolstering-deterrence-on-natos-eastern-flank/>.
45. Much the same can be said of the failure to deter Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991—or Iraq's failure in turn to deter American attack 12 years later.

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