

Can Deterrence Be Tailored?

by M. Elaine Bunn

Key Points

Deterrence, the hallmark of Cold War-era security, needs to be adapted to fit the more volatile security environment of the 21st century. The Bush administration has outlined a concept for tailored deterrence to address the distinctive challenges posed by advanced military competitors, regional powers armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and nonstate terrorist networks—while assuring allies and dissuading potential competitors.

The goal of deterrence is to prevent aggressive action or WMD use by ensuring that, in the mind of a potential adversary, the risks of the action outweigh the benefits, while taking into account the consequences of inaction.

Deterrence requires detailed knowledge of the society and leadership that we seek to influence. U.S. decisionmakers will need a continuing set of comprehensive country or group deterrence assessments, drawing on expertise in and out of government, in order to tailor deterrence to specific actors and specific situations.

The capabilities needed for tailored deterrence go beyond nuclear weapons and the strategic capabilities of the so-called New Triad, to the full range of military capabilities, presence, and cooperation, as well as diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments.

The clarity and credibility of American messages in the mind of the deterree are critical to tailoring deterrence threats. U.S. policymakers need mechanisms to assess how their words and actions are perceived, how they affect each adversary's deterrence calculations, and how they might mitigate misperceptions that undermine deterrence.

North Korea's nuclear weapons test is only the latest illustration of how dramatically the international security environment has changed over the last 15 years. Given the wider variety of actors that could inflict mass casualties upon the United States, its allies, or its interests, it makes sense to explore whether and how deterrence could be adapted, adjusted, and made to fit 21st-century challenges.

In its 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report*, the Bush administration set forth a vision for tailored deterrence, continuing a shift from a one-size-fits-all notion of deterrence toward more adaptable approaches suitable for advanced military competitors, regional weapons of mass destruction (WMD) states, as well as nonstate terrorist networks, while assuring allies and dissuading potential competitors.¹

The QDR was the first official U.S. public document to use the term *tailored deterrence*. But the QDR did not explain in much detail what the newly coined term means or how it might be achieved. This has led to a number of questions: How does *tailored deterrence* differ from previous strategies? Whom is the United States trying to deter, from doing what, and in what circumstances? What does one need to know in order to deter in each case? How should capabilities be tailored for deterrence? How can the United States tailor deterrence when, given global communications, messages tailored to one audience will be received by all?

Deterrence aims to prevent a hostile action (for example, aggression or WMD use) by ensuring that, in the mind of a potential adversary, the risks of action outweigh the benefits, while taking into account the consequences of inac-

tion. That said, there is nothing immutable about how the concept should be applied in the face of an evolving security environment. To comprehend the tailored deterrence concept fully and the challenges of implementing it effectively, three facets critical to assessing its viability must be explicated:

■ *Tailoring to specific actors and specific situations*: Some believe the primary contribution of the tailored deterrence concept is that the differentiation among deterrees would emphasize the need to understand each potential adversary's decision calculus. As one analyst put it, tailored deterrence is "context specific and culturally sensitive."²

■ *Tailoring capabilities*: Some draw attention to the need for clarity regarding what kinds of capabilities—either broadly or narrowly defined—would be needed for tailored deterrence, a question that raises potentially large programmatic (that is, new or modified weapons and platforms) and resource implications. The precise capabilities for any particular adversary and scenario would be tailored by choosing a particular mix among all those available.

■ *Tailoring communications*: Others focus on the distinctive problem of communicating intent—specifically the kinds of messages the United States would send in its words or actions that contribute to (or detract from) its efforts to deter specific actors, in both peacetime and crisis situations.

The QDR was only one step in the hard work needed to flesh out the concepts and capabilities underlying tailored deterrence. Defense Department leaders have emphasized the need to reinvigorate intellectual debate on deterrence and dissuasion and to stimulate those outside of government to think through these issues.³

This essay looks in greater detail at each of these three aspects: who is being deterred; what

capabilities are needed in order to deter; and how messages are communicated for deterrence purposes. While specialists can and do give different weight to these variables, only by answering all three of these questions can the efficacy of the concept of tailored deterrence be judged.

Past and Future

The evolution of American thinking about deterrence can be characterized, in broad terms, as moving from deterring one actor during the Cold War to multiple actors now; and from an emphasis on deterrence by threat of punishment (imposing costs/risks) in the Cold War, to an emphasis today on deterrence by denial (denying the gains of the aggressive action) in addition to deterrence by the threat of punishment.

In the Cold War, the main target of U.S. deterrence was a single actor, the Soviet Union. American deterrence policy focused on increasing the costs/risks of Soviet aggression through the threat of punishment—popularly understood to mean mutual assured destruction—and strategic deterrent forces were largely considered synonymous with nuclear weapons (although Cold War deterrence was actually more subtle and nuanced than that).⁴

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s, some strategic analysts turned their attention to deterrence of WMD-armed regional adversaries. They argued that rogue states would try to deter U.S. intervention in their region, intimidate U.S. allies, and make intrawar threats to limit American aims in case of war. They pointed out that regional deterrence is more problematic for the United States for several reasons: regional adversaries may be less risk-averse, and they may have considerable resolve because crises often involve their core interests, whereas U.S. interests are peripheral.

