

# MULTI-ACTOR DETERRENCE DEFINING THE CONCEPT

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The former Cold War conceptualization of deterrence and complex security realities have diverged over the past three decades. Rather than understand deterrence as a single actor's decision calculus concerning their costs and benefits in a dyadic context, current US strategies and plans must work within a complex, multiplayer scenario that demands analysis through a multi-actor deterrence concept lens. Multi-actor deterrence is a complex system with multiple state and nonstate actors with conflicting and common interests, each with different strengths and weaknesses. These actors operate within a new security environment in which nuclear proliferation, cyber and space threats, and regional and hybrid conflicts simultaneously exist and influence their decision-making processes.

**T**ailoring deterrence strategy based on the assessment of a single actor's decision calculus in a dyadic context is inadequate in today's multipolar world. An improved framework accounting for current empirical trends allows for a better assessment, integration, and execution of deterrence strategy. The realities upon which the post-Cold War conceptualization of deterrence is based have diverged, and the current multipolar power configuration rejects a simplification that struggles to fit every new threat scenario into a two-actor model. The emerging complexity of our new threat-based world is better understood with a multi-actor model.

## Introduction

For much of the last century, deterrence was one of the cornerstones of the international relations field. Situated within the realist paradigm that drew on the practices of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, deterrence was defined as a theory in which one actor uses credible threats against another actor to persuade it not to take a specific action, either through the imposition of cost or the denial of benefit. Moreover, deterrence was understood as involving two state actors responding to each other mostly in the nuclear domain.

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While the actors and security threats have multiplied since the end of the Cold War, and emerging technologies and new and unconventional domains have dramatically evolved, the core tasks of providing strategic deterrence, crisis management, and cooperative security have remained largely unchanged. In fact, the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* continues to argue strategies must be tailored to Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran and rests on the idea that the United States must be prepared to deter catastrophic events produced only through nuclear capabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Yet as the world has witnessed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, geopolitical situations are broader than two actors, and there is a danger that current deterrence concepts and strategies will continue to handicap US security operations. As emerging great powers seek to alter global power configurations and security environment dynamics, so should we adjust our concepts and strategies.

Scholars of deterrence are often asked to evaluate this multi-actor context and transform it into a dyadic one that eliminates competing interests and simplifies a complex system. Although that might seem like a reasonable suggestion, this proposal assumes it is useful to turn a multi-actor scenario into a dyadic analysis in a complicated security environment. This environment includes nonnuclear states and nonstate actors using new warfighting domains, technologies, and alternative structures to maneuver and achieve strategic goals contrary to US interests.

The commander of US Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richards recently stated, “we can no longer expect our potential adversaries to act within our long-standing, self-imposed constraints based on our rule sets or values, particularly between conventional and nuclear.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the US military must think differently about the way it conceptualizes deterrence and plans strategy in the twenty-first century. A considerable volume of scholarship attests to the fact deterrence is not the same as it was during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> It is no longer appropriate to simply continue tailoring deterrence strategy to specifically assess a single actor’s decision calculus concerning their costs and benefits in a dyadic context.

This article draws attention to the inadequacy of the existing conceptualization and the need to provide a framework for the current empirical trends that would allow for a better assessment, integration, and execution of deterrence strategy. The bipolar-world conceptualization of deterrence and the post–Cold War realities have diverged. As such, concepts need restructuring to better capture recent trends and improve analyses.

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1. Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: OSD, February 5, 2018), <https://media.defense.gov/>.

2. Charles A. Richards, “Online Event: International Security at the Nuclear Nexus (Day 1),” Center for Strategic and International Studies (website), October 21, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/>.

3. Brad Roberts, “On Adapting Nuclear Deterrence to Reduce Nuclear Risk,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 2 (Spring 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/>; Jeffrey A. Larsen and Kerry M. Kartchner, eds., *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Jim J. Wirtz, “How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (Winter 2018); and T. V. Paul, “Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 39, no. 4 (December 1995).

