

# CAN A SMALL STATE CHALLENGE A MUCH LARGER STATE OR A COLLECTION OF ENEMY STATES?

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines how, despite the odds stacked against them, small states can still employ an effective conventional deterrence strategy. The author first explores the concept of deterrence before discussing the issue of deterrence through military superiority. He then analyses other approaches to deterrence, such as total defence and alliance. The author also highlights that it is in the interests of small states to pursue some form of deterrence against potential adversaries because an armed conflict can threaten their very existence. However, the author concludes that deterrence is not a permanent solution to security problems. It is a dynamic posture that has to be maintained to ensure that the state does not pay a heavy price for the devastation of war. In his opinion, successful deterrence is simply an extension of time to address the underlying geopolitical issues.

*Keywords: Deterrence; Nuclear; Dissuade; Strategies; DIME*

## INTRODUCTION

Small states are arbitrarily defined using criteria such as land area, population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or even the extent of their influence. It is not easy to find a consensus on the most fitting definition, if one even exists. Danish political analyst Erling Bjol points out that the concept of a small state does not mean anything when considered in isolation of an international system.<sup>1</sup> He says that 'a state is only small in relation to a greater one.'<sup>2</sup> Hence, my consideration of small states in this essay would be those that exhibit stark asymmetry when compared with their adversaries.

Regardless, most would agree that small states have the odds stacked against them. The late Singaporean statesman Lee Kuan Yew believed that small states will always be particularly vulnerable to global happenings.<sup>3</sup> They perform few significant roles in the international system, and the world will carry on even without their existence.<sup>4</sup> History has illustrated the decline of many small states including Athens, Sparta and Venice, and their consequent absorption by their larger neighbours.<sup>5</sup>

Given a small state's inherent vulnerabilities, there is good reason to doubt its ability to deter a much larger adversary or a collection of enemy states. American political scientist John Mearsheimer recognises that the degree of asymmetry may be 'so

great that the attacker does not have the slightest doubt that he will succeed on the battlefield.'<sup>6</sup> In this instance, 'deterrence does not really apply.'<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, I posit that being small is not necessarily a foregone conclusion. It is still possible for a small state to operationalise an effective conventional deterrence strategy.

The focus of this essay shall be on conventional deterrence because most small states do not have nuclear weapons, and therefore cannot employ nuclear deterrence strategies. There is also a fundamental assumption that adversarial states are rational actors who make decisions based on utility, and hence can be deterred. The assumption of rationality is the cornerstone of deterrence theory.

The essay first discusses the concept of deterrence and the conditions for successful deterrence. Next, it examines the examples of Israel, Switzerland and Norway in their demonstrations of effective deterrence through military superiority, a whole-of-society defence strategy, and an alliance's support. Finally, the essay explores the challenges of deterrence for small states, including the limitations of conventional deterrence. Despite these challenges, it is still possible and in the interests of small states to pursue the deterrence of larger adversaries because, for most, war is not an option.

## CONCEPT OF DETERRENCE

Deterrence can be defined as the power to dissuade an adversary from performing an action by showing that the cost and risk of his action outweigh his prospective gain.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, classical deterrence theory focuses on a threat-based approach through the creation of military capability sufficient to convince an adversary not to undertake an act of aggression.<sup>9</sup> Deterrence succeeds when an adversary believes that his military action will fail or result in dire consequences, hence refraining from that action.

There are two fundamental but non-mutually exclusive approaches to deterrence. *Deterrence by denial* strategies seek to convince an adversary that any act of aggression is unlikely to succeed. Political scientist Michael Mazarr views *deterrence by denial* as representative of a state's capability, intention and effort to defend a commitment.<sup>10</sup> Any attack on the commitment, if not defeated, would be protracted and costly.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, *deterrence by punishment* strategies threaten severe punishment for an act of aggression.<sup>12</sup> Notably, the 'focus of deterrence by punishment is not the direct defence of the contested commitment but rather threats of wider punishment' that would make the attack disproportionately costly and irrational to the adversary.<sup>13</sup> *Deterrence by punishment* is typically associated with the possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent, because the employment of nuclear weapons promise complete destruction of the adversary.<sup>14</sup> There are no reliable means to defend against nuclear weapons or mitigate their effects.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a nuclear state can threaten punishment of unacceptable cost if an attack occurs. For the longest time, conventional weapons were unable to achieve similar effects as nuclear weapons. Hence, for the most part, non- nuclear small states could not reliably inflict punishment and had to rely on conventional *deterrence by denial* strategies. The advent of highly destructive precision-guided conventional munitions has changed this equation.