After September 11, 2001, another set of players was added to the debate about deterrence: nonstate actors or terrorists. Initially, conventional wisdom was that terrorists were undeterrable. However, that view is evolving, at least to the point that those both inside and outside government are asking whether there may be ways to deter various parts of terrorist networks,

either through increasing the costs or decreasing the gains.

Although *tailored deterrence* is a new term, the concepts underlying it—the need to adjust deterrence to each of a wide range of potential opponents, actions, and situations, and a wider range of capabilities that contribute to deterrence—are not new and have been evolving for some time.⁵ The most cogent current definition of *deterrence* is in the Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept (DO JOC),⁶ written in 2004 and revised in 2006. The DO JOC states that the objective of deterrence operations is “to decisively influence the adversary’s decision-making calculus in order to prevent hostile actions against U.S. vital interests.⁷ . . . An adversary’s deterrence decision calculus focuses on their perception of three primary elements”: the *benefits* of a course of action; the *costs* of a course of action; and the *consequences of restraint* (that is, costs and benefits of not taking the course of action we seek to deter).⁸

This definition returns to the basic principles underlying deterrence—before it was applied to the particular case of the Soviet Union and the application of the theory (and its emphasis in that particular case on increasing the risks through the threat of punishment, primarily with nuclear weapons) became conflated with the underlying theory of deterrence. What is needed is a reexamination of the underlying theory and a determination of how to apply it to modern cases of concern, without the irrelevant attributes of Cold War deterrence.

During the Cold War, deterrence was the dominant goal of U.S. security policy. Now, while it remains an important goal, deterrence interacts closely with the equally important security policy goals of assurance, dissuasion, and defeat.

The distinction between *deterrence* and *dissuasion* is often confused. If, as a proverb posits, the beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right name, then it may help illuminate the issue of deterrence to distinguish it from dissuasion. While deterrence is focused on convincing an adversary not to undertake acts of aggression, dissuasion is aimed at convincing a potential adversary not to compete with the United States or go down an undesirable

path, such as acquiring, enhancing, or increasing threatening capabilities.⁹ For instance, one deters WMD use but *dissuades* acquisition of WMD. More broadly, one deters aggression but *dissuades* acquisition (or improvement) of the means of aggression. However, both are focused

both deterrence and dissuasion require “getting into the heads” of others

on influencing the decisions of others, and both require “getting into the heads” of these others. The types of information and the understanding of a country or group and its leaders necessary for deterring that actor would also be useful for developing dissuasion strategies for that actor.

Without influencing an opponent’s decision, we could still try to *prevent* or *disrupt* his *acquisition* of threatening capabilities, or *defeat* or *defend against use* of them. But in those cases, we may have physically kept the potential aggressor from taking action, but we have not changed his mind; thus, our actions are not dissuasion or deterrence. That is not to say that the United States should stint on its efforts to prevent, deny, disrupt, or defeat; those are valuable capabilities in and of themselves, since some adversaries may not be dissuaded from acquiring or improving capabilities or deterred from using them. Indeed, U.S. ability to do those things (prevent, deny, defeat, disrupt) may well influence the calculations of the adversary and contribute to dissuasion and deterrence.

Likewise, the United States must consider the requirements of extended deterrence in the evolving security environment: how to assure allies and friends that the United States will meet its security commitments to them, so they will not feel the need to develop their own nuclear weapons or other capabilities that the United States would view as counterproductive. Just as U.S. views on deterrence are evolving, so may those of our allies—including whom they are concerned about deterring, as well as the role of offenses and defenses, and the role of U.S. capabilities versus their own capabilities to underpin deterrence.

Just as deterrence and dissuasion require tailoring, so too does assurance. What reassures

M. Elaine Bunn is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. Comments may be addressed to Ms. Bunn at bunne@ndu.edu.

one ally may frighten another. If U.S. allies are to be reassured, they need to have confidence in American judgment and reliability; if they do not, the specific capabilities do not really matter. Both assurance and deterrence are in the eye of the beholder.

Deterring Each Actor

If deterrence is about influencing the perceptions—and ultimately, the decisions and actions—of another party, it is logical that the requirements for deterrence will differ with each party that we might try to deter and may well differ in each circumstance or scenario.

During the Cold War, the United States spent enormous amounts of time, energy, resources, and effort trying to understand how the Soviets thought and what might deter them. The United States acquired considerable knowledge and insight into the thinking of Soviet leaders with respect to how they viewed the United States, how they might use military force, and their doctrine for nuclear weapons. However, such knowledge was not obtained easily, and there often were differences of view about Soviet thinking.

Regarding other states that the United States might confront in the future, our knowledge base and expertise are far more rudimentary. The application of deterrence with respect to the Soviet Union will not be the same as in future situations where we might seek to deter other states or nonstate actors. Three categories of actors could be objects of tailored deterrence: near-peer competitor/advanced military power; rogue power/regional WMD state; and terrorist network/nonstate terrorist.¹⁰ However, the specifics within each category are important if deterrence is to be tailored. In the near-peer competitor/advanced military power category, Russia and China are the obvious candidates. The current “usual suspects” in the rogue power/regional WMD state category are North Korea and Iran (the former now a nuclear state if its own declarations and U.S. intelligence are believed; the latter seen by the United States as an aspiring nuclear state, although Iran denies it). The most prominent in the terrorist network/nonstate terrorist category is al Qaeda,¹¹ although there are others, such as Hezbollah.