The current multipolar power configuration rejects simplification and the reflexive tendency to fit every new threat scenario into a two-actor model. Instead, a multi-actor model provides a framework to start exploring ways to address the emerging complexity of a new, threat-based world. Restricting the understanding of deterrence to two large actors engaged in conflict can limit a deeper understanding of how smaller actors influence the power dynamic. For example, there are situations between the United States and China where Taiwan might influence a negotiation outcome due to their relationship among the larger actors.

## Multipolar World, Multi-Actor Analysis

The realist concept of power has defined much of the Cold War security environment and the way we think about deterrence, particularly during the first wave of literature (1940s to mid-to-late 1950s).<sup>4</sup> As Stephen Quackenbush and Frank Zagare point out, “almost to a theorist, realist thinkers saw a balance of power as the structural condition necessary for peace to prevail—that is, for deterrence to work.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, despite its initial empirical deficiencies that were addressed by adding the cost-of-war variable, balance-of-power theory has continued to inform much of the nuclear deterrence and strategic thinking in academic and policy-making circles.<sup>6</sup>

As the Cold War ended, the balance of power shifted from a bipolar struggle between two superpowers to a unipolar system, allowing the United States to become an unrivaled actor in global world politics.<sup>7</sup> And in the most recent shift, over the past decade, the strategic security environment has been characterized by the emerging powers actively working against the existing international institutions and the order that was established after the end of World War II.<sup>8</sup>

Such erosion of once well-established security norms by states such as China and Russia are also increasing the risk of regional conflict, including in the Middle East, Europe, and East Asia.<sup>9</sup> But this should not come as a surprise, as some scholars

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4. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948); and Robert Jervis, “Deterrence Theory Revisited,” *World Politics* 31, no. 2 (January 1979).

5. Stephen L. Quackenbush, and Frank C. Zagare, *Modern Deterrence Theory: Research Trends, Policy Debates, and Methodological Controversies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

6. John A. Vasquez, “The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz’s Balance Proposition,” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997).

7. John G. Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth, “International Relations Theory and the Consequences of Unipolarity,” *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009).

8. Philip Cunliffe, “Framing Intervention in a Multipolar World,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 19, no. 3 (June 2019).

9. *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community: Hearing Before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, 116th Cong. (January 29, 2019) (Statement for the Record, Daniel Coats, Director of National Intelligence) 116th Cong., January 29, 2019, <https://www.dni.gov/>.

argued the world was entering a new era of multipolarity over a decade ago.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Russia has been openly challenging US hegemony, while multipolarity has become one of its primary ideological goals in international relations as it seeks to dominate Eurasian lands via regional institutional arrangements and recently invaded and claimed territory.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, ever since the Taiwan Strait crisis in the mid-1990s, China has been committed to multipolarity and increasing engagement at both global and regional levels.<sup>12</sup> These new poles of power with “alternative visions of world order” are simultaneously and directly challenging American supremacy and the Western liberal notions of international governance.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the Cold War construct of great powers and lessons of the dyadic US-USSR interactions continue to inform strategic analysis. Most military decision makers plan *actor-specific* tailored deterrence efforts, basing their arguments on the dyadic game-theoretic models of decision making and realist assumptions dating back to Thomas Schelling and Glenn H. Snyder, in which rational actors conduct cost-benefit analyses when making policy decisions.<sup>14</sup>

Applying this outdated understanding and dyadic logic can mislead: it does not allow the consideration of how additional actors play different roles in a deterrent contest and how that reality impacts outcomes. For example, nuclear states are no longer just deterring other nuclear states. Rather, they are simultaneously interacting in different warfighting domains with decision makers who do not share the same ideas regarding costs and benefits, therefore rendering the deterrent retaliatory threats seemingly ineffective or even impossible.

