

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 39
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2009*

Article 8

8-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Gerson, Michael S.. "Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 39, 3 (2009). <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol39/iss3/8>

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Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age

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Deterrence is once again a topic of discussion and debate among US defense and policy communities. Although the concept has received comparatively little attention since the end of the Cold War, it seems poised to take center stage in America's national security policy during the coming decades. With two ongoing wars already straining the military, concerns about a recalcitrant and militarized Russia, Iran's continued uranium enrichment activities, North Korea's nascent nuclear arsenal, and top-to-bottom military modernization in China, adversary-specific deterrence strategies will likely become a prominent component of national and international security in an increasingly multipolar world.

As part of this renewed interest in deterrence, conventional weapons are playing an important role. The "New Triad," consisting of both nuclear and advanced conventional weapons; proposals for conventionally armed intercontinental ballistic missiles; and, more generally, the concept of Prompt Global Strike all represent a growing belief that advanced conventional capabilities can substitute for some missions previously relegated solely to nuclear weapons. Although there has been considerable debate over these specific initiatives—for example, the effect that putting conventional warheads on ballistic missiles would have on strategic stability—most specialists agree that conventional forces can help reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategy. In fact, in recent years the US military has expanded the concept of "strategic deterrence," a term that once encompassed only intercontinental nuclear weapons, to incorporate both nuclear and conventional forces, as well as diplomatic, economic, and informational tools.¹

The recent emphasis on substituting conventional for nuclear weapons in selected missions is an important step in developing a credible and robust twenty-first century deterrent, but it does not fully consider

the unique logic and strategy of conventional deterrence. The current debate focuses primarily on the use of conventional weapons for “deterrence by punishment,” the threat to impose unacceptable costs, such as the destruction of an adversary’s strategic and high-value targets, in response to unwanted actions. Yet, one of the most important contributions of conventional forces is “deterrence by denial,” the threat to deny an adversary the ability to achieve its military and political objectives through aggression.² If some early strategists were accused of “conventionalization” by treating nuclear weapons merely as more powerful and effective tools of war, the current debate regarding conventional contributions to deterrence may be accused of “nuclearization” in that it treats conventional capabilities merely as a substitute for nuclear weapons.

This article seeks to expand the current debate about the role and utility of conventional forces in US deterrence strategies by reexamining the traditional logic of conventional deterrence, which focuses on deterrence by denial, in the context of the modern international security environment. It is primarily concerned with the role of US conventional forces in extended deterrence, defined as the threat of force to protect allies and friends, rather than “central” or “homeland” deterrence.³ This focus on extended deterrence—and especially on the role of deterrence by denial in extended deterrence—highlights the central importance of protecting territory from attack and invasion. Historically, the desire for control over specific territory has been a frequent motivator of interstate crises and conflict.⁴ While interstate conventional wars have significantly declined since the end of the Second World War, the potential for conflict over Taiwan or on the Korean Peninsula, the prospect of future clashes over control of scarce natural resources, and the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia attest to the continued possibility of conflict over specific territory that has important strategic, economic, political, religious, historical, or socio-cultural significance.

Consequently, this article examines how US conventional military power can be used to deter conventional aggression against friends and allies by threatening to deny an adversary its best chance of success on the battlefield—a surprise or short-notice attack with little or no engagement with American military forces. The ability to prevent an opponent from presenting the United States with a *fait accompli*—that is, from strik-

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ing quickly and achieving victory before substantial US (and perhaps coalition) forces can be deployed to the theater—is a central component of modern conventional deterrence.

Conventional Deterrence in US Strategy

Broadly defined, deterrence is the threat of force intended to convince a potential aggressor not to undertake a particular action because the costs will be unacceptable or the probability of success extremely low. This threat has always been one of the central strategic principles by which nations attempted to prevent conflict.⁵ Even so, the development and rigorous analysis of deterrence as a discrete strategic concept did not occur until the advent of nuclear weapons.