What do we need to know about each potential adversary in order to tailor deterrence?

The Calculus of Tailored Deterrence

- What are the nation's or group's values and priorities? How are these affected by its history and strategic culture?
- What are their objectives in the particular situation?
- What factors are likely to influence their decisionmaking?
- Who makes decisions, how does the leadership think, what is their view of the world and their experience with and view of the United States?
- How do they calculate risks and gains?
- What do they believe their stakes to be in particular situations (stakes may vary depending on the scenario)?
- What is the likely credibility of U.S. deterrence options to this adversary—for both imposing costs and denying gains?
- How risk-taking—or risk-averse—is the leadership?
- How much latitude does the leadership have to either provoke or conciliate?
- What are their alternative courses of action?
- What do they believe the costs and benefits of restraint to be? Do they think they are worse off if they do not take the aggressive action? Do they see any positive benefits in not taking the action in question?
- What do they perceive as America's answers to the questions above—for example, U.S. objectives, stakes, or risk-taking propensity?

Since deterrence is about influencing the perceptions—and ultimately, the actions—of another party, deterrence is really the ultimate mind game. It requires detailed knowledge of many aspects of the society and leadership that we seek to deter—that is, what makes them tick. Deterrence must take into account each terrorist group, each rogue state leader, each potential major power adversary we face. To deter a country or entity, the United States needs to understand a number of factors about each one¹²—the adversary's values, objectives in a particular scenario, decisionmaking, perceptions of the stakes of a situation, how averse to or accepting of risk they are in that situation, and so forth, as well as the adversary's perception of *America's* objectives, values, decisionmaking and risk tolerance.¹³

The answers to some of these questions are difficult to discern, and others may never be answered, but reducing one's ignorance as much as possible is desirable when it comes to deterrence, especially if the United States ends up having to learn to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea or a nuclear-armed Iran—or WMD-armed terrorists.

While each deterree must be assessed on a specific basis, there may be some general distinctions that can be made among the three categories of actors to be deterred. The U.S. level of confidence in deterrence will likely be greatest for major powers because major powers are likely to be more risk-averse; they are likely to view the stakes as approximately equal for each

side in most cases,¹⁴ and they are less likely to be concerned that the United States believes it could impose a regime change, and thus place the deterree in a fatalistic frame of mind where deterrence is difficult. U.S. confidence in deterrence will be less for regional rogue states, given the asymmetry in stakes, with existential risk to the rogue state but not to the United States; the greater risks the rogue leaders may be willing to take, especially if they fear regime change in any event; and the unfamiliarity of U.S. decisionmakers with their strategic calculus and vice versa. Terrorists are the category in which the United States will have the least confidence in deterrence, although that is not to say that it is not worth the attempt.

The issue of *deterring terrorists* is worth further consideration here. Some would say that deterring terrorists is an oxymoron, given the appeal of suicide or “martyrdom” operations for some kinds of terrorists. As recently as May 2006, President George W. Bush said, “The terrorists have no borders to protect, or capital to defend. They cannot be deterred—but they will be defeated.”¹⁵ However, it is also true that even terrorists with suicidal inclinations want to die to accomplish something and that defensive deterrence—that is, denying them the accomplishment, or the “benefits” of their actions—may, over time, be the more effective way to think about deterring terrorists. Indeed, in the case of some terrorists, an overwhelming response may be precisely what they

are trying to goad the United States into, if they believe it would advance their objectives, such as increasing animosity toward the United States to enhance recruitment and drive wedges between the United States and its partners.

The tenets of deterrence almost certainly apply to state sponsors of terrorism, and while traditional deterrence through the threat of retaliation is less likely to be effective with terrorists than with state actors, it is worth further study to assess which terrorists or groups may be deterrable and by what methods.

Focusing on the components and enablers of a terrorist network—operatives, leaders, financiers, state supporters, the general populace—may also provide insights about where costs can be imposed, or benefits denied, in order to effect deterrence.¹⁶

Whether for terrorists, rogue states, or major powers, the United States must be clear about not only whom it is trying to deter, but also what action it is trying to deter them from taking. One deters *someone* from *doing something*. The United States may seek to deter general aggression and coercion; or, if conflict begins, intrawar escalation (horizontal and vertical); or, more specifically, WMD use.

It is not sufficient to say, for example, “The United States wants to deter North Korea”; it must be specified what it wants to deter (or dissuade) them from doing: providing nuclear weapons or materials to terrorists? Invading South Korea? Using nuclear weapons? It may be that the United States would like to deter all those actions; however, what it takes to deter each may be very different. What the United States might say it would do in each case, and the credibility of our options to increase risks and deny gains, probably will vary in each case—as would the way North Korea would likely weigh the risks and gains.