Although initially some scholars argue this transition from a bipolar to a multipolar international system is not to be feared, today’s multiplicity of resurgent and

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10. Coral Bell, “The End of the Vasco da Gama Era: The Next Landscape of World Politics” (Sydney, Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, November 15, 2007); and John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

11. Thomas Ambrosio, “Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution: How the Kremlin Resists Regional Democratic Trends,” *Democratization* 14, no. 2 (April 2007); Elena Chebankova, “Russia’s Idea of Multipolar World Order: Origins and Main Dimensions,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (January 2017); and Paul Stronsky and Richard Sokolsky, “Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia’s Engagement with Regional Institutions” (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

12. Jenny Clegg, *China’s Global Strategy: Towards a Multipolar World* (New York: Pluto Press, 2009); and Susan Turner, “Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined,” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009).

13. Nathalie Tocci, “Towards a European Security and Defence Union: Was 2017 a Watershed?” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 56, no. 1 (2018).

14. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966); Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence by Denial and Punishment* (Princeton, NJ: Center of International Studies, January 1959); and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication 3-0 (Washington DC: CJCS, October 22, 2018).

aspiring state and nonstate challengers to US hegemony increases the likelihood of instability.<sup>15</sup> This new world order requires states to increase interactions and consider the interests of other states in each scenario and domain rather than just in the nuclear arena. What was understood as a two-player deterrence game involving the United States versus Russia is now expanding into a multi-actor game scenario. Deterrence must be viewed through the new multipolar system lens rather than a misleading and archaic dyadic logic system.

## Taxonomy of Deterrence: Concepts, Theories, and Strategies

Where does multi-actor deterrence situate in a taxonomy of deterrence terms? Overall, academics and military strategists often confuse deterrence terms; in particular, they ignore the difference between concepts, theories, and strategies of deterrence. According to Patrick Morgan, “deterrence strategy refers to the specific military posture, threats, and ways of communicating them that a state adopts to deter, while the theory concerns the underlying principles on which any strategy is to rest.”<sup>16</sup>

While Morgan’s research is very specific in distinguishing how different the two terms can be, he does not acknowledge the variance of the terms within a theory or strategy.<sup>17</sup> For example, in order for deterrence to be successful, nations need strategies to inform strategic goals and objectives. The strategy details how actions will be executed to produce the desired deterrence effect. Therefore, deterrence concepts and theories apply to the strategy to accomplish operational goals.

Clarifying specific deterrence concepts, theories, and strategies helps identify the differences between important terms within the field that are often confused and situates the multi-actor deterrence concept within a deterrence taxonomy. For example, the concept of multidomain deterrence—recently included in academic and defense circles—is often confused with cross-domain deterrence. But these terms have different purposes that produce distinct policy and operational outcomes.

This much-needed clarification of deterrence concepts, theories, and strategies will eliminate pseudo equivalencies and present multi-actor deterrence as a concept—a general understanding of how multiple actors deter each other within the complex strategic environment. This new and innovative concept will allow scholars and strategists to better measure success of deterrence efforts in a multi-actor environment and eventually provide further case studies and validated tests to elevate this term toward a theory.

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15. Charles W. Kegley and Gregory A. Raymond “Must We Fear a Post-Cold War Multipolar System?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 36, no. 3 (1992); Graham Allison, “China vs. America: Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 5 (2017); and Mathew J. Burrows, “Western Options in a Multipolar World,” Issue Brief (Washington, DC: The Atlantic Council, November 2017), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/>.

16. Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

17. Quackenbush and Zagare, *Modern Deterrence*.

The following is a taxonomy of deterrence concepts, theories, and strategies that should be compared and differentiated among other terms to help academics and practitioners evaluate how actors interact within deterrence environments:

**Multi-Actor Deterrence** (concept): The notion of a complex system with multiple state and nonstate actors with conflicting and common interests, each with different strengths and weaknesses, and operating within a new security environment in which nuclear proliferation, cyber and space threats, regional and hybrid conflicts simultaneously exist and influence their decision-making processes.<sup>18</sup>

**Space Deterrence** (concept): The notion to prevent adversaries from attacking satellites and other military or economic assets in and through space.<sup>19</sup>

**Cyber Deterrence** (concept): The notion to be responsive and prevent adversaries from attacking technology within cyberspace.<sup>20</sup>