Deterrence theory was developed against the backdrop of the Cold War nuclear arms race and focused on the prevention of nuclear conflict. Yet, while the majority of academic research and public debate was concerned with the prevention of nuclear war—the net result was that deterrence became synonymous with nuclear weapons—conventional deterrence, appropriately, assumed an increasingly important role in the development of military strategy during this period.⁶ As the Soviet Union began to amass a large and survivable nuclear arsenal that was capable of global reach in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the credibility of the Eisenhower Administration’s policy of “Massive Retaliation,” which threatened an overwhelming nuclear response to virtually any Soviet aggression, was brought into question. Once the Soviet Union developed survivable nuclear capabilities that could reach the US homeland, many defense officials and analysts argued that the threat of Massive Retaliation lacked credibility against anything other than an all-out Soviet nuclear attack.⁷

As a result, western military strategy eventually shifted from total reliance on nuclear weapons as a means of deterring both Soviet conventional and nuclear aggression to a strategy of “Flexible Response,” which included conventional and nuclear elements. From the mid-1960s onward, NATO relied on conventional power, backed by the threat of nuclear escalation, to deter any conventional assault on Europe by the numerically superior Warsaw Pact, and relied on nuclear weapons to deter nuclear attacks.⁸ By incorporating “direct defense”—the ability to respond to Warsaw Pact aggression, especially conventional aggression, with proportionate (i.e., conventional) force—into NATO strategy, the concept of Flexible Response sought to create a more credible means of deterrence across the entire spectrum of conflict.

A potential enemy is more likely to attack neighbors if the regime believes it can accomplish its objectives before US forces respond.

Following the Cold War, conventional deterrence earned an even greater role in US national security strategy. With the demise of the Soviet Union and significant advancements in conventional precision-guided munitions, many defense analysts concluded that “smart” weapons could provide a powerful deterrent against a wide variety of threats. While some commentators argued that nuclear weapons were still necessary to prevent nuclear attacks, and others contended that conventional weapons were “the only credible deterrent” even against nuclear threats, almost all agreed that technologically advanced conventional weapons could now take the place of nuclear weapons in many missions.⁹ Following the remarkable success of sophisticated conventional firepower in Operation Desert Storm, William Perry declared, “This new conventional military capability adds a powerful dimension to the ability of the United States to deter war.”¹⁰

In the current international security environment, conventional deterrence can be useful against nonnuclear and nuclear-armed adversaries. For regimes that do not possess nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, US conventional capabilities will likely be the most credible and potent deterrent. History suggests that, in general, nations without weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are not intimidated by an opponent’s nuclear capabilities. For example, nuclear weapons did not give the United States significant advantages before or during the Korean and Vietnam wars; nor did they dissuade Egypt from attacking Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War¹¹ or Argentina from attacking the British-controlled Falkland Islands in 1982.¹² This circumstance is due in part to the perceived impact of the “nuclear taboo,” a moral and political aversion to using nuclear weapons that has emerged due to the long absence of nuclear use in time of war. The nuclear taboo reduces the credibility—and therefore the utility—of nuclear weapons, especially against regimes not possessing nuclear weapons or other WMD.¹³

Although implicit or explicit nuclear threats may lack credibility against non-WMD regimes, many potential adversaries believe that the United States will use conventional firepower, especially because America has conventional superiority and a demonstrated willingness to use it. Consequently, when dealing with non-WMD-related threats, conventional deterrence will be the most likely mechanism for deterring hostile actions.

According to Admiral Michael Mullen, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “A big part of credibility, of course, lies in our conventional capability. The capability to project power globally and conduct effective theater-level operations . . . remains essential to deterrence effectiveness.”¹⁴

Conventional deterrence also plays an important role in preventing nonnuclear aggression by nuclear-armed regimes. Regional nuclear proliferation may not only increase the chances for the use of nuclear weapons, but, equally important, the possibility of conventional aggression. The potential for conventional conflict under the shadow of mutual nuclear deterrence was a perennial concern throughout the Cold War, and that scenario is still relevant. A nuclear-armed adversary may be emboldened to use conventional force against US friends and allies, or to sponsor terrorism, in the belief that its nuclear capabilities give it an effective deterrent against US retaliation or intervention.¹⁵ For example, a regime might calculate that it could undertake conventional aggression against a neighbor and, after achieving a relatively quick victory, issue implicit or explicit nuclear threats in the expectation that the United States (and perhaps coalition partners) would choose not to get involved.

In this context, conventional deterrence can be an important mechanism to limit options for regional aggression below the nuclear threshold. By deploying robust conventional forces in and around the theater of potential conflict, the United States can credibly signal that it can respond to conventional aggression at the outset, and therefore the opponent cannot hope to simultaneously achieve a quick conventional victory and use nuclear threats to deter US involvement. Moreover, if the United States can convince an opponent that US forces will be engaged at the beginning of hostilities—and will therefore incur the human and financial costs of war from the start—it can help persuade opponents that the United States would be highly resolved to fight even in the face of nuclear threats because American blood and treasure would have already been expended.¹⁶ Similar to the Cold War, the deployment of conventional power in the region, combined with significant nuclear capabilities and escalation dominance, can help prevent regimes from believing that nuclear possession provides opportunities for conventional aggression and coercion.