For example, there is a difference between focusing on preventing war from starting in the first place and preventing intrawar escalation—that is, nuclear use during war. If the primary objective were the former, the United States might say, “If you cross the 38th parallel, your regime is over.” If, however, the focus is on deterring nuclear use, and the United States had already said the regime is at risk for starting the (conventional) war, then the adversary would be in a go-for-broke position once he begins the war, and there is little leverage left

to prevent nuclear use. In that case, in order to prevent the war, it may have been preferable to emphasize in peacetime that the United States and South Korea could deny Pyongyang success in its objective—for example, unifying the peninsula under North Korean control.

some would say that detering terrorists is an oxymoron

As the foregoing suggests, the most challenging aspect of tailored deterrence is not so much the problem of deterring direct attacks upon the United States, which in all likelihood would be a regime-ending act for a nation-state perpetrator. Rather, it is the problem of deterring lesser, more localized acts of aggression against a third party in cases where a WMD-armed adversary believes that its capabilities could effectively checkmate a local U.S. response. More than anything else, the problems of precluding this kind of localized deterrence deficit—implicit in, for example, the unleashing of Hezbollah against Israel by a nuclear-armed Iran, or a nuclear-armed North Korean attack to reunify the Korean Peninsula—are what have animated U.S. concerns about rogue state proliferation.

With regard to what actions are to be deterred, the term *deterrence* is used implicitly and explicitly in a variety of ways in current U.S. Government documents. It is sometimes used very broadly (detering *all* aggression) and other times in a much narrower way to focus on deterring WMD use. However, the latest QDR takes a broad view of what actions the United States is attempting to deter, including “WMD employment, terrorist attacks in the physical and information domains, and opportunistic aggression.”¹⁷

It is important for the U.S. Government to have a continuing process to develop comprehensive country or group deterrence assessments that include such factors as those described above in order to provide the information and analysis needed for tailoring deterrence to specific actors and situations. To assess all the factors important to deterrence requires experts, outside as well as inside the Intelligence Community, knowledgeable about the particular country or group or leader. It is also useful to have the perspectives of a wide range of specialists; for example,

anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, or others who may have first-hand knowledge of a country, leader, or group through contact as part of a nongovernmental organization or business. It also requires deterrence strategy functionalists to assist the other experts in determining what information is relevant to deterrence. The same types of knowledge are needed not only for deterrence but also for dissuasion, compellence, escalation control, and war termination. Thus, an effort to understand these factors for deterrence purposes will pay dividends in other areas as well.

Some scattered efforts have been made in and outside of government to assess the decisionmaking calculus of specific opponents. However, much more needs to be done, including competing analyses of each actor. The U.S. Government will need to assess the current state of the art in understanding each potential adversary and what the gaps are in our knowledge. It will also need to assess which gaps can be filled through a concerted information-gathering effort and which are unknowable and thus will need to be treated as variables in U.S. planning. Some type of national-level activity, either virtual or bricks-and-mortar, may be needed to bring together deterrence planners, governmental analysts, and nongovernmental experts to assess such questions and to develop guidelines for the development of operational plans and policies.¹⁸ As one defense official said in discussing the need to reinvigorate intellectual debate on deterrence and dissuasion, the “key to this debate is growing our knowledge of the world views, goals, and strategic approaches of 21st-century adversaries.”

Tailoring Capabilities

The 2006 QDR also posits the need for *tailorable capabilities*. It is clear to most that capabilities for deterrence are not limited to nuclear weapons, as many thought was the case during the Cold War. But which military or non-military capabilities play in deterrence? Just as there are variations in emphasis about whom and what actions the United States is trying to deter, there are also variations about the breadth of the set of capabilities needed for, and applicable to, deterrence.

The narrow view, expressed in the 2006 QDR, is that the New Triad capabilities are the primary ones for deterrence. The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)¹⁹ described the New

Triad as composed of offensive strike systems—nuclear and nonnuclear, kinetic and nonkinetic, such as cyber attack; defenses of all types, both active and passive; and a revitalized and responsive defense infrastructure. This New Triad is bound together by enhanced command and control, intelligence, and planning. The concept of the New Triad was developed during the NPR to expand “strategic” capabilities beyond just nuclear weapons.²⁰

From the deterrence standpoint, the capabilities of the New Triad can be seen as affecting different sides of an adversary’s calculus. Offensive forces, broadly defined, increase potential risks to aggressors; defensive forces decrease potential gains by denying the aggressor the political or military objectives they hoped to achieve. The 2001 NPR was, in essence, an early attempt to tailor capabilities for the multiple deterrees and situations of the 21st century.

Credibility has long been viewed as a key aspect of deterrence: to deter, the adversary must perceive the ally as having both the capability and the will to carry out threatened actions, whether to impose costs or deny benefits. To strengthen the credibility of U.S. threats to act against an adversary, it needs to develop capabilities across the spectrum and develop a range of deterrence options. The NPR recognized that large-scale nuclear attacks in response to some actions taken by some adversaries are simply not credible.

For some, *New Triad tailored capabilities* is code for new nuclear weapons with niche capabilities—optimized for specific characteristics, such as low yield, earth penetration, reduced residual radiation, or biological agent defeat. Proponents argue that specialized nuclear capabilities are more deterring either because hostile regional powers believe the United States would be “self-deterred” by the relatively large-yield, high-collateral-damage nuclear weapons it has, or because adversaries may think they can make their highly valued assets (for example, leadership or WMD) immune from attack by putting them in hard and deeply buried facilities. The United States, therefore, needs new or modified capabilities to address those shortcomings for deterrence purposes. However, it is difficult to know whether adversaries—and if so, which adversaries—view the U.S. nuclear arsenal as less deterring. But the more Americans talk about being self-deterred given the current U.S.

nuclear arsenal, the more likely it will be that some adversaries will not be deterred by it.