**Deterrence** (theory): The notion to prevent an adversary's action by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.<sup>21</sup>

**General or Central Deterrence** (theory): The notion of the existence of a stable balance of power among adversaries.<sup>22</sup>

**Credible Deterrence** (theory): The notion to influence via capabilities that deny an aggressor the prospect of achieving their objectives and the complementary capability to impose unacceptable costs on the aggressor.<sup>23</sup>

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18. Michelle Black and Lana Obradovic, "Multi-Actor Deterrence: Defining the Concept" (conference paper presented at the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association and the International Security and Arms Control Section of the American Political Science Association (ISSS-IS) conference, Denver, CO, October 18–19, 2019); and Black and Obradovic, "Multi-Actor Deterrence: Defining the Concept" (conference paper presented at the ISSS-IS conference, Lafayette, IN, November 2018), <https://www.isanet.org/>.

19. Forrest E. Morgan, *Deterrence and First-Strike Stability in Space: A Preliminary Assessment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), <https://www.rand.org/>.

20. Martin C. Libicki, *Cyberdeterrence and Cyberwar* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), <https://www.rand.org/>.

21. CJCS, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2016), s.v. "deterrence."

22. Justin V. Anderson, Jeffrey A. Larson, and Polly M. Holdorf, *Extended Deterrence and Allied Assurance: Key Concepts and Current Challenges for U.S. Policy* (Colorado Springs, CO: USAF Academy Institute for National Security Studies, 2013), <https://www.usafa.edu/>.

23. Barack Obama, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for the 21st Century Defense* (Washington DC: Department of Defense (DOD), January 2012).

**Self-Deterrence** (theory): The notion of self-imposed restraints and caution to avoid any crisis escalation leading to an exchange.<sup>24</sup>

**Immediate Deterrence** (theory): In the face of threats and counterthreats, the notion of actions that forestall conflict that occur in a crisis atmosphere in which the use of force may be imminent.<sup>25</sup>

**Direct Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will focus on communicating threats to the challenger to prevent an action by inducing fear of the consequences.<sup>26</sup>

**Indirect Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives may attempt to achieve deterrence vis-à-vis that power with the threat to “strike neighboring or nearby states, whether or not they are directly engaged in the ongoing conflict.”<sup>27</sup> An example of this is a regional nuclear power unable to counter-deter (conventional or nuclear) threats by a major power because of technological incapacity and distance factors.

**Deterrence by Denial** (strategy): Goals and objectives will seek to dissuade the adversaries by denying them the ability to achieve their objective or interests. Defenders of the status quo will make it physically impossible to pursue and successfully achieve their objective/interest.<sup>28</sup>

**Deterrence by Punishment** (strategy): Similar to direct deterrence, goals and objectives will focus on dissuading a challenger to the status quo by threatening a punitive response to influence their calculi regarding the potential gains of their objective/interest.<sup>29</sup>

**Extended Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will focus on an actor providing the threat of force on behalf of another state rather than just itself, usually in assistance to allies to prevent proliferation or costly conventional posture.<sup>30</sup>

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24. Thérèse Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), <https://www.rand.org/>.

25. Richard Lebow and Janice Stein, “Deterrence and the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (1995); and Curtis S. Signorino, and Ahmer Tarar, “A Unified Theory and Test of Extended Immediate Deterrence,” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006).

26. CJCS, *DOD Dictionary*, s.v. “extended deterrence”; and Anderson, Larsen, and Holdorf, *Extended Deterrence*.

27. Robert E. Harkavy, “Triangular or Indirect Deterrence/Compellence: Something New in Deterrence Theory?” *Comparative Strategy* 17, no. 1 (1998), <https://doi.org/>.

