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**Deterrence Strategies—Application &
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DETERRENCE STRATEGIES—APPLICATION & VIABILITY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author examines the challenges faced by states seeking to deter threats without the advantage of possessing nuclear weapons. He first examines the principles behind deterrence such as the two main strategies of denial and punishment. The factors needed for successful deterrence—capability, credibility and communication—are also examined. The author then goes on to highlight the differences between conventional and nuclear deterrence. Singapore is cited as a case study to highlight how elements of diplomacy, information and economics along with military deterrence can shape a successful strategy. The author concludes by stating that though a strong military is still the most practical means for non-nuclear states to protect themselves, it must be utilised along with these other factors due to the limitations of conventional deterrence.

Keywords: Deterrence; Nuclear; Dissuade; Strategies; DIME

INTRODUCTION

Deterrence is one of the pivotal tools in the prevention of war, and the post-Cold War era complexities will require the deterrer to utilise both military and non-kinetic deterrence strategies that are curated to send clear signals to the adversary on the potential implications from aggression. Deterrence theory was conceived within the context of the Cold War nuclear weapons race and concentrated on preventing nuclear conflict.¹

However, nuclear and conventional deterrence are very dissimilar and distinct in possible consequences and result in a more dynamic relationship between contending states.² Given the inherent differences, research has shown that unlike nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence does not offer the resolution of a stable stalemate.³ Thus, presenting a conundrum for non-nuclear states which have to contend with conventional deterrence as a solution to the uncertainty underscoring the current geopolitical environment.

The author begins by explaining the key principles of deterrence theory and the application of a deterrence strategy. Thereafter, he highlights the limitations of conventional deterrence as compared to nuclear deterrence. Using Singapore as a case study, the author argues that the viability of a deterrence strategy depends on utilising all elements of national power across the entire DIME (Diplomatic, Information,

Military, and Economics) continuum. Keeping within the context of relative effectiveness between nuclear and conventional deterrence, the author will exclude non-state actors and focus on deterrence strategies against sovereign states, in preventing inter-state conventional conflicts.

The viability of a deterrence strategy depends on utilising all elements of national power across the entire DIME continuum.

DETERRENCE THEORY

According to Snyder, deterrence means ‘discouraging the enemy from taking action by posing for him a prospect of cost and risk outweighing his prospective gain.’⁴ In other words, the deterrer has to dissuade the potential adversary not to embark on a certain action as there will be intolerable great cost and low likelihood of success. The power of dissuasion depends on the degree of influence that the deterrer has over the potential adversary’s cost-benefit analysis by not only accentuating the price of aggression but also the advantage of abstaining from aggression.⁵ The ability to perform cost-benefit analysis or the assumption of a ‘rational actor’ is central to deterrence theory. Critics of this assumption argue that it is

unrealistic to expect a rational adversary that can clinically quantify a decision that maximises its net benefit. Nevertheless rational deterrence theory is based on a 'unitary rational actor' that intuitively responds to deterrents and enticements in reaching the best expected outcome. In other words, state actors are expected to 'deal with choices, not mental calculations'.⁶

DETERRENCE STRATEGIES



The ammunitions entrance to Ouvrage Schoenenbourg along the Maginot Line in Alsace, France.

Denial and punishment are the two main deterrence strategies that a state can employ to convince its adversaries against undertaking aggression.⁷ Firstly, with deterrence by denial, a state seeks to influence the adversary's decision-making by convincing it that success is impractical or improbable. The objective is to deny the adversary confidence of the operational benefits that it desires to accomplish from aggression.⁸ Classic manifestations of denial strategies involve the fortification of national borders, such as the Maginot line built in the 1930s along the France-Germany border to deter raising German aggression. It can be argued that it was precisely because of the deterrence posed at the tactical and operational level which forced the Germans to adopt an offensive strategy that bypassed the formidable fortifications to achieve a strategic victory.⁹

On the other hand, with deterrence by punishment, a state seeks to influence the adversary's assessment about the possible costs by threatening extreme repercussions from retaliatory strikes if the

adversary attacks. The objective is not the upfront defence of the challenged arena but to inflict wider punishment by targeting the adversary's assets or interests that it holds at value—such as population centres, military facilities, economic infrastructure or leadership figures.¹⁰

The distinction between denial and punishment strategies is defensive and offensive centric respectively—as the former seek to overcome and inflict substantial losses against the adversary within the immediate area of confrontation whereas the latter aims to decisively bypass the adversary's defences and catastrophically devastate the adversary's valued assets.