For others, New Triad tailored deterrence capabilities mean a wider range of capabilities other than nuclear: improved options for conventional global strike or nonkinetic options (such as computer network attack), as well as defenses of all kinds. For example, the Bush administration has proposed adding a conventional option to the submarine-launched Trident missile. It has been reported that such a capability would be able to strike distant targets—such as terrorist camps, enemy missile sites, suspected caches of biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons, and other potentially urgent targets—within an hour.²¹ Currently, the only capability to do so is nuclear. The proposed conventional Trident modification has been explicitly linked by administration officials to tailored deterrence.²² Some believe that its use is more credible, and therefore more deterring, than a nuclear weapon in some situations. However, the conventional Trident has run into problems in Congress, largely because of concerns about the possibility of miscalculation by nations such as Russia and China.²³

If the ability to threaten conventional precision strikes, which could target individuals and small groups—and their assets—discriminately and with relatively little or no collateral damage, is part of the New Triad and tailored deterrence, then the corollary ability to locate and track individuals and assets in order to strike them promptly on a global scale can also strengthen the credibility of U.S. deterrence efforts—if adversaries see it this way, given the mixed American record of success. In addition, even if the United States develops a good track record of finding and precisely targeting adversaries, the history of military technology indicates that we should expect that their ability to hide, conceal, and deceive will improve as well.

Other analysts rightly take a much broader view of capabilities needed for tailored deterrence—that is, not just the New Triad, but also forward presence, force projection, and allied cooperation, which are all capabilities widely spread across U.S. military forces. The 2006 Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept breaks down the capabilities needed for deterrence into two categories: those that directly and decisively influence an

adversary’s decision calculus, and those that enable such decisive influence. *Direct means* include force projection; active and passive defenses; global strike (nuclear, conventional, and nonkinetic); and strategic communication. *Enablers* include global situational awareness; command and control; forward presence; security cooperation and military integration and interoperability; and deterrence assessment, metrics, and experimentation. Thus, the Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept goes beyond the capabilities explicitly, or even implicitly, included in the New Triad, particularly by including overseas presence and allied/coalition military cooperation and integration.

For tailored deterrence, the capabilities emphasized and the specific mix will vary by the actor and situation; that is, how much

credibility has long been viewed as a key aspect of deterrence

one relies on defenses versus offenses (probably more reliance on defenses, broadly defined, in the case of rogue states and terrorists than in the case of major powers) and how much one emphasizes nuclear versus nonnuclear or kinetic versus nonkinetic. The role of forward-deployed forces in deterrence will vary by deteree, as will the role of allies.

One caution in thinking about capabilities for deterrence is the tendency to confuse the instrument with the effect—the means with the end. As Colin Gray put it, one of the sins against sound thinking is “the assertion that *any* military capability (or, indeed, anything else) inherently is deterring.” He continues, “People in the mental habit of referring to long-range and nuclear-armed forces as *the deterrent* are vulnerable to the erroneous belief that deterrence is secured by buying and maintaining incremental quantities of *the* great deterrent” and that “to secure more deterrence, we just need to buy more of *the* deterrent.”²⁴

Where does the concept of tailored deterrence fit into capabilities-based planning, and how does it fit in the planning construct in the 2006 QDR? While capabilities-based planning “focuses more on how an adversary might

fight rather than who an adversary might be,²⁵ the *who* is important for deterrence. Capabilities-based planning does not mean ignoring the *who*; it may simply mean looking at a wider range of possible adversaries and scenarios.

For assessing capabilities to acquire or maintain, capabilities-based planning may be appropriate and yield a range of *types* of capabilities that can be mixed and matched depending on the specifics of the deterrence situation. But capabilities-based planning has proven less effective in illuminating *how much* of a capability is needed. The force planning construct introduced in the 2006 QDR lays out a framework intended to guide both the appropriate size of the force (capacity) and the types of capabilities (forces and equipment) needed across a range of scenarios. It attempts to account both for activities that the Department of Defense conducts continuously (steady state) as well as those that it conducts episodically (surge). One can assume that deterrence of multiple actors is part of the day-to-day steady state, although the United States may have to surge forces for deterrence purposes in a building crisis (this would include what have traditionally been called flexible deterrent options). This steady state and surge dichotomy should prove useful for thinking about deterrence in peacetime and crisis, since the peacetime needs for deterrence have traditionally been undervalued in operational and programmatic planning (it is difficult to build deterrence into computer models and simulations, which traditionally focus on the more easily measured defeat mission). But it is still unclear how this construct will be applied to tailored deterrence.

In reality, more than just military capabilities are involved in deterrence. For example, nonmilitary homeland security efforts, such as the ability to sustain economic activity, may reinforce deterrence by denying adversary objectives in attacks on the American economy or infrastructure. U.S. diplomatic or economic sanctions can impose costs, while economic aid in the context of an adversary not taking an action can reinforce the benefits of restraint. Legal capabilities, such as threats of war crimes prosecution for any commander involved in the use of WMD, may affect the decisionmaking calculus of lower-level adversary leaders. Diplomatic commitments to allies, embodied in treaties and agreements and reinforced by a web of economic and

industrial relationships, can reinforce deterrence of aggression against allies by convincing adversaries that U.S. stakes are high.

Tailoring Messages?