The Logic of Conventional Deterrence

There is comparatively little theoretical literature on conventional, as opposed to nuclear, deterrence, but what scholarship does exist provides a useful baseline for analyzing the utility of conventional deterrence in the emerging international security environment. The few scholars who have

studied conventional deterrence generally agree on its basic logic, offering refinements, additional insights, and supporting evidence rather than competing theories. Consequently, the existing literature can be readily synthesized into a broader, more complete, and more robust theory of conventional deterrence, effectively incorporating arguments from important works on the subject.¹⁷

The logic of conventional deterrence is based on three interrelated arguments. First, states contemplating conventional aggression typically seek relatively quick, inexpensive victories.¹⁸ The history of conventional warfare demonstrates that most nations desire and develop military strategies designed for rapid, blitzkrieg-style wars rather than protracted wars of attrition.¹⁹ Long and costly wars can ruin economies and create political instabilities undermining the effectiveness, reputation, and survival of the government or state.²⁰ War is inherently unpredictable, and most leaders do not want to get trapped in a costly and bloody conflict with no end in sight and an uncertain final outcome.

Second, conventional deterrence is primarily based on deterrence by denial, the ability to prevent an adversary from achieving its objectives through conflict.²¹ If states typically seek short and low-cost conflicts, then conventional deterrence largely depends on convincing an adversary that it cannot achieve its objectives rapidly or efficiently. In this context, the deterrent effect is achieved in large part by the possibility of getting bogged down in a long and costly war of attrition. According to John Mearsheimer, one of the principal architects of conventional deterrence theory, “. . . deterrence is best served when the attacker believes that his only alternative is a protracted war: The threat of a war of attrition is the bedrock of conventional deterrence.”²² Thus, if a state believes it can achieve rapid victory, deterrence is more apt to fail; conversely, deterrence is more likely to succeed when an aggressor state believes it cannot achieve its goals in relatively short order.²³

Although the strategy of conventional deterrence primarily depends on deterrence by denial, the usefulness and applicability of deterrence by punishment should not be overlooked, especially in light of significant advancements in conventional precision-strike capabilities. In practice, a robust and flexible conventional deterrence strategy should combine both mechanisms, as some adversaries are more likely to be deterred by the threat of punishment and others by the threat of denial. For example, some leaders may believe that they can simply withstand or “ride out” whatever punishment the opponent’s conventional forces can inflict. For these regimes, threats to deny success may be a more potent deterrent than threats of punishment. On the other hand, some aggressors may convince them-

selves that US conventional forces will not be able to successfully deny their objectives. These leaders may believe that they can achieve their aims in spite of the opposing conventional power because they have greater resolve and are willing to fight longer and harder, and accept greater casualties. Often, they base this resolve on the belief that they can achieve their goals before substantial US conventional power arrives, a *fait accompli*. These opponents may perceive that they have a better conventional war-fighting strategy or a “home field advantage” since the conflict is on their territory. Their resolve is often based on strategy that incorporates the employment of asymmetric tactics to offset US conventional advantages, such as supporting terrorism or acquiring WMD. In all these cases, the threat of punishment may be the most effective deterrent.²⁴

In general, however, denial has an important advantage over punishment: If conventional deterrence fails, a force designed for deterrence by denial is more able to engage in conventional conflict, control escalation, and exercise a winning strategy. Given that a credible deterrence by denial strategy requires that an adversary believe that U.S. forces are actually capable of denying victory on the battlefield, this force posture is inherently designed to fight and win a conflict in the event of a deterrence failure.²⁵ According to Lawrence Freedman, “In principle, denial is a more reliable strategy than punishment because, if the threats have to be implemented, it offers control rather than continuing coercion. With punishment, the [adversary] is left to decide how much more to take. With denial, the choice is removed.”²⁶

Third, and finally, the “local” balance of military power—the balance between the conventional forces of the attacker and those of a defender in the area of conflict—often plays a critical role in conventional deterrence, since it is local forces that will impact an aggressor’s calculations regarding a quick victory.²⁷ If US adversaries seek relatively short and inexpensive wars, and if the key to deterring conventional aggression is convincing those adversaries that they will not be able to achieve such an objective, then credible and effective deterrence requires that US forces be in or near the region, or readily able to deploy, for an immediate response. When the local balance favors the adversary, deterrence is more likely to fail because the regime will calculate that it can achieve a rapid success. When the local balance favors the defender, deterrence is more likely to succeed.²⁸

The importance of the local power balance in deterrence calculations suggests that US conventional superiority in and of itself is not as relevant as some analysts have suggested.²⁹ In fact, the available evidence suggests that overall superiority may be insufficient to establish deterrence. Despite

the apparent advantage of conventional superiority in the macro sense, deterrence may still fail if the opponent believes it has a local advantage.