28. Snyder, *Deterrence by Denial*.

29. Snyder.

30. Anderson, Larsen, and Holdorf, *Extended Deterrence*.

**Minimal Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives aim to possess a limited number of nuclear weapons, no more than is necessary to deter a potential adversary. A minimal deterrence doctrine requires only that nuclear weapons be able to impose sufficient costs on a potential attacker to make the initial nuclear attack appear too costly.<sup>31</sup>

**Horizontal Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will subscribe to the normal tenets of direct deterrence options but with the additional facet that the deterring activities might occur in a different location and/or through asymmetric means or scale.<sup>32</sup>

**Vertical Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will use varying levels of threats or domains to influence the challenger but do not use location as a method of execution. Rather, a defender can use conventional capabilities to deter nuclear capability use.<sup>33</sup>

**Triadic Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will support one state using threats and/or punishments against another state to coerce it to prevent nonstate actors from conducting attacks from its territory.<sup>34</sup>

**Tailored Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will support an actor-specific set of deterrence capabilities designed to influence a specific leader or leader's group.<sup>35</sup>

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31. Hans M. Kristensen, Robert S. Norris, and Ivan Oelrich, "From Counterforce to Minimal Deterrence: A New Nuclear Policy on the Path toward Eliminating Nuclear Weapons," Occasional Paper no. 7 (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists and The Natural Resources Defense Council, April 2009), <https://pubs.fas.org/>.

32. Joshua M. Epstein, "Horizontal Escalation: Sour Notes of a Recurrent Theme," *International Security* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1983–84), <https://doi.org/>.

33. King Mallory, *New Challenges in Cross-Domain Deterrence* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

34. Boaz Atzili and Wendy Pearlman, "Triadic Deterrence: Coercing Strength, Beaten by Weakness," *Security Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/>.

35. M. Elaine Bunn, "Can Deterrence Be Tailored?," Strategic Forum 225 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, January 2007), <https://www.hsdl.org/>; Jerrold Post, "Actor-Specific Behavioral Models of Adversaries: A Key Requirement for Tailored Deterrence," in *Tailored Deterrence: Influencing States and Groups of Concern*, ed. Barry Schneider and Patrick Ellis (Maxwell AFB, AL: US Air Force Counterproliferation Center, 2011); Michael Johnson and Terrence K. Kelly, "Tailored Deterrence: Strategic Context to Guide Joint Force 2020," *Joint Force Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2014); and Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice," *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 3 (2009), <https://doi.org/>.

**Cross-Domain Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives will counter threats in one area (such as space or cyber) by relying on different types of capabilities where operations can be more effective.<sup>36</sup>

**Multi-Domain Deterrence** (strategy): Goals and objectives result from operations that involve mixing and merging military and civilian actions, involvement, operations, and or plans that can act as an influence on another actor or adversary. Includes all capabilities found in cross-domain deterrence, with the addition of political, social, economic/financial, and informational.<sup>37</sup>

## Defining Multi-Actor Deterrence

The multi-actor deterrence concept recognizes that the complex twenty-first-century threat environment includes multiple state and nonstate actors with conflicting and common interests, each with different strengths and weaknesses. These actors operate within a new security environment in which nuclear proliferation, cyber and space threats, and regional and hybrid conflicts simultaneously exist and influence their decision-making processes. It also acknowledges that more than two actors tend to be involved in almost all contemporary threat environments, and those actors may not necessarily be labeled as great powers.

This conceptualization builds on Schelling's argument that "international conflicts are not constant sum-games, but rather variable-sum games," which take all the "sum of the gains of the participants involved."<sup>38</sup> These sums hold different values and meanings for each individual actor. Moreover, Schelling argues conducting deterrence requires "there be both conflict and common interest between the parties involved."<sup>39</sup>

The multi-actor concept, therefore, extends Schelling's conceptualization of deterrence to look beyond the bargaining of just two parties by including other players with interests at stake in the bargaining process. Expanding this concept will shape the discussion on deterrence planning. Multi-actor deterrence forces those who think, plan, and operate within the deterrence enterprise to move past the common dyadic scenario and accept that the international distribution of power has transitioned to a multipolar world order. This will result in multiple complex bargaining situations and influence the range of response options.<sup>40</sup> For example, each actor has its own preferred bargaining situation that will impact possible options defense organizations will need to recognize as they plan operations.