Tailoring communication—that is, the messages the United States sends in its words and actions, and the ways those are perceived by opponents—can contribute to (or detract from) U.S. efforts to deter. Given the multiple actors that the United States is now trying to deter, we need to think consciously about how words and actions are perceived, how they affect each adversary's deterrence calculations, and how the United States might try to mitigate misperceptions that undermine deterrence.

Messages can take the form of specific actions, sometimes referred to as *flexible deterrent* options—deploying forces in times of tension or building crisis to send a message to an opponent that the United States is willing and able to take action to counter the action (for example, deploying a carrier battlegroup to the Taiwan Strait in 1996 when China fired missiles toward the island prior to its elections, or visibly deploying B-52s to Guam).

Words—declaratory policy or official statements—are another form of deterrence messaging. An example of what was intended to be *nonpublic* declaratory policy is then-President George H.W. Bush's letter to Saddam Hussein prior to the 1991 Gulf War, which stated that if Iraq used chemical or biological weapons, “you and your country will pay a terrible price.”²⁶ Many have credited that threat—interpreted to be a threat to use nuclear weapons—with deterring Saddam from using chemical weapons during the first Gulf War. There is no way to know for certain whether it did. However, such a threat in the future is likely to be less effective; a number of then-senior officials, from Secretary of State James Baker, to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, to President George H.W. Bush all said in subsequent published memoirs that they never would have responded with nuclear weapons had Iraq used chemicals against U.S. troops, which makes the threat less credible in the future and therefore less deterring.

How to combine words and deeds in each case in order to deter is the key question. As one defense official said, “Tailored deterrence also means that our declaratory statements will need

to be tailored so that our policy statements and our operational capabilities work together to send the same message and to strengthen deterrence.”²⁷ Whether through words or actions, shaping decisions of opponents does not begin with the crisis; their perceptions may already be well entrenched by then, and it may be difficult to communicate new messages to leaders in protective bunkers. Communications in peacetime are probably more important than words said or actions taken in times of tension.

Ideally, planning for crisis or peacetime deterrence actions and declaratory policy all need to be specific to who and what. But everyone sees and hears all of it: what we say to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is heard by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il and Osama bin Laden, as well as Russia and China. Is there a universal deterrence message and set of actions? Rather than sending blanket messages that could be counterproductive for some deterrees, how does one tailor deterrence messages that go out to all through the globalized media, especially if there are different deterrence messages we want to send to different actors? How can the

U.S. words and actions can contribute to—or detract from—efforts to deter

United States best communicate with a particular leadership? To whom do they listen? Even in one country or group, there may be multiple targets for U.S. messages. How do they filter information? How can the United States reduce the possibility of misperception?

Some messages are clear. For instance, sending carriers to the Taiwan Strait in 1996 was clearly aimed at China and deterring it from acting against Taiwan. Others are more ambiguous and open to interpretation. For example, deploying missile defenses in Europe may seem, to the United States, to be clearly about deterring a nuclear-armed Iran (or even dissuading Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state), but the Russians may see the deployment as a message to them. The message that is intended by our actions and statements is less important than the message that is received.

What the United States says about regime change is a case in point. If a rogue state believes the only way to deter the United States from regime change is to have nuclear weapons or other WMD to deter intervention, then a declared U.S. policy of regime change—or intentional ambiguity—may have the opposite effect from the desired U.S. objective of dissuading WMD acquisition. Some argue that after the American invasion of Iraq, North Korea and Iran became more, not less, determined to acquire nuclear weapons.²⁸ On the other hand, Libya may have been influenced in the opposite direction, and the scale weighed in favor of giving up nuclear capability²⁹ in order not to risk being “Saddamized.” Some analysts have suggested that it may be prudent for the United States to give security guarantees not to seek regime change in exchange for North Korea or Iran giving up its pursuit of nuclear weapons.³⁰

Another consideration for the United States is the need to calibrate what it says and does, or threatens to do, in two dimensions: it must deter an opponent, and it must be morally acceptable to its own society. The same messages that the United States sends to adversaries will be heard by the American public, as well as allies. A message sent to underscore resolve and willingness to inflict pain on an adversary—in order to deter—may come across as bellicose, repugnant, or immoral to the U.S. public and allies. For example, it would not be acceptable for the United States to threaten terrorists’ families or Islamic holy sites, even if it were judged to be effective for deterring terrorists. So declaratory policy intended for deterrees must be consistent with the values, system of government, and national character of the United States. A sustained and massive deception campaign (certainly if it is known to be a deception) as part of deterrence or dissuasion efforts probably would not be effective, given our open society as well as the likelihood of leaks. On the other hand, declaratory policy that includes having a cacophony of voices saying diverse and contradictory things—creating uncertainty in the mind of potential aggressors—plays to America’s strengths.

A key reason we need to learn as much as we can about each adversary’s decision calculus is that each adversary may have a different perception of the credibility of American

threats. This perception is shaped by an adversary’s national and cultural attributes as well as its unique history of dealing with and studying the United States. It is also shaped, in part, by the lessons that each adversary takes away from U.S. policy and actions toward others. Furthermore, the perception of U.S. credibility shifts as

the message intended is less important than the message received

each adversary reassesses America’s standing and power in the world. For example, U.S. threats to take actions against states probably had more credibility in October 2002, before the Iraq war, than in December 2006, when some perceive the United States as bogged down and overextended. But again, other factors also shape this perception of credibility. Therefore, understanding U.S. credibility (or lack thereof) in the eyes of each deterree is critical to how we tailor deterrence threats to adversaries. In many cases, a declaratory policy simply will not work, as some adversaries might view it as a hollow threat.