Challenges for Conventional Deterrence

The existing scholarship, previously outlined, provides a framework for how conventional deterrence works. The majority of this literature, however, is now decades old. While the core elements of deterrence theory, both conventional and nuclear, remain relevant, it is necessary to reexamine some of the theory's assumptions and arguments in the context of today's security environment.³⁰

Quick Victory, Deterrence, and the "Fait Accompli"

In the future, the desire for relatively quick, low-cost victories may lead states that are considering conventional aggression against the United States to employ a "*fait accompli*" strategy.³¹ The purpose of this strategy is to rapidly achieve limited objectives, such as seizing a piece of territory, with little or no military engagement. A *fait accompli* strategy hinges on strategic surprise; the goal is to attack swiftly and achieve victory before the United States has time to mobilize and deploy forces.³² Following the accomplishment of limited objectives, the adversary may switch to a defensive posture designed to repel any counterattack. By striking quickly and then exercising a defensive posture, the adversary hopes to deter or complicate US attempts to reverse any gains or restore the status quo.³³

The *fait accompli* strategy—and, more generally, military planning for rapid victory—is an important component of strategic thinking in several nations. China's concept of "Local Wars under Modern High-Technology Conditions" envisions localized, short-duration, and high-intensity conflicts using technologically advanced weapons for both symmetric and asymmetric combat, including cyber, space, and information warfare.³⁴ According to some analysts, China's military strategy for its Taiwan contingency approximates a *fait accompli*-type strategy. China would attempt to rapidly defeat, or at least incapacitate, Taiwan, perhaps through a massive conventional missile strike, thereby forcing Taiwan to capitulate before US forces could arrive.³⁵ Similarly, according to a high-ranking North Korean defector in 1997, Kim Jong-il apparently believed that he could achieve a quick victory against South Korea by launching a massive missile strike against Seoul, while at the same time forestalling US intervention by threatening missile attacks on Japan.³⁶

As a result, conventional deterrence puts a premium on forward-deployed combat power, as well as forcible entry, force sustainment and re-

inforcement capabilities, and regional base access. Compared to deterrence by punishment, which relies primarily on precision-strike capabilities, deterrence by denial involves a number of complicated logistical issues that impact an adversary's calculations regarding success. With deterrence by denial, not only might an adversary question America's political willpower but, equally important, it could question whether the United States is capable of responding, and, if so, how quickly. These types of calculations will be especially important for states hoping to achieve a *fait accompli*, since this strategy is predicated on the ability to accomplish objectives before substantial US forces can arrive.

Rapid-response and force sustainment may present increasingly complex challenges in the coming decades, as current and potential adversaries develop both symmetric and asymmetric means to counter US power projection. China, for example, is developing a range of anti-access and area-denial capabilities intended to diminish the capacity of extra-regional nations to deploy, operate, and sustain forces in its geographical region.³⁷ The ability, whether real or perceived, to prevent or weaken US power projection capability and operational effectiveness can undermine deterrence efforts. Consequently, the credibility of conventional deterrence—and execution of the threat if deterrence fails—requires convincing potential aggressors that the United States can and will rapidly respond to aggression against its global interests, and that there is nothing the regime can do to prevent or hinder the response.

Deterrence by Denial and Deterrence by Defeat

In the emerging international security environment, the concept of denying victory has to be carefully evaluated. There is an important difference between the threat to merely deny a rapid victory and the threat to completely defeat the opponent. The traditional logic of conventional deterrence hinges almost exclusively on the former. It is important to note that this threat does not necessarily require defeating the opponent. Rather, the deterrent effect is derived by convincing the aggressor that it cannot accomplish its objectives within an acceptable timeframe and cost. Even if an adversary believes it could achieve success through a protracted war, Mearsheimer argues, “deterrence is nevertheless likely to obtain, largely because the protracted nature of the conflict will result in high costs.”³⁸

In some future scenarios, however, this threat might be insufficient to obtain effective deterrence. One central challenge for both conventional and nuclear deterrence in the twenty-first century is that the United States faces challenges from a variety of states with varying mo-

When dealing with non-WMD-related threats, conventional deterrence is the most likely mechanism for deterring hostile actions.

tives, objectives, cultures, and propensity for risk-taking. Most important, while some future adversaries may be motivated to aggression by opportunity and the prospect of profit and gain, others might be motivated by some perceived necessity. According to Richard Ned Lebow, international crises and conflicts can result from a leader's perception of an impending and detrimental change in the external security environment, such as a shift in the regional or international balance of power that jeopardizes the nation's long-term security, or from a leader's attempt to divert domestic attention away from internal political instabilities and turmoil to generate a "rally around the flag" effect.³⁹ In these situations, the regime believes that it must act to prevent an even more dire outcome that might occur if they did nothing.