A successful deterrence strategy has to satisfy criteria in the aspects of (1) capability, (2) credibility and; (3) communication. First, the state must have the military capability to repel and retaliate against the adversary to deny its objectives.<sup>16</sup> Second, the state

must convince the adversary that it has credibility because it has the political will to act if threatened.<sup>17</sup> Third, the state must clearly communicate the cost to the adversary, including its capability, will, and responses should certain boundaries (also known as 'red lines') be crossed.<sup>18</sup> Crucially, these boundaries and threatened responses must appear credible to the adversary and be worth going to war for, should deterrence fail.<sup>19</sup>

## ACHIEVING DETERRENCE THROUGH MILITARY SUPERIORITY

Israel is an example of a small state that has kept a collection of larger Arab states at bay through its military superiority, which presents a massive cost to potential adversaries for any attack on it. This is an achievement considering Israel's geographic asymmetry relative to the neighbours that had threatened it with complete eradication. Israel is dwarfed and surrounded by Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It has little strategic depth. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) would be outnumbered by an aggregated Arab coalition. Israeli strategic thought recognises these constraints and assumes that 'Israel would always engage its enemies from an inferior position in terms of territory, resources, and tolerance to casualties and to international pressure.'<sup>20</sup>

Every episodic success in preventing the adversary from achieving its goals and eroding its military capabilities alters its cost-benefit calculus and achieves deterrence for the next round.

Nevertheless, Israel has created 'reverse asymmetry' by capitalising on its technological superiority to compensate for its numerical disadvantage.<sup>21</sup> It has been at the forefront of military innovation, which has preserved its strategic edge for the offence with smart weapons such as unmanned combat systems and vehicles, integrated electronic warfare systems and precision-guided munitions.<sup>22</sup> Israel also leads in the research and development of integrated early warning and air defence systems, and

has built layered anti-missile defence systems such as the *Iron Dome* which can deal with a range of aerial threats from tactical rockets to intercontinental ballistic missiles.<sup>23</sup>

Israel's offensive and defensive capabilities contribute to both its *deterrence by denial* and by *punishment*. Israel's ability to strike its adversaries preemptively and defend against incoming threats achieve *deterrence by denial* by denying its adversaries success on the battlefield. At the same time, Israel has threatened *punishment* through massive retaliation targeted at adversary cities.<sup>24</sup> *Deterrence by punishment* is typically associated with nuclear weapons, but Israel's conventional precision strike capabilities can ensure the destruction of its adversaries' strategic targets.<sup>25</sup> Its adversaries have little means to stop these strategic strikes. However, it should be noted that Israel's deliberate ambiguity over its possession of nuclear weapons bolsters its ability to *deter by punishment* as well.<sup>26</sup>

Pertinently, what stands out in the Israeli case is that every Israeli victory on the battlefield is seen to be a communication of its credibility and capability. By most Western definitions, the very use of force implies that deterrence has failed, and the assumptions it was based on were incorrect.<sup>27</sup> The Israeli approach, on the

other hand, believes that deterrence cannot achieve zero violence. Deterrence is not permanent and has to be maintained through 'episodic uses of force.'<sup>28</sup> Every episodic success in preventing the adversary from achieving its goals and eroding its military capabilities alters its cost-benefit calculus and achieves deterrence for the next round.<sup>29</sup> This means that violence is not completely eradicated but is postponed with reduced magnitude.<sup>30</sup> Dmitry Adamsky aptly describes Israeli deterrence as 'The sword by itself does not establish credibility: it should be constantly bloodied to maintain deterrence.'<sup>31</sup>

## ACHIEVING DETERRENCE THROUGH TOTAL DEFENCE

Aside from pursuing military superiority, small states can adopt a *Total Defence* strategy to deter larger adversaries. A *Total Defence* strategy is a whole-of-society concept that co-ordinates defence planning across multiple domains, including political, military, economic and social, to achieve deterrence.<sup>32</sup> Fundamentally, this concept enlists efforts from all sectors of society to work around the constraints of a small state, such as its lack of military parity and strategic depth, to maximise the prospective cost of an attack in order to dissuade a potential adversary.



Completed, Israel's nuclear facility, the Dimona complex as seen by US Corona satellite on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1968.

Switzerland, a small state of about 8.5 million people, is one of a few neutral European states that have adopted a variant of *Total Defence* as its security strategy. Termed by the Swiss as *General Defence*, this strategy seeks to safeguard peace and neutrality, prevent armed attacks against Switzerland, and preserve its independence and sovereignty.<sup>33</sup> The preservation of peace by acquiescing territory or complying with foreign pressure is not acceptable.