Hence, the distinction between denial and punishment strategies is defensive and offensive centric respectively—as the former seek to overcome and inflict substantial losses against the adversary within the immediate area of confrontation whereas the latter aims to decisively bypass the adversary's defences and catastrophically devastate the adversary's valued assets. Lastly, the two variations of deterrence are complementary and a strategy that employs them in combination will communicate to an adversary that undertaking aggression will result in both significant losses at the confrontation theatre and the adversary's homeland. For example, the planned acquisition of F-35B fighter jets by Singapore will significantly enlarge the range of military operations for both denial and punishment deterrent.¹¹ For the former, the jet's 'short-take-off-and-vertical-landing' capability allows it to respond quickly from short runways or warships to effect denial operations while the jet's stealth features allow it to penetrate undetected behind enemy lines for retaliatory strikes.

Diplomacy and deterrence are the two pillars of Singapore’s defence policy – recognising that deterrence is inadequate by itself and must be augmented with diplomacy to be effective.

There are three interrelated elements for successful deterrence—capability, credibility and communication.¹² Firstly, capability refers to the demonstration of the deterrer’s existing military prowess that is able to repulse or impose unacceptable losses on the adversary. Secondly, credibility means that the adversary must believe that the deterrer has the resolve to reply with force if threatened. Lastly, as deterrence is a relationship between the deterrer and the adversary, communication is vital as the deterrer needs to articulate and unambiguously convey to the adversary on what is to be avoided and the likely consequences. Hence, signaling to the adversary the tolerance threshold on matters of national interest, and that breaching these, will unequivocally trigger a swift military response from the deterrer.¹³

The Falklands War in 1982 illustrates an example of deterrence failure. To a certain extent, Argentina occupied the Falkland Islands as they were under the impression that the United Kingdom (UK) had neither the military capability nor the political resolve to retake them. On the other hand, the UK had failed to comprehend Argentina misperception and hostile posture and did not clearly communicate both its determination and military prowess. These missteps greatly diminished the deterrence of the UK’s military strength.¹⁴

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NUCLEAR AND CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE

Given the destructive nature of nuclear weapons, there is little reservation on the capability of nuclear deterrence—with most debate focusing on the political will to initiate a nuclear strike.

However, for conventional deterrence, there is more doubt about its capability in relation to the deterrer’s resolve to impose costs on the adversary. This scepticism gives rise to the nature of ‘contestable costs’ since the execution and potential consequence of conventional deterrence are largely determined by the deterrer’s capacity and strategy and, the adversary’s countermeasures.¹⁵



A GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) weapon on display outside the Air Force Armament Museum, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida.

There are two areas of distinction between nuclear and conventional deterrence that result in the latter being less effective. Firstly, the effectiveness of conventional reprisals is heavily reliant on the intangibles. More than just hardware and quantity, the effectiveness of conventional forces depend on intrinsic characteristics such as personnel quality, technical competency, superior force structure, and the ability to swiftly operationalise in deploying the reserve forces.¹⁶

Secondly, as compared to nuclear warfare, conventional conflict has a slower destruction tempo and gives a longer lead time for the adversary to fully experience the expected cost. The tempo is relative since it is undeniable that conventional weapons can be highly destructive. In 2017, the United States (US) deployed the BU-43/B massive ordnance air blast bomb with an explosive force equivalent to 18,000lb of TNT against a system of tunnels used by Islamic State militants in Afghanistan.¹⁷ However, the kinetic destruction from conventional weapons are still 'localised' and represents a single or a series of 'episodic

events'.¹⁸ In contrast, a nuclear retaliatory strike can be achieved almost instantaneously and guaranteeing colossal obliteration upon the aggressor. Thus, the destructive nature of conventional deterrence is cumulatively slower to manifest from the moment of initiation to dominance in the battlefield—allowing the adversary a longer gestation period to desist from aggression or for the imposition of substantial costs. Due to the above factors, the adversary will have the impression of a 'prospect of technical, tactical, or operational solution' that makes conventional deterrence less effective.¹⁹