The distinction between states motivated by opportunity and those motivated by necessity has important and far-reaching implications for the design and implementation of effective conventional (and nuclear) deterrence strategies.⁴⁰ In particular, states motivated by opportunity or necessity are likely to have different risk calculations and tolerances to costs. According to Prospect Theory, an influential model of decision-making under risk, decision-makers tend to be willing to accept significant risks and costs to prevent losing something of great value, and are more risk-averse and sensitive to costs when attempting to gain something new.⁴¹ Based partly on insights from Prospect Theory, it is now well known that decision-makers consider not only the potential costs and risks of action, but, equally important, the potential costs of inaction.⁴² Consequently, a state that is motivated by some perceived necessity may be willing to take substantial risks, especially if inaction is believed to result in a certain and intolerable loss. In these circumstances a leader may calculate that the costs of doing nothing outweighs the potential costs and risks of action.⁴³

Prospect Theory suggests that the concept of denying victory will apply differently depending on the adversary's motivations for aggression. Since nations motivated by opportunity and the prospect of profit and gain are likely to be relatively risk-averse and sensitive to costs, the threat to prevent rapid and low-cost success will be sufficient for deterrence. Even if victory is attainable in the long-run, the prospect of a long and expensive conflict often is enough to induce caution and restraint.

Leaders motivated by the necessity to prevent losing something of value, however, may be willing to engage in a long and expensive conflict, especially if the stakes are deemed critical to national security or domestic political survival. In such cases, the ability to deny a swift and inexpensive victory may be insufficient for the purpose of achieving deterrence, since the leadership might calculate that the objectives are sufficient to run the risk of a protracted conflict. While they might still prefer a short and inexpensive conflict, and may attempt a *fait accompli*-type victory, they would probably be willing to engage in a longer and harder conflict if the final objectives are worthwhile. Consequently, in these cases the United States must credibly threaten to defeat the adversary, rather than simply deny the prospect of a quick and cheap victory, in the early stages of conflict so that the opponent cannot hope to eventually achieve its objectives in a protracted war. For regimes motivated by necessity, credible deterrence will not hinge on the ability to deny only a quick victory, but rather on the ability to completely defeat the opponent quickly.

The Credibility of Conventional Deterrence

Credibility, according to Sir Lawrence Freedman, is the “magic ingredient” of deterrence.⁴⁴ Deterrence credibility is a function of an adversary’s assessment of a nation’s military capability and political resolve. For deterrence to be credible, an adversary has to believe that the United States has both the military capability and the political willpower to carry out its announced objectives.⁴⁵ Of all the concepts and theories associated with deterrence, the issue of how to demonstrate or signal credibility has been the dominant theme in academic and policy literature.

Whereas in the nuclear context discussions about deterrence credibility have centered on political willpower and resolve, in conventional deterrence the issue of credibility has focused on the military capabilities component of the credibility equation. The almost exclusive emphasis on resolve for credible nuclear deterrence and on capabilities for credible conventional deterrence is the result of the inherent differences between nuclear and conventional weapons. There is little doubt that nuclear weapons are extremely destructive. The pertinent question for credible nuclear deterrence is not whether one can inflict significant costs for unwanted actions (assuming, of course, that the nuclear forces are survivable and there are appropriate command, control, and communications), but rather whether one will use nuclear weapons, since the execution of the threat might risk retaliation in kind. As Herman Kahn argued, in the nuclear are-

na “credibility depends on being willing to accept the other side’s retaliatory blow. It depends on the harm he can do, not the harm we can do.”⁴⁶

In the conventional setting, it has been advocated that the situation is essentially reversed. Given the comparatively limited power of conventional weapons, an adversary may doubt whether conventional forces are capable of denying a rapid victory or inflicting the associated costs that outweigh the benefits of aggression. As Richard Harknett explains:

The nature of conventional forces invites skepticism at a level that few deterrence theorists have emphasized—that of capability. Due to the contestable nature of conventional forces, it is a state’s capability to inflict costs that is most likely to be questioned by a challenger. In a conventional environment, the issue of credibility is dominated by suspicions about the capability to inflict costs rather than on the decision to inflict costs In the end, a state evaluating a conventional deterrent can assume that the deterrer will retaliate. The pertinent question is how costly that response will be.⁴⁷

The importance of the credibility of US conventional capabilities remains relevant. Future adversaries may discount conventional threats in the mistaken belief that they could circumvent US forces via a *fait accompli* strategy or otherwise withstand, overcome, or outmaneuver the United States on the conventional battlefield. But a singular focus on the capabilities part of the credibility equation misses the critical importance of an adversary’s judgment of US political resolve. In future conventional deterrence challenges, perceptions of US political willpower are likely to be as important for deterrence credibility as military capabilities.

