

Conventional Deterrence: An Interview with John J. Mearsheimer

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SSQ: Your book *Conventional Deterrence* was published in 1984. What is your definition of conventional deterrence?

JJM: Conventional deterrence is all about persuading an adversary not to initiate a war because the expected costs and risks outweigh the anticipated benefits. When I wrote *Conventional Deterrence*, I was specifically interested in examining situations where two large armies face each other and at least one of them is thinking about attacking the other.

Throughout the first three decades of the Cold War, virtually all the literature on deterrence dealt with nuclear deterrence. Hardly any attention was paid to conventional deterrence. Indeed, I think I am the first person to ever write an article or book dealing explicitly with conventional deterrence. My goal, of course, was to think systematically about how deterrence works when there is a possibility of a major conventional war, but nuclear weapons are not part of the equation.

SSQ: Early in the book you discuss how conventional deterrence is obtained and state, “Conventional deterrence is largely a function of military strategy” (p. 63). Later on you write, “Military calculations will not always deter decision-makers” (p. 209). Can you explain this difference?

JJM: As Clausewitz makes clear, war is an extension of politics by other means. In other words, states invariably go to war in pursuit of specific political goals. The intensity of the political forces pushing a state to countenance war varies from case to case, but sometimes they are especially powerful. States also pay careful attention to purely military considerations. They want to know what is going to happen when the fighting starts and what they are likely to achieve at the end of the conflict. They also want to know how much risk is involved in pursuing their chosen military strategy. Sometimes states will assess that the likelihood of military success is very low, but still go to war, because political calculations dictate that it is worth taking the risk. The two classic cases

of this kind of logic at work are the Japanese attack against the United States in December 1941 and the Egyptian attack against Israel in October 1973.

SSQ: On p. 16 you state, “Since WWII, the nature of conventional war has not changed and there is no reason to expect a change.” Does the idea of war being characterized by clashing mass armies remain true?

JJM: The only reason to rule out the possibility of clashing mass armies is the presence of nuclear weapons. While there is no question that nuclear weapons reduce the possibility of a large-scale conventional war between two nuclear-armed states, there is still a real possibility that such a war might happen. This possibility was a matter of great concern on the central front in Europe during the Cold War, and it is a concern today on the Korean peninsula and on the border between India and Pakistan.

SSQ: How does military reluctance to engage in conflict affect political decisions concerning conventional deterrence?

JJM: There are some cases where political leaders want to go to war, but their country’s military leaders resist, mainly because they are not confident they can achieve their goals on the battlefield. In those cases, deterrence is likely to hold. This logic explains why the German generals initially prevented Hitler from attacking France soon after Poland fell in September 1939.

SSQ: A quote from p. 211 says, “Although a limited aims strategy is hardly ever an attractive option, it is usually not so unattractive that deterrence obtains in a crisis.” Are nations doomed to continue with limited aims strategies?

JJM: Limited aims strategies are not attractive, because limited wars tend to escalate in the modern world. Limited wars usually turn into unlimited wars. Nevertheless, there are sometimes circumstances where the political imperative for war is so powerful that states will pursue a limited aims strategy anyway. This logic explains why the Egyptians pursued a limited aims strategy when they attacked Israel in October 1973.

SSQ: Have determinants of the success of conventional deterrence changed?

JJM: I think the basic determinants remain unchanged. One could argue, however, that conventional deterrence between China and the

United States largely involves air and naval forces, whereas conventional deterrence during the Cold War was more about the clashing of large armies supported by tactical air power. My book, of course, focused mainly on the latter scenario, and thus one could say we need to think more about the former scenario.

SSQ: Is your definition of deterrence the same for nuclear and conventional, and how is conventional deterrence complicated by nuclear weapons?

JJM: The definition for conventional and nuclear deterrence is the same if you are talking about the overarching relationship between military and political calculations and how they interact to affect deterrence. But the military calculations are different in those two realms. For example, it is difficult to see how a military can employ nuclear weapons on the battlefield to achieve meaningful success. That is certainly not the case, however, with conventional weapons. Furthermore, inflicting—or threatening to inflict—immediate and massive punishment on the other side’s civilian population is of central importance in the world of nuclear deterrence. It is not an important consideration in the conventional realm, which is not to deny that civilians sometime end up suffering greatly in conventional wars. But it rarely happens immediately and it is not the equivalent of being vaporized, which is a serious possibility in a nuclear war.

SSQ: Is it possible today to achieve strategic surprise?

JJM: I think it is more difficult to achieve strategic surprise today than it was when I wrote about conventional deterrence in the 1980s. The main reason is that the ability of countries to penetrate each other’s various communications networks has markedly improved in recent decades. Still, one does not want to underestimate how clever states bent on achieving surprise can be, or how obtuse potential victims can be sometimes.

SSQ: Is the concept of conventional deterrence still relevant given terrorist adversaries, and how does regime type relate to conventional deterrence?