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36. Jon Lindsay and Erik Gartzke, *Cross-Domain Deterrence: Strategy in an Era of Complexity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019).

37. Michelle Black, "Food for Thought: Multi-Domain Escalation Management" (working paper, NATO Allied Command Transformation, January 2022).

38. Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict*, 5.

39. Schelling, 5.

40. Schelling, 5.

In the United States, defense planners still look at the deterrence concept through the Cold War context lens wherein two actors and their alliances are competing over resources, ideological supremacy, and global political influence. The multi-actor deterrence concept, on the other hand, demonstrates such conceptualization is inadequate in the new multipolar environment. In this environment, each individual player has different priorities, challenges, strengths, weaknesses, strategic cultures, capabilities, and constraints.

The multi-actor deterrence concept should be integrated where appropriate rather than eliminating the traditional dyadic conceptualization. For example, in a deterrence scenario that includes South Korea, North Korea, and the United States, analysis is generally centered on the relationship between North Korea and the United States. Integrating the multi-actor deterrence concept would recognize all relevant actors in the scenario and identify their preferences and interests.

Such a conceptualization would, therefore, expand the number of players to involve North Korea, South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Russia, Australia, and NATO. The additional actors added to the scenario show the complexity of the geopolitical environment and the relationships that Russia, Australia, and NATO could have within the two-player game.

In other situations such as the High North, the traditional dyadic conceptualization would limit the analysis to only those actors who have equal and near-peer power—US and Russia. The multi-actor deterrence concept, however, would include and evaluate interests of all the actors who have a stake in the Arctic region, such as China, the EU, Norway, Denmark, India, and NATO, to see where potential convergence and divergence of interests would arise.

Previously, power was described as having nuclear power. But the twenty-first-century environment understands the inclusion of different domains can change the power balance, and smaller states with cyber capabilities can influence near-peer powers. The updated conceptualization embodied in multi-actor deterrence helps reveal all actors' preferences and highlight areas of cooperation and conflict, allowing planners to hone and clarify options and strategic messages to meet their deterrence objectives.

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the multi-actor deterrence concept contributes to a tailored deterrence strategy by encouraging the inclusion of actor-specific behavior and capability analyses.<sup>41</sup> Most literature on deterrence theory and strategy focuses on assessing the adversary's decision-making process. This is commonly referred to as tailored deterrence—an actor-specific set of deterrence plans or operations (i.e., strategy of deterrence) designed to influence an actor or decision-level group.<sup>42</sup>

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41. Barry R. Schneider and Patrick D. Ellis, eds., *Tailored Deterrence: Influencing States and Groups of Concern* (Maxwell AFB, AL: US Air Force Counterproliferation Center, 2012).

42. Bunn, "Can Deterrence Be Tailored?"; Post, "Actor-Specific Behavioral Models"; Johnson and Kelly, "Tailored Deterrence"; and Lantis, "Strategic Culture."

Tailored deterrence is broken into different parts that generally deal with the actor doing the deterring and the actor being deterred. Tailoring deterrence makes it more effective as actions and messages are custom made and directed toward the intended audience.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, US deterrence planners seek to tailor deterrence by understanding the perspective of the adversary, how it makes decisions, and what influences its decision calculus. Such an approach allows US planners to hold certain items of value at risk or entice the adversary with benefits to influence a decision before it becomes executable and counter to US interests.<sup>44</sup>

The dyadic and tailored deterrence conceptualization is pervasive among military and civilian academic strategists and is often cited in US national security strategy documents as the preferred processes for deterrence strategy.<sup>45</sup> National security documents from the UK Ministry of Defense and NATO include dyadic and tailored deterrence concepts as well, despite not implementing them the same way. This reliance on tailored deterrence is partly due to the scholarly argument grounded in prospect theory, expected utility theory, rational actor theory, cost-benefit analysis, and game theory.