One of the key challenges facing the United States in future conventional deterrence contingencies is the perception that American public and political leaders are highly sensitive to US combat casualties and civilian collateral damage.⁴⁸ Regardless of the actual validity of this belief—and there is some evidence suggesting that the US public is willing to tolerate casualties if the conflict is viewed as legitimate or the public believes the United States has a reasonable chance of prevailing⁴⁹—this view appears to be relatively widespread.⁵⁰ If conventional deterrence is largely based on the threat to rapidly engage the opponent’s forces in combat, then the credibility of this threat depends on an opponent’s belief that the United States is willing to accept the human and fiscal costs of conventional conflict. Consequently, perceptions of casualty sensitivity can undermine the credibility and potential success of conventional deterrence. A nation might be more inclined to attempt regional aggression if it believes that a sufficient US military response would be hindered or prevented by the political pressures associated with America’s alleged aversion to casualties.

A potential aggressor likely will try to exploit this perceived aversion to casualties in its deterrence and warfighting strategies. For example,

in future conventional contingencies an opponent may attempt to deter US intervention by threatening to execute a protracted war of attrition, thereby inflicting heavy casualties on US forces. In this scenario, the adversary is essentially turning the hallmark of conventional deterrence, the ability to execute a rapid and inexpensive victory, against the United States. Saddam Hussein tried this strategy in the run-up to the first Gulf War by threatening to create “rivers of blood” if US forces intervened. Saddam reportedly told US Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie, “Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle.”⁵¹ In fact, perceptions of casualty aversion might actually encourage future adversaries to adopt protracted strategies in an effort to prevent US intervention. These strategies are based on the belief that such aggressors can accomplish their objectives by wearing down America’s political will through a long and bloody war of attrition.

The Conventional-Nuclear Nexus

The emphasis on conventional capabilities in America’s deterrence strategy has to carefully balance the benefits with potential risks. Most importantly, efforts to capitalize on and operationalize conventional contributions to deterrence may in fact create or strengthen incentives for nuclear proliferation. One of the primary motivations for a nation to seek nuclear weapons vis-à-vis the United States is to deter America’s conventional, rather than nuclear, capability. For some regimes, nuclear weapons are an attractive means to offset US conventional superiority and deter intervention in regional conflicts.⁵² In this context, nuclear proliferation is an asymmetric response to US conventional superiority.

This incentive for nuclear acquisition underscores the continued necessity of nuclear deterrence as long as nuclear weapons exist. As the United States seeks to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons by strengthening conventional forces, it has to also work to offset the asymmetric options used to balance against its conventional power. Consequently, as the United States expands the role of conventional capabilities in deterrence, a credible nuclear deterrent is still required, at least for the foreseeable future, to help convince current and potential adversaries that nuclear weapons are not an effective tool to restore freedom-of-action or gain coercive leverage over its neighbors or the United States.

Conclusion

In his 5 April 2009 speech in Prague, President Obama stated that the United States intends to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.” This reduction, if achieved, does not signify the

beginning of unilateral nuclear disarmament. The President was careful to note that nuclear deterrence would be necessary as long as other nations possess nuclear weapons, and that the goal of a nuclear-free world “will not be reached quickly, perhaps not in my lifetime.”

A reduction in the role that nuclear weapons play in America’s national security strategy requires a corresponding increase in conventional capabilities. Whereas nuclear weapons dominated the research and debate on deterrence in the twentieth century, conventional weapons will likely occupy a significant portion of the discourse in the new century.

This increased role for conventional forces demands new thinking related to the kinds of conventional capabilities, targeting doctrines, warfighting strategies, deployment of forces, and strategic communication necessary to deter both conventional- and WMD-armed opponents. Placing greater emphasis on the role of conventional forces in deterrence requires an understanding of the unique logic and strategy associated with conventional deterrence, as well as how, when, and where it might be implemented. In some cases, nuclear weapons will still be essential; in others, however, conventional capabilities are likely to play a much greater role. Despite the many challenges inherent in any conventional or nuclear deterrence doctrine, there are opportunities to incorporate the United States’ conventional capabilities into a robust and comprehensive deterrent strategy that is credible and effective across the range of potential contingencies.

