

## Challenges of Future Deterrence

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(The views expressed here are the author’s and not necessarily those of others.)

### Abstract

A new conception of deterrence has emerged in the Department of Defense. It is “tailored,” addressing a range of adversaries, both state and non-state. It is also multi-layered, going beyond military threats to involve all instruments of national power, to be directed at multiple targets of influence within each adversary. The challenges to implementing this vision of deterrence are considerable. Tailoring deterrence requires a good understanding of how adversaries perceive the world and make decisions, as well as a good understanding of how to influence those decisions. Layering deterrence requires long-range planning and close coordination among multiple government agencies. It is unreasonable to expect that challenges of this magnitude can be overcome in the near term.

### Dilemmas of WMD deterrence

As Thomas Schelling observed decades ago, the strategy of deterrence—in his terms, the use of threats to keep an enemy from starting an attack—cedes the initiative to the other side. Faced with inferior but dangerous foes, the leaders of a superpower may find it uncomfortable to maintain such a seemingly passive stance, especially with fresh memories of experiencing a surprise attack. One notable result of 9/11 was, in fact, a devaluation of deterrence.

The issuance of the 2002 *National Security Strategy* may have been the idea’s low point. It described America’s enemies, an admixture of terrorists and rogue states, as undeterrable. It insisted that the United States “can no longer solely rely on a reactive posture as we have in the past. The inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today’s threats, and the magnitude of potential harm that could be caused by our adversaries’ choice of weapons, do not permit that option. We cannot let our enemies strike first.”

Since then, some of the shortcomings of the alternatives to deterrence have been rediscovered as well. Defensive measures, it is generally recognized, do not offer a seamless net. And however tempting it may be to take the offensive against perceived threats, even the most powerful state may find that war depletes political capital faster than it regenerates. In some combination with other strategies, the need for deterrence therefore endures.

But simply because we conclude that deterrence is needed does not assure that it actually will work, or that we will have a way of knowing. When no attack takes place, we do not necessarily know if anyone intended to attack; if someone intended to attack but reconsidered, we do not necessarily know exactly why they refrained.

Still, this problem does not stop anyone from making educated guesses about the effectiveness of deterrence. Compared to a few years ago, there is less of a belief today in the undeterrable terrorist. It is hoped that informal terrorist supporters can be dissuaded from helping and potential recruits from joining. Even hardened operatives might be deterred from acting by anticipation of failure or by the desire to protect values such as the survival of their movement. But no one seems convinced that deterring terrorists is enough.

Concerning states, there is a widespread belief that different potential adversaries are likely to have different thresholds for deterrence, depending on their interests and perception of risk, among other things. Beyond that, there is little agreement. Those more inclined to confrontational strategies warn that our Iranian adversaries (for example) are fanatics inalterably bent on Armageddon, while those more inclined to cooperative strategies insist that they are ultimately as pragmatic as anyone, and can be deterred safely until it becomes possible to resolve the underlying dispute.

These opposed images of adversary behavior—rash or rational?—would be considered simplistic if applied to the United States itself. Although it is risky to extrapolate too much from the American system, experience has taught that decision-making can be unpredictable, sometimes dominated by parochial considerations, frequently suboptimal, and never immune from error. It also matters who leads, but it is not so simple to assess a leader's style and effectiveness in advance or at a distance. Neither "rational" nor "irrational" seems adequate to describe this situation.

## **The new vision of deterrence**

Against this background, U.S. Strategic Command issued a new doctrinal statement, the *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept*, in February 2004. The SD JOC was designed to address the issue of differences between potential adversaries, including non-state actors. It stated that "because the perceptions and resulting decision calculus of specific adversaries in specific circumstances are fundamentally different, our deterrence efforts must... be tailored in character and emphasis to address those differences."

"Tailored deterrence" was endorsed in the January 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*. It received further elaboration in the second version of the JOC, released in December 2006 as the *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept*. The DO JOC points toward systematic characterization of adversaries and evaluation of courses of action in support of deterrence. These goals imply long-range, deliberate planning.