The integration of the decision-making calculus models into tailored deterrence strategy allows defense organizations to examine what an adversary values and presume how it will act when confronted with certain actions or strategies. Once an actor has deconstructed the rationality, perspective, preference, intent, risk-taking, and bargaining of other actors in the form of a decision calculus, a path can be identified to help either deter an actor away from a certain action or assure actors toward a common goal.

For example, if actor A is attempting to understand actor B's intentions regarding a specific scenario, it will need to understand the decision calculus of actor B to find out their interests and intentions. Once the actor A performs the decision calculus analysis of actor B, actor A should be able to discern what actor B will do in a given situation and what their common or divergent interests might be. From there, actor A can devise a deterrence strategy framed by a process of strategic messaging and communication with actor B about what actor A will do if its rules and limits are violated within a bargaining situation. This also allows actor A to adjust when necessary.

Still, the above conceptualization of deterrence is rather limiting as it forces us to look at one scenario from the two actors' points of view. It fails to capture the dynamics of the multipolar world: complexity is added when multiple actors are introduced into the deterrence model simultaneously. A cursory analysis of the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the multi-actor lens reveals other actors participated in the geopolitical situation.

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43. Jonathon Trexel, "Deterring the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: The Role of Japan's Ballistic Missile Defense" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska at Lincoln, 2013), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/>.

44. DOD, *Deterrence Operations: Joint Operating Concept* (Washington, DC: DOD, December 2006).

45. OSD, *Nuclear Posture Review*; DOD, *Deterrence Operations*; UK Ministry of Defence (MOD), Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Deterrence: The Defense Contribution* (Bristol: MOD, 2019), <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/>; Franklin Miller, "Tailoring U.S. Strategic Deterrence Effects on Russia," in Schneider and Ellis, *Tailored Deterrence*; and George W. Downs, "The Rational Deterrence Debate," *World Politics* 41, no. 2 (1989), <https://doi.org/>.

Initially, it was a Russian-Ukraine deterrence scenario, but an expanded analysis could include NATO, the EU, the UN, Belarus, China, the world banking system, India, and others. Many of these actors participated in the situation but were not regionally located within the conflict situation. Instead, they participated either independently or within alliances, clearly illustrating the complexity of this situation beyond a two-player game. Furthermore, the actors involved engaged other-than-nuclear multi-domain capabilities including financial, space, and political pressure points directed toward Russia. The multi-actor deterrence concept, if further developed, will be crucial to enhancing the tailored deterrence strategy used by the United States.

## **Conclusion: Integrating Multi-Actor Analysis**

Based on an initial presentation of this concept in 2019, NATO sought to find a methodology flexible enough to recognize and understand emerging security challenges that face the Alliance today and in the future. It conducted research to build a seven-step model allowing practitioners to identify actors involved in a deterrence scenario, analyze their decision calculi and possible courses of action, identify overlapping perceptions of actors involved, and develop possible deterrence strategies.<sup>46</sup> At the conclusion of this research in 2021, NATO moved its experimental methodology to an operational level and today continues to incorporate the multi-actor approach into the Alliance's deterrence strategies.

The US national security enterprise, however, has been slow in adapting the antiquated Cold War dyadic deterrence models to address today's more challenging and complex security environment. Incorporating the multi-actor concept into the tailored deterrence strategy would provide US analysts and planners a set of behavior patterns that could be understood across the spectrum of actors and allow them to perform actions within the diplomatic, information, military, and economic spheres of national power.

Currently, when conducting tailored deterrence, US operators enact sanctions or pursue military actions to prevent a certain action of a single and often only near-peer adversary. If other actors are indirectly influenced, this is considered a second- or third-order effect. Planners and strategists in the United States should integrate the expanded taxonomy of multi-actor deterrence and allow operators to investigate and integrate the interests of all actors to find commonalities and/or conflicts among them, informing their tailored deterrence strategy and strategic messaging in a way that influences *all* relevant actors. **Æ**

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46. Michelle Black, "Enabling Coherent Deterrence, a Multi-Actor Approach," research project, NATO Concept Development, June 2019–December 2020.

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