The objective of *General Defence* is the *dissuasion* of aggression. The term *deterrence* is avoided because the Swiss associate it with an offensive threat of retaliation against an adversary following an attack, which is deemed to be beyond their military means and incompatible with their neutrality.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the Swiss perceive *dissuasion* as the 'ability to avoid war through a combination of militarily credible preparedness, public confidence in and support of an active military defence, and protection of the civil population.'<sup>35</sup> In practice, *dissuasion* includes: (1) maximising the costs of an attack; and (2) minimising the gains of an aggressor from an attack.<sup>36</sup> This, in the author's opinion, is essentially *deterrence by denial* disguised with inoffensive overtures.

To maximise the costs of an attack, Switzerland signals that its military, supported by whole-of-society, is credible and capable of resisting any attack. The largely conscripted Swiss Army can mobilise 650,000 soldiers in 48 hours, and, considering the state's small land mass, this achieves the highest density of boots on the ground in Europe.<sup>37</sup> Extensive military fortifications amid mountainous terrain also favour the defenders.

On the economic front, despite Switzerland's landlocked geography and dependence on external sources for food and raw materials, its diversified supply chains and a national stockpile of essentials can sustain it through prolonged isolation.<sup>38</sup> As for the civil dimension, the Swiss civil defence system has sufficient shelter space to protect 90% of its population from anything short of a full-scale nuclear war.<sup>39</sup> Crucially, this allows Switzerland to resist external intimidation and blackmail because it is confident of protecting its soldiers and their families.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, in a bid to minimise prospective gains to the adversary, Switzerland is prepared to destroy

industrial plants, goods, infrastructure and transportation systems to deny enemy usage.<sup>41</sup> In the event that the Swiss military is overwhelmed, the government has pledged to continue underground resistance. In this context, where every Swiss male has received military training and keeps his personal weapon at home, the threat of guerilla warfare is credible.<sup>42</sup> The only gain to the adversary would be its occupation of a hostile territory devoid of utility, with continued armed resistance waged by a determined population.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, Switzerland's history strengthens the case for small states to adopt a *Total Defence* strategy to deter larger adversaries. It was the only Central European state that Germany did not invade during the Second World War for reasons unknown. Nonetheless, a reasonable conjecture would be that Switzerland had few benefits to offer for the potentially costly effort to invade it. Hence, in the larger scheme of German war efforts, an invasion of Switzerland was not a priority.

## ACHIEVING DETERRENCE THROUGH ALLIANCE

Small states can also deter larger adversaries through military alliances. These bilateral (e.g. with a major power) or multilateral (e.g. with a collection of regional states) alliances are based on shared security interests. Deterrence is achieved when the aggressor recognises that an attack on the small state will elicit a military response from the alliance, and decides that the prospective gains from this course of action do not justify its cost.

Norway is an example in its longstanding dependence on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) for capable and credible deterrence against Russia.<sup>44</sup> Its geographical location beside an outsized Russia, lack of strategic depth and relative military inferiority drive its dual-track approach of deterrence and *détente* towards Russia. The former is one of extended deterrence that promises both *denial* and *punishment*. Firstly, Norway will receive support from Allied forces to stop the adversary from achieving its objectives in a conflict. Secondly, it draws on the nuclear deterrence provided by the US and other nuclear-armed allies.



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Norway's dependence on the larger NATO ambit does not mean that its own military capability is neglected. Alliance partnership works both ways. Norway's ability to deter aggression and defend against limited attacks without Allied support strengthens NATO's collective deterrence.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the ability of NATO members to deploy and operate in Norway enhances the country's deterrence. There is consensus that the Norwegian Armed Forces 'punches above its weight' qualitatively with its professional training and access to high-end technology, despite lacking the quantitative figures afforded by its larger allies like the US or UK.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, Norway's access to cutting-edge systems like the F-35A Joint Strike Fighter

and P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft offers strategic and operational benefits in their interoperability with and connectivity to other NATO systems.<sup>47</sup> Coupled with Norway's large-scale military exercises with its NATO allies and Nordic neighbours to hone tactical integration and NATO's ability to deploy to the Arctic, they signal the alliance's commitment to defend Norway and its capability to operate effectively as an integrated fighting force.<sup>48</sup>

Significantly, Norway can rely on NATO for its defence because NATO member states collectively recognise the strategic importance of securing Norwegian territory, airspace and waters. There is a convergence in their strategic interests. For Norway, a Russian invasion is unlikely, but increasing Russian assertiveness over the Arctic region and its natural resources directly threatens Norwegian economic security.<sup>49</sup> As for NATO's European members like Denmark, Iceland and the United Kingdom (UK), Norway sits between them and Russia. The deterrence of Russian aggression against Norway directly contributes to their security. Moreover, members like Germany, the UK and the Netherlands import energy from Norway, and their companies are vested in the Norwegian energy sector.<sup>50</sup>



A British Army Scimitar reconnaissance vehicle during Exercise COLD WINTER '87 in Norway.