Utilising conventional forces to forge a deterrence strategy also imposes a heavier information burden on the deterrer. Due to the indisputable scale of widespread damage from nuclear weapons, the adversary will be more concerned about the trigger points that will initiate the response than the exact technical specifications of the nuclear capability—since such detailed information offers immaterial utility in countering a nuclear detonation.²⁰



An RSAF AH-64D Apache helicopter taking off for live-firing exercises in the Shoalwater Bay Training Area as part of Exercise Wallaby 2021.

However, the magnitude of the information required to bolster the credibility of the conventional threat is cumbersome. The onus is on the deterrer to influence the potential aggressor through the use of a repertoire of information which includes both the specifics of the threat and the means to effect the threat. Furthermore, the range of information is not static and varies according to changes in military capability and political resolve.²¹

Therein lies the challenge of finding the ‘sweet spot’ of disclosure whereby only the essential information that will deter the aggressor is divulged so that the deterrer’s weaknesses are not exposed. The current political landscape does not lend itself to the required degree of openness. There is a notable reluctance demonstrated by most states in engaging in situations that would lead to the revelation of their military prowess and neither is there an ease in discussion in identifying the adversary and the threshold limits of the deterrer.²²

Hence, as compared to nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence is less expected to create an enduring stalemate as potential adversaries are likely to believe they are able to ‘design around conventional military threats’.²³ It is not a permanent strategic solution and the deterrer has to endure a dynamically volatile relationship with the adversary in the hope that the temporary respite from hostilities will allow both parties to settle the crux of the disputes or antagonisms.²⁴

DETERRENCE STRATEGIES FOR NON-NUCLEAR STATES: A CASE STUDY OF SINGAPORE

The role of the military is unquestionably vital in the deterrence equation since a sovereign state with a weak military will place it at the mercy of potential adversaries.²⁵ However, as discussed in the previous section, conventional deterrence is not infallible as the inflicted costs are ‘contestable’ and the deterrer bears a heavy information burden in conveying a credible threat.

Apart from total reliance on military denial and punishment, a viable deterrence strategy will need to incorporate a framework that utilises the elements of national power across the DIME continuum. This

broadens the dimension of deterrence and forces the adversary to consider not just potential losses from kinetic forces, but also likely political and economic fallouts from aggression.²⁶

Using Singapore as a case study, the next section illustrates how non-kinetic elements (within the diplomatic, informational and economic domains) are able to augment the military component in formulating a viable deterrence strategy. This approach is vital to small states such as Singapore as they lack a territorial strategic depth to ‘to trade space for time’ or embark on defence operations within their own territory.²⁷

Diplomacy

Diplomacy and deterrence are the two pillars of Singapore’s defence policy—recognising that deterrence is inadequate by itself and must be augmented with diplomacy to be effective.²⁸ As an instrument of foreign policy, defence diplomacy can strengthen relationships with other nations’ military and defence institutions; thus reducing the potential adversary’s incentives and heighten the consequences of aggression.²⁹

Given Singapore’s small land mass which limits the expansion of its training facilities, defence diplomacy provides a wide scope of international military co-operation to grant potential access to overseas facilities. Importantly, the overseas avenue allows Singapore to upscale the training size and complexity that cannot be achieved within its own shores.³⁰ For example, the recent expansion of the Shoalwater Bay Training Area and the newly acquired Greenvale Training Area in Australia will provide an area ten times the size of Singapore, allowing vast air and land ranges for combined arms training.³¹ In addition, Singapore also maintains several overseas and fighter detachments in United States, Australia and France to conduct realistic training in honing their capabilities and readiness. In particular, the latest Guam detachment which is geographically closest to Singapore among the overseas bases will allow Singapore to quickly redeploy the fighters back when needed.³²