NOTES

1. *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept* (Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.: United States Strategic Command, February 2004).

2. Glenn Snyder developed the distinction between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. See Glenn Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 14-16.

3. As an “insular” great power protected by large bodies of water, the United States does not have to contend with significant conventional military threats against its territory.

4. On the role of disputed territory in crises and war, see, for example, Paul Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996); Paul F. Diehl, ed., *A Road Map to War: Territorial Dimensions of International Conflict* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 1999); John Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993); Hemda Ben-Yehuda, “Territoriality and War in International Crises: Theory and Findings, 1918-2001,” *International Studies Review*, 6 (December 2004), 85-105; and John Vasquez and Marie T. Henehan, “Territorial Disputes and the Probability of War, 1816-1992,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 38 (March 2001), 123-38.

5. See, for example, George Quester, *Deterrence before Hiroshima: The Airpower Background of Modern Strategy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1986); and Richard Ned Lebow, “Thucydides and Deterrence,” *Security Studies*, 16 (April-June 2007), 163-88.

6. Samuel P. Huntington, “Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe,” *International Security*, 8 (Winter 1983-84), 32-34; and John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), 13. See also John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Soviets Can’t Win Quickly in Central Europe,” *International Security*, 7 (Summer 1982), 3-39.

7. One of the most sophisticated critiques of the Eisenhower Administration's policy published at the time is William W. Kaufmann, "The Requirements of Deterrence," in William W. Kaufmann, ed., *Military Policy and National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1956), 12-38. For an examination of nuclear debates and doctrine during this period, see David A. Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960," *International Security*, 7 (Spring 1983), 3-71; and Richard K. Betts, "A Nuclear Golden Age? The Balance before Parity," *International Security*, 11 (Winter 1986-87), 3-32.

8. On the transition to flexible response, see, for example, David N. Schwartz, *NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1983); Helga Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility, 1966-1967* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996); and Ivo Daalder, *The Nature and Practice of Flexible Response: NATO Strategy and Theater Nuclear Forces since 1967* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991).

9. Viewpoints on this debate include William J. Perry, "Desert Storm and Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs*, 70 (Fall 1991), 66-82; Paul H. Nitze, "Is It Time to Junk Our Nukes?" *The Washington Post*, 16 January 1994, C1; Charles T. Allan, "Extended Conventional Deterrence: In from the Cold and Out of the Nuclear Fire?" *Washington Quarterly*, 17 (Summer 1994), 203-33; Gary L. Guertner, "Deterrence and Conventional Military Forces," *Washington Quarterly*, 16 (Winter 1993), 141-51; and Seth Cropsey, "The Only Credible Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, 73 (March/April 1994), 14-20. For a more recent analysis of the necessary missions for nuclear weapons, see Ivan Oelrich, *Missions for Nuclear Weapons after the Cold War*, Federation of American Scientists, Occasional Paper No. 3, January 2005.

10. Perry, 66.

11. Although Israel has never confirmed that it has nuclear weapons, it is widely believed to have had them since at least the late 1960s or early 1970s. On Israel's nuclear weapons program, see Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998).

12. See T. V. Paul, "Nuclear Taboo and War Initiation in Regional Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39 (December 1995), 696-717.

13. On the "nuclear taboo," see Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008). See also Robert Jervis, "What Do We Want to Deter and How Do We Deter It?" in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazarr, eds., *Turning Point: The Gulf War and U.S. Military Strategy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 128. Some available evidence suggests that Egyptian and Argentinean decisionmakers were not intimidated by Israel or Britain's nuclear capabilities because they believed that the nuclear taboo effectively constrained the use of nuclear weapons against them. See, e.g., Paul.

14. Michael G. Mullen, "It's Time for a New Deterrence Model," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 51 (Fourth Quarter 2008), 3.

15. This concern is the core of the "stability-instability paradox," a term coined by Glenn Snyder. The issue is whether stable mutual deterrence at the nuclear level encourages aggression at lower levels. If countries are mutually deterred from using nuclear weapons by the fear of retaliation, then they might believe that they can fight conventional wars because both sides would be deterred from nuclear escalation. See Glenn H. Snyder, "The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror," in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), 185-201.

16. According to Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan, "At the extreme, forces deployed abroad are automatically involved in outbreaks of conflict, as when they are located at the edge of a demilitarized zone across a traditional invasion route. In less extreme and more frequent cases, the fact that military personnel (and often their dependents) are located in an area of potential conflict means that the state making the deployment can ill afford to shut its eyes to potential threats in the region. Hence the location of forces abroad can sometimes support a nation's policies more directly and effectively than a force of equal capability which is kept at home, even when provisions are made to move the latter force quickly and effectively when needed." See Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1978), 6.