As discussed above, having a range of capabilities could provide the United States with the ability to tailor its deterrence options to the particular actions threatened by particular adversaries. However, there is a major caveat: the adversary has to perceive the option as effective and credible. For example, while the United States can talk about locating, tracking, and targeting individuals, its success has been mixed, and, therefore, U.S. credibility to threaten precision strikes against adversaries suffers as well.³¹ So part of this depends on how adversaries perceive U.S. capability to target them and their assets discriminately, given the mix of successes and failures. Demonstrations of U.S. capability to do so could strengthen its credibility over time. (The same issue applies to other capabilities—for example, missile defense, since it currently lacks credibility in the eyes of many, given the less-than-stellar test results of some parts of the system.)

In addition, the United States may try to bring specific, select capabilities to bear in order to have a deterring effect in a specific situation, yet our watching adversaries may be reading some kind of message into any of the other steps we take, whether or not we intend them

to convey that message. Everything the United States says, everything it does, and every capability it has impacts the way the United States is perceived by potential adversaries.

The United States can only undertake intelligence assessments, probings, and informed guesses to try to ascertain how adversaries will perceive the messages that it tries to send. It may be that a pattern of interaction—as the United States and Soviet Union developed in the last several decades of the Cold War—will be necessary for tailored communications to best support tailored deterrence. But in the end, there are no guarantees that the message intended to be sent to each deterree will be the message received. The United States will need a more refined and systematic process for gauging and assessing the effectiveness of its deterrence message and adapting it to the situation as it evolves. But deterrence is inherently hard to measure: how do U.S. leaders know if deterrence is successful—that is, that the reason for the adversary’s inaction is that it was successfully deterred by influencing his decision—rather than his never having intended to take the aggressive action in the first place?

The United States also needs to assess deterrence (or dissuasion) effects not only in the proximate or primary case in which we are seeking to deter but also in the secondary cases, which may be the primary case next month or next year. Or it may mean prioritizing who the main deterrence targets are, tailoring our messages for them, and letting the chips fall where they may with regard to perceptions of other potential deterrees.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the jury is still out on how feasible the implementation of tailored deterrence really is. To be sure, the concept as a whole has a certain self-evident logic in a world of diverse threats. But some big questions are still out there and unresolved.

As this analysis suggests, a more refined understanding of *each of the actors* that the United States is trying to deter is essential to tailored deterrence, and how to gather the pertinent information (from both governmental and non-governmental sources) and make it relevant for deterrence planning will be a challenge. Some of the applicable capabilities of the New Triad are neither operational nor near completion,

and there is only an incomplete understanding of all the other capabilities, military and non-military, that play in deterrence. Communicating deterrence messages to potential adversaries that are clear and differentiated according to the circumstances and the deterree—when all will get the messages intended for others, each may perceive different lessons from prior U.S. actions, and some may also get mixed messages from the cacophony of voices in the American system—poses another challenge to tailored deterrence.

However, as difficult as these steps may be, falling back upon old conceptions of deterrence is not a real option. For the United States, it makes eminent sense to embark upon a major effort to adapt its deterrence concepts to today's volatile security environment and complex range of threats. The specter of a nuclear-armed North Korea, Iran, or transnational terrorist group demands no less.

Notes

¹ Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 6, 2006), 2. Additional discussion of tailored deterrence in the 2006 QDR can be found on pages 4, 27, and 50–51.

² Ronald F. Lehman II, Director of the Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, address at Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis–Fletcher Conference, December 14, 2005.

³ Ryan Henry, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, briefing, “Deterrence and Dissuasion for the 21st Century,” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis–Fletcher Conference, December 14, 2005, available at <www.ifpafletcherconference.com/oldtranscripts/2005/Ryan_Henry.ppt#283,1>.

⁴ This is a simplified summary of Cold War deterrence; however, during the Cold War, there was a role for conventional weapons and forward-deployed forces in Europe (under the doctrine of *flexible response*) and Asia in addition to nuclear weapons. Deterrence by denial (making clear to the Soviets that they would not accomplish what they hoped to accomplish in any aggression) also played a role in U.S. deterrence thinking. But deterrence by the threat of punishment and nuclear weapons dominated the analysis of Cold War deterrence. In addition, there were actually other potential deterrees during the Cold War—that is, deterring North Korea from a conventional invasion of South Korea, post-1952; and at some points in the Cold War, deterring China from attacking Taiwan. But the Soviet Union was by far the predominant direct object of U.S. deterrence efforts.

⁵ This evolution is reflected in many official documents. For example, the 1995 Secretary of Defense Annual Report to Congress discusses the need to deter WMD-armed regional powers and “to continually assess the strategic personalities of countries with these weapons.” More recently, the 2001 and 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Reports*, 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, 2002 and 2006 National Security Strategies, 2005 National Defense Strategy, and 2004 National Military Strategy discussed “deterrence” but did not *define* it.

⁶ U.S. Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), “Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept,” final draft, version 2.0, August 2006, available at <www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/do_joc_v20.doc>.

