DETERRENCE

In its simplest form, deterrence consists of the following threat, intended to dissuade a state from aggression: 'Do not attack me because if you do, something unacceptably horrible will happen to you.' In other words, deterrence is a form of persuasion in military strategy. To convey such a threat, the deterrer must decide what constitutes an attack, and must then decide what level of response would be adequate to deter it. This in turn depends on the deterrer's estimation of the adversary's intentions and the values it places on them. For deterrence to succeed, the threat must also be credible. Not only must the potential aggressor believe that the costs of an attack would be higher than its benefits, but also that there is a significant likelihood that such costs would indeed be incurred.

As a strategy, deterrence is often contrasted with defense. The latter focuses on military capabilities rather than intentions. While deterrence works by the threat of punishment, defense works by denying the enemy's ability to achieve its objectives once an attack has begun. It was only with the advent of nuclear weapons that such a distinction could be made in peacetime. Before the arrival of mutually assured destruction (MAD), the terms 'deterrence' and 'defence' simply referred to different time periods. Prior to an attack, military forces are supposed to deter an enemy. After the attack, when deterrence has failed, they are used to actively resist the attack. In light of the unacceptable costs of nuclear war, military strategists and planners have devoted a great deal of attention to the requirements of deterrence in the nuclear age. Strange as it may seem, the main problem with the concept of nuclear deterrence is that (fortunately) no two nuclear-armed states have gone to war with each other using their nuclear weapons. The result is that none of the alleged requirements of nuclear deterrence is derived from a tested empirical theory. What theory has been developed is therefore deductive rather than inductive. No one knows for sure what kind of attacks, or what kind of behavior in general, the possession of nuclear weapons deters. Nor is there any reliable answer to the question 'How many nuclear weapons are enough?' This is because the credibility of a deterrent threat depends on the perceptions of the adversary rather than the deterrer. Nevertheless, there are three issues that, although debated at some length in the context of the **cold war**, remain central to debates about nuclear deterrence in the post-cold war era.

First, there is much debate over the scope of nuclear deterrence, and the dilemmas associated with attempting to deter threats not only to one's own state, but also to one's allies. During the cold war, for example, the United States engaged in a strategy of *extended* deterrence. Not only were its nuclear forces intended to deter a direct nuclear attack (or first strike) on its territory, but it was also believed that they could deter the Soviet Union from non-nuclear aggression against US allies in Western Europe, as well as a range of 'provocative' behavior by the Soviet Union and China. This is sometimes referred to as *general* deterrence as opposed to *immediate* deterrence directed against an imminent threat.

Second, there is no consensus in the literature on how best to make nuclear deterrence credible in the eyes of an adversary. There is a complex trade-off between credibility and effectiveness in thinking about *nuclear* deterrence. An available response to attack, which is very low in credibility, might be sufficient to deter if it poses a very severe **sanction** (e.g. massive retaliation) or if the aggressor's prospective gain carries very little value for it. On the other hand, a threatened response that carries a rather high credibility but poses only moderate costs for the aggressor may not deter if the aggressor places a high value on its objective and

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anticipates a good chance of attaining it. During the cold war, advocates of 'minimal deterrence' debated with those who suggested that the United States should be prepared to fight a nuclear war with the Soviet Union in order to deter it. Nuclear deterrence strategy has long been plagued by the paradox that if deterrence should fail and war should begin, then it would not be rational actually to carry out a threat of nuclear retaliation upon which deterrence is based. Once attacked, a rationally calculating player has nothing to gain by massive retaliation.

Third, there has always been a heated debate over the levels and types of nuclear weapons necessary to achieve nuclear deterrence. On the one hand, many commentators believe that nuclear war is for an enemy to strike first. The choice between suicide or surrender should be avoided by blurring the so-called 'firebreak' between nuclear and conventional weapons, and having available a variety of options to deter a variety of attacks.

During the cold war these three issues were debated at some length, and there is a voluminous literature on the subject. Thankfully, the cold war ended without a nuclear war. None the less, as long as nuclear weapons exist, the same issues will remain pertinent in the future. If we have learnt anything from the experience of nuclear deterrence over the last 50 years, it is that deterrence is not merely a stockpile of weapons. A nuclear strategy allegedly based on this concept neither ensures the continuation of peace nor allows political leaders to ignore the international context that makes deterrence necessary. so unthinkable that nuclear-armed states co-exist in a situation of existential deterrence. As long as political leaders acknowledge the irrationality of nuclear weapons as instruments of war, and as long as it is impossible to defend oneself against a nuclear attack or to launch a nuclear attack in the realistic expectation of preventing any nuclear retaliation (otherwise known as second strike invulnerability), nuclear deterrence is not difficult to achieve. Other commentators argue the opposite case, claiming that the paradox of deterrence provides scope