Besides, NATO members recognise the military significance of the Arctic region as a critical channel between Russia and the North Atlantic Ocean.<sup>51</sup> This channel facilitates Russia's deployment of its ballistic missile submarines, an essential component of its nuclear deterrence capability, and potentially its disruption of the movement of NATO forces and sea lines of communication across the North Atlantic Ocean. Thus, the collective deterrence of Russia in the Arctic contributes to the continued security of Allied operations and interests in the region.

## CHALLENGES WITH DETERRENCE FOR SMALL STATES

Nevertheless, small states face an uphill struggle in deterring larger adversaries due to their inherent vulnerabilities. Kuwait is perhaps a classic example of a small state that has little ability to deter its larger neighbours, and has to seek protection from a larger security partner. Unfortunately, there are risks to relying on someone else for defence, particularly in the absence of a mutual defence treaty and if the security partner's commitment to protecting shared interests is not clear. Kuwait paid dearly in 1990 when Iraqi troops invaded, swept away its limited resistance, and conquered the state within hours.<sup>52</sup> Deterrence had

failed because Washington's communications with Iraq preceding the invasion were "ambiguous and contradictory."<sup>53</sup> Saddam Hussein did not perceive the United States' (US) commitment to defend Kuwait to be credible.

There are also inherent deficiencies in conventional deterrence strategies. For instance, there are challenges for a small state to establish *deterrence by denial* or *punishment* because of the nature of conventional capabilities. The state's ability to impose a cost on its adversary is dependent on the weapons it possesses, its technical competencies in their application, and the presence of enemy counter-measures.<sup>54</sup> A potential adversary may view conventional deterrents as 'contestable costs' because there is a prospect of a technical, tactical or operational solution that would degrade their effectiveness.<sup>55</sup> This was the case in Egypt's circumvention of Israel's conventional deterrents, primarily the IDF's air superiority and armour capabilities, in 1973. Egypt's operational strategy to neutralise Israeli armour with a wall of anti-tank guided missiles and Israeli air power with a tactical shield of surface-to-air missiles degraded Israel's ability to inflict prohibitive costs, thereby making Egypt's initiation of the Yom Kippur War possible.<sup>56</sup>



Kuwaiti oil fires set by retreating Iraqi forces in 1991.

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Moreover, deterrence theory is premised on rationality, but value perception is subjective. In the lead up to the Yom Kippur War, Israel recognised its overwhelming military superiority and was convinced that war would not be a viable option for its Arab adversaries unless victory was certain.<sup>57</sup> However, the Arab states had a different logic. They reasoned that they could make political gains even if they lost battles. They would survive even if they lost a war. Israel failed to realise that the larger risk appetite of the Arab states changed their cost-benefit calculus until it was too late. Hence, it is often easy to assume that deterrence is working when it is not challenged.<sup>58</sup>

This highlights a general limitation with the study of deterrence. It is easier to identify deterrence failures when the use of force occurs, such as in Kuwait. On the other hand, it is way more difficult to find empirical support for conventional deterrence successes, much less to prescribe a definitive strategy for success for

small states. Many factors influence the avoidance of conflict.<sup>59</sup> It is extremely difficult to isolate deterrence as the key success factor.

Finally, in today's volatile security landscape, it is difficult to envision how a small state can reliably deter a larger adversary from threatening it through hybrid and non-conventional means that fall below the threshold of war.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the deficiencies in deterrence theory, it is definitely in the interest of small states to pursue some form of deterrence against potential adversaries because an armed conflict can threaten their very existence. As discussed, the pursuit of military superiority, whole-of-society defence, and an alliance with a major power are viable means for a small state to impose a hefty cost on armed aggression, which may consequently dissuade an adversary from this course of action. The adoption of one or more of these means depends on the state's context. For instance, an alliance might be effective (unlike Kuwait's case) if there is intimate alignment of strategic interests and culture. That said, deterrence is not a permanent solution to security problems. It is a dynamic posture that has to be maintained to ensure that the cost of war is not contestable. Successful deterrence is simply an extension of time to address the underlying geopolitical issues.<sup>60</sup>



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