The DO JOC also involves a broad conception of deterrence. Its "central idea," or definition of deterrence, is "decisive influence," which encompasses multiple "ways" or "methods": threatening to impose costs, threatening to deny benefits, and encouraging restraint by lowering its anticipated costs and increasing its anticipated benefits.

Just as the architects of national ballistic missile defense envision a "layered defense" with multiple systems intercepting an attack at multiple points along a trajectory, the DO JOC anticipates "deterring multiple decision-makers at multiple levels." The targets of deterrence operations extend from top leaders down to trigger-pullers ("a military unit commander at the operational or tactical level of war" or "the terrorist 'foot soldier' who actually conducts the attack").

Using multiple “methods” to influence multiple decision-makers leads to something more than a military concept. As the DO JOC dryly observes, “the range of required means to effectively deter extends beyond those available to the Department of Defense (DOD) alone and reaches into other executive departments and across to our international partners.”

## **Serious challenges ahead**

The challenges involved in bringing this vision to life easily can be underestimated. The DO JOC discusses a number of relevant capabilities, including global situational awareness, strategic communications, and force projection. But it provides no clear sense of how to tailor these means to particular adversaries or circumstances, or how to coordinate them across multiple agencies.

Tailoring involves two especially daunting problems. The first is reducing the prevailing uncertainty about how particular adversaries perceive, think, and decide. These questions extend beyond the mindset of an individual leader or key adviser to include how a particular government or organization operates, both under normal circumstances and during times of tension. And all of this insight must be acquired through veils of secrecy and deception.

The *Iraqi Perspectives Project* report released in 2006 by Joint Forces Command illustrates the difficulty of this problem. Based on many interviews with former Iraqi officials, it concluded that the inner circles of the regime were so preoccupied by the threat from Iran that they did not take the idea of invasion by the U.S. very seriously. This is a surprising finding for most Americans.

The other major challenge of tailoring is how to gain an understanding of how best to influence the above-mentioned mindsets and processes, often in a hostile environment involving limited communications. Without much purchase on this problem, many decision-makers may simply embrace whichever recommendations come from the most credible-seeming source, or whichever ideas appeal most strongly to their own intellectual prejudices and preconceptions. Leaders and their advisers are especially notorious for resorting to favorite metaphors (e.g., contagion or falling dominoes) or analogies (e.g., WWI, Munich, Korea, Vietnam) to define a situation and the proper course of action.

For the sake of decisiveness, the advantage of these mental strategies is clear, and it seems pointless to condemn a decision-maker for failing to develop a definitive grasp of events as they unfold. Historians often cannot do so even with the luxury of archives and hindsight. Still, especially in the nuclear age, this situation cries out for a remedy. What might have happened if John F. Kennedy had found *The Strategy of Conflict* to be a better read than *The Guns of August*?

Further difficulties arise from the pursuit of multi-layered strategies. First, implementing such a strategy places added demands on the planning mechanisms of federal departments and agencies other than the Department of Defense. The question of institutional strength outside of DoD has become so pronounced that the Secretary of Defense was moved to point out in a speech last November that the manpower of a single aircraft carrier strike group outnumbers the entire U.S. Foreign Service.

Second, establishing and carrying out multi-layered strategies magnifies the burden placed on interagency coordination. Alexander George’s research found that the form and extent of coordination reflect the style and preferences of the incumbent president. This circumstance is liable to frustrate any long-range interagency strategy. No purely analytic or bureaucratic mechanisms can address this problem.

The challenges associated with understanding adversaries, tailoring mechanisms of influence, and implementing long-range, interagency strategies should not be dismissed too lightly. Overcoming them could be considered virtually coterminous with achieving successful intelligence reform and national security interagency reform. Still, even incremental progress is greatly to be desired. One encouraging sign is the growing willingness of DoD and the Department of Homeland Security to make new intellectual investments in national security problems. In the meantime, we may simply have to recognize and learn to live with irreducible uncertainty.