JJM: Terrorism is a minor factor in international politics, and it has little to do with conventional deterrence. Regime type has hardly any

effect on conventional deterrence. The underlying logic applies equally to democracies and authoritarian states.

SSQ: How have technological improvements such as precision-guided munitions (PGM), stealth, and missile defense affected conventional deterrence?

JJM: PGMs and missile defense were around when I first started writing about conventional deterrence. Indeed, the first article I ever published was on PGMs and how they affect conventional war. When it comes to weaponry, militaries operate in a very dynamic environment, and the particular constellation of weapons that states have at their disposal at any particular point in time affects the military calculations that underpin deterrence in important ways. What is crucial, however, is how militaries employ the different weapons in their arsenals. Doctrine and strategy matter greatly for both deterrence and war fighting. This has always been the case and always will be.

SSQ: How do you see autonomous weapons systems and artificial intelligence affecting conventional deterrence? Positive or negative?

JJM: While I recognize that autonomous weapons and artificial intelligence add a new twist to warfare, I do not see them making conventional deterrence more or less likely to work.

SSQ: Can we apply the concept of conventional deterrence to conflicts in space and cyber?

JJM: Given that it is possible to have a conventional war in space, one could surely apply basic deterrence theory to that realm, although I have never thought much about how one would do that. It is also possible to imagine two sides waging a nonnuclear war that only involved cyberattacks. One could also apply the logic of conventional deterrence to that realm, although again, I have not studied that issue. One can also imagine both space and cyber being bound up with more traditional military forces in a potential conflict situation. It seems likely, for example, that two large armies facing off against each other in a crisis will be heavily dependent on communications networks that are vulnerable to cyberattacks. Does this create a situation where the side that strikes first wins because it effectively paralyzes the other side's armies, thus weakening conventional deterrence? Or does it create a situation where it does not matter who strikes first, because the victim will retain the capability to wreck the

attacker's command and control? Thus, there is no difference between first strike and second strike, which strengthens deterrence. I do not know the answers to these questions, but there is no doubt we need good answers, because questions of this sort are of central importance for understanding conventional deterrence in the contemporary world.

SSQ: You wrote, "When nations are dissatisfied with the status quo, the prospects for deterrence are not promising" (p. 211). Has there been anything in the past 20 years that would lead you to change your thinking on this?

JJM: No. I think that anytime a state is unhappy with the status quo, it is going to search hard for ways to change it. And that often means looking for ways to use force to alter the existing state of affairs. Dissatisfied states are inclined to appeal to force, because there is no higher authority in the international system they can appeal to for help in dealing with their grievances. As long as the system remains anarchic, states will be tempted to use force to alter an unacceptable status quo.

SSQ: On p. 212 you issue a message for status quo powers: "Beware in a crisis because your opponent is seeking a way to defeat you." Could the United States be deterred by China in a crisis over Taiwan?

JJM: My sense is that in a crisis over Taiwan, the United States would be the status quo power and China would be the revisionist power. After all, Beijing is intent on incorporating Taiwan into China, while Washington is likely to be committed to preventing that from happening. Thus, the question is: in a crisis over Taiwan, could China be deterred by the United States? It would probably be difficult to make deterrence work, because China is deeply committed to ending Taiwan's independence and thus would be searching for ways to make that happen. The United States would certainly want to be aware of these dynamics so as to maximize its prospects of making deterrence work.

SSQ: To quote the book, "When one side has overwhelming advantage in forces, deterrence is very likely to fail Political consequences of continued peace may be so unacceptable that a nation is tempted to pursue an unattractive course of action" (pp. 59–62). Is this the situation today between the US and North Korea?

JJM: There is no question that a state bent on altering the status quo, which also has a huge force advantage over its adversary, is going to be

especially difficult to deter. A good example of this logic at play involves Hitler's decision to invade Poland on September 1, 1939. The German military was far superior to the Polish military in numbers and quality. Plus, the Soviet Union, which was allied with Nazi Germany, promised to attack Poland shortly after the Wehrmacht entered Poland. The United States today is far superior to North Korea in terms of both conventional and nuclear weaponry. There are two reasons, however, why the United States is unlikely to attack North Korea, much less invade it. First, North Korea has somewhere between 20 and 60 nuclear weapons, which it can use against South Korea and Japan, to include the American military forces and their families living in those two countries. Second, China would surely intervene if the United States invaded North Korea, just as it did in the fall of 1950, when American troops crossed the 38th Parallel.

SSQ: A recent study published in *International Security* showed Americans much more tolerant of non-combatant casualties than previously thought. Could these views affect conventional deterrence in the future?

JJM: I do not think so. My sense is that the key considerations that affect conventional deterrence are the likelihood that the military will achieve its aims on the battlefield and the intensity of the political considerations that are pushing the state to countenance going to war. I have not seen much evidence that the decision to launch a conventional war is affected one way or the other by concerns about civilian casualties.

SSQ: Dr. Mearsheimer, on behalf of team SSQ, thank you for sharing your views on conventional deterrence with the SSQ audience. **SSQ**

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