⁷ The Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept (DO JOC) uses the term *vital interests* consistent with the National Security Strategy. See DO JOC, 8.

⁸ USSTRATCOM, 5.

⁹ This definition is influenced by the discussion of dissuasion in the 2001 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews, as well as Andrew Krepinevich's work on dissuasion at the Center for Security and Budgetary Affairs.

¹⁰ In each category, both terms listed are used in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review's discussion of tailored deterrence; the first term in each category is used in the introduction on page iv; the second is used on pages 4 and 49.

¹¹ While the United States is already at war with al Qaeda—and some would therefore argue that deterrence has failed—it could seek to deter other actions, such as WMD use or additional attacks on the United States.

¹² The unit of analysis may also vary, depending on whom the United States is seeking to deter: it may be the nation's governing bodies writ large, or the leadership council of a regime, or an individual leader, depending on the nature of decisionmaking for that deterree.

¹³ Adapted and expanded from a similar list in Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001); see particularly chapter 5, “The Dilemma of Popular Usage and a New Direction.”

¹⁴ A major exception to this generalization would likely be China's view of a Taiwan scenario.

¹⁵ President George W. Bush, commencement address at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, May 27, 2006, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060527-1.html>.

¹⁶ For the French approach on deterring terrorists, see Jacques Chirac, speech at The Strategic Air and Maritime Forces at Landivisiau/L'Île Longue/Brest (Finistère), January 19, 2006, available at <www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/france/france-060119-elysee01.htm>.

¹⁷ 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, 49.

¹⁸ USSTRATCOM has established a Strategic Deterrence Assessment Laboratory at its headquarters in Omaha to conduct analysis in support of deterrence planning by all relevant combatant commands, consistent with the Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept. The lab is a good beginning, but a coordinated interagency effort in Washington may also be needed to bring together the Intelligence Community, Department of Defense (including the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, and the combatant commands), the Department of State, and other U.S. Government agencies—as well as outside experts, including academics who may be reluctant to work with USSTRATCOM or the Intelligence Community but may have great insights into the strategic cultures of potential adversaries.

¹⁹ See the Secretary of Defense's foreword to the Nuclear Posture Review, available at <www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2002/d20020109npr.pdf>. The report itself remains classified (despite the fact that excerpts were leaked and posted on the Internet).

²⁰ In fact, the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review was misnamed; it should have been called the *Strategic* Posture Review, since it addressed more than just nuclear capabilities.

²¹ See, for example, Michael R. Gordon, “Pentagon Seeks Nonnuclear Tip for Sub Missiles,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2006, 1.

²² Peter Flory, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, testimony before the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 29, 2006.

²³ While some believe Russia's early warning system (and in the future, China's) may pick up the launch of a conventional Trident and assess it as a nuclear attack on them, there are potential notification mechanisms that could eliminate or reduce the risk of such miscalculation—and procedures need to be worked out in any event for possible missile defense interceptor launches against rogue states that could be misinterpreted by Russia and China as a ballistic missile attack.

²⁴ Colin S. Gray, “Deterrence and the Nature of Strategy,” in *Deterrence in the 21st Century*, ed. Max G. Manwaring (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 2000), 18–19.

²⁵ 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, iv.

²⁶ Marlin Fitzwater, statement on President George H.W. Bush's letter to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, January 12, 1991, available at <<http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/papers/1991/91011201.html>>.

²⁷ Flory testimony.

²⁸ For an analysis of the inherent conflict between threatening regime survival while preventing nuclear proliferation, see Robert S. Litwak, “Non-proliferation and the Dilemmas of Regime Change,” *Survival*, Winter 2003–2004, available at <www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/survival2.pdf>.

²⁹ Judith Miller, “How Gadhafi Lost His Groove,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 16, 2006, A14.

³⁰ Thomas L. Friedman, “A Choice for the Rogues,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2006.

³¹ For instance, on one hand is the failed decapitation strike on Saddam at Dora Farms in the opening hours of Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, and the long-time inability of the United States to locate and target Osama bin Laden; on the other hand is the successful 2002 precision strike in Yemen by a Predator drone that killed Abu Ali al-Harithi, the alleged al Qaeda mastermind behind the bombing of the USS *Cole*. On the Dora Farms strike, see Bob Woodward, “U.S. Aimed for Hussein as War Began,” *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2004, A1; on the Abu Ali al-Harithi strike, see Walter Pincus, “U.S. Strike Kills Six in Al Qaeda; Missile Fired by Predator Drone; Key Figure in Yemen Among Dead,” *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2002, A1.

The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) is a policy research and strategic gaming organization within the National Defense University (NDU) serving the Department of Defense, its components, and interagency partners. The institute provides senior decisionmakers with timely, objective analysis and gaming events and supports NDU educational programs in the areas of international security affairs and defense studies. Through an active outreach program, including conferences and publications, INSS seeks to promote understanding of emerging strategic challenges and policy options.



The Strategic Forum series presents original research by members of NDU as well as other scholars and specialists in national security affairs from this country and abroad. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government. For information on NDU Press visit the Web site at <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/nduhp>. INSS also produces *Joint Force Quarterly* for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the journal can be accessed at www.ndupress.edu.

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

James A. Schear
Director of Research

Stephen J. Flanagan
Director

David H. Gurney
Director, NDU Press