A broad diplomatic network with friendly nations also anchor their regional security commitment and enhances Singapore security by complicating the cost-benefit calculus of potential adversaries.³³ For example,

the Five Power Defence Arrangements—a defence arrangement since 1971 between UK, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore ‘is an excellent example of multilateral security grouping adapting and contributing to regional peace and stability over the long term. It does so by promoting regional co-operation, confidence-building and respect for international law, through exercises, dialogue, and regular professional seminars and forums and also by evolving to respond to modern security needs’.³⁴

The activation of ‘Operation Flying Eagle’ in response to the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 in Indonesia was the largest Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operation carried out by the SAF and signaled the operational readiness and capabilities of the land, air and sea units of the armed forces.

Lastly, beyond exercises and training, Singapore has contributed to functional security co-operation such as the multinational anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden since 2009.³⁵ Apart from protecting the strategic waterways in the Gulf of Aden, Singapore’s participation allows the building of relationships and enhancement of inter-operability with the international naval forces and maritime agencies. Importantly, the operational joint patrols will allow the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) to translate the Gulf of Aden experience to the Straits of Malacca—a strategic lane of communication that is crucial to the national interests of the regional littoral nations, thus allowing Singapore the confidence to prepare for future conflicts in the region.

Information

The basis of deterrence credibility highlights the crucial role of strategic communications in deterrence. Since deterrence is premised on the threat of force, successful deterrence mandates that credible threats be

sufficiently and unambiguously communicated to the adversary. In its essence, strategic communications are pivotal in conveying to adversaries the specific acts that are intolerable and information about the deterrer’s ‘interests, capabilities, and resolve’.³⁶ In this aspect, peace time military actions can be utilised as a form of strategic communications instrument to demonstrate the capability to project and maintain sizeable combat power.

For example, the activation of ‘Operation Flying Eagle’ in response to the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 in Indonesia was the largest Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Operation carried out by the SAF and signaled the operational readiness and capabilities of the land, air and sea units of the armed forces.³⁷ Although it was a once-off deployment, this particular event could be perceived as an accurate gauge of SAF’s projection, agility, determination and willpower to respond to crises, and communicated the capability and capacity for combined arms operation.

Economics

The economic success of Singapore has provided it with the resources to consistently invest substantial amounts on its defence. In addition, being economically competitive permits Singapore to persevere during crisis in peace or war. The former refers to the capability to withstand unfavourable economic measures, such as trade restrictions or boycotts. Whereas the latter requires the capability to deal with an adversary’s wartime economic sanctions, such as navy blockades or other measures that gravely threaten national survival.³⁸

Hence crisis preparation requires the stockpiling of strategic goods with Singapore diversifying its trade links across the world to ensure that the supply chains are not beholden to a particular country or region.³⁹ In the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the strategy of maintaining adequate stockpile faced the challenge of potential disruption to the global supply chains. However the Singapore government was able to maintain its strong economic links with several countries that ensured disruptions were kept at to a minimum and actively sourced new supply nodes.⁴⁰ Importantly, this episode signaled to potential

adversaries the resourcefulness of Singapore’s overall strategy to safeguard its bargaining position and its resilience in persevering through adversities.

CONCLUSION

This essay explained the key concepts of deterrence theory and the assumption of a rational state actor. The author has examined the application of deterrence strategies via denial and deterrence and explained that these two strategies are not mutually exclusive. In comparing nuclear and conventional deterrence, the author has highlighted the limitations of the latter in terms of ‘contestable costs’ and a heavy information burden in communicating a credible threat. Using Singapore as a case study, the author has illustrated that the viability of a deterrence strategy

depends on utilising all elements of national power across the DIME spectrum.

Having a strong military for deterrence is still the most practical solution for non-nuclear states to survive in the current international system—whereby the threat of military force against sovereign states are always present to a certain extent. However, the limitations of conventional deterrence will require a deterrence strategy that also incorporates the non-kinetic elements of diplomacy, informational and economic. Instead of a complete reliance on military deterrence, such an approach allows a non-nuclear state to pursue a viable deterrence strategy that combines the various deterrence tools within the DIME framework.

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