17. For an earlier synthesis of the existing literature, see Edward Rhodes, "Conventional Deterrence," *Comparative Strategy*, 19 (July-September 2000), 221-53.

18. See, for example, Measheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 24; Kenneth Watman and Dean Wilkening, *U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1995), xii, 67; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), Chapter 2; and Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 39-40.

19. For example, in the run-up to the First World War, which turned out to be one of the longest and most violent wars of the twentieth century, leaders developed offensive military strategies in the belief that attack-

ing was easier than defending, and that significant advantage could be gained by the side that mobilized and attacked first. See, for example, Jack Snyder, *Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984); Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security*, 9 (Summer 1984), 58-107; and Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

20. Watman and Wilkening, 67.

21. Ibid. See also Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 24, 30, 64, 206-08; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, 30-34; Rhodes, 243-47; and Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crises* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1981), 248. On the distinction between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment, see Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 14-16.

22. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 64, 206-07.

23. Huth, 40; and Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 24, 64.

24. On some of the potential difficulties of conventional punishment and denial strategies, see Richard J. Harknett, "The Logic of Conventional Deterrence and the End of the Cold War," *Security Studies*, 4 (March 1994), 86-114; and Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Airpower and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), 9-10, 22-23.

25. According to Karl Mueller, "Denial offers an additional advantage over punishment, in that it fails gracefully if it does not work. The actions a coercer takes to convince the enemy that defeat is inevitable are basically the same as those required to make defeat actually occur; that is, prosecuting a denial strategy looks very much like pursuing a pure force victory. If it fails, the effort will not have been wasted." See Karl Mueller, "Strategies of Coercion: Denial, Punishment, and the Future of Air Power," *Security Studies*, 7 (Spring 1998), 191-92.

26. Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2004), 39.

27. Huth, 39-41, 57-60, 74, 76; Paul K. Huth and Bruce Russett, "What Makes Deterrence Work? Cases from 1900 to 1980," *World Politics*, 36 (July 1984), 518; Watman and Wilkening, xii, 67-72; Rhodes, 245-46; and Edward Rhodes, Jonathon M. DiCicco, Sarah S. Milburn, and Thomas C. Walker, *Presence, Prevention, and Persuasion: A Historical Analysis of Military Force and Political Influence* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2004), 396.

28. Huth, 40, and, more generally, chapters 3-5.

29. See, for example, Gary L. Guertner, "Deterrence and Conventional Military Forces," *Washington Quarterly*, 18 (Winter 1993), 142; and Allan, 208.

30. For the author's views on the continued relevance and applicability of some of the core concepts of deterrence, see Michael S. Gerson, "Concepts of Deterrence in the 21st Century: Some Things Old, Some Things New," in Karl-Heinz Kamp and David S. Yost, eds., *NATO and 21st Century Deterrence* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2009), 153-72.

31. The *fait accompli* strategy is based on John Mearsheimer's concept of a "limited aims" strategy. See Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 30, 53-54. See also Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1974), 536-40; Watman and Wilkening, 67; and Rhodes, 222-23.

32. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 53-54.

33. Ibid.

34. David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy," in James C. Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang, *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999).

35. See, for example, Vincent Wei-Cheng Wang, "Taiwan: Conventional Deterrence, Soft Power, and the Nuclear Option," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008), 406; Roger Cliff, "China's Military Modernization and the Cross-Strait Balance," statement before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 15 September 2005 (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND); Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security*, 25 (Spring 2001), 11; Robert Kagan, "How China Will Take Taiwan," *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2000, B7; and Brad Roberts, *Nuclear Multipolarity and Stability*, IDA Document D-2539 (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, November 2000), 15.

36. Kevin Sullivan, "Key Defector Warns Again of North Korean War Plans," *The Washington Post*, 10 July 1997, A23. For a similar argument, see Kang Choi and Joon-Sung Park, "South Korea: Fears of Abandonment and Entrapment," in Alagappa, 383.

37. See, for example, Roger Cliff, Mark Burles, Michael S. Chase, Derek Eaton, and Kevin L. Pollpeter, *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Anti-Access Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2007); Michael McDevitt, "Sea Denial with Chinese Characteristics," in Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, William S. Murray, and Andrew R. Wilson, eds., *China's Future Nuclear Submarine Force* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 359-72; and Andrew S. Erickson and David D. Yang, "On the Verge of a Game-Changer," *Proceedings* (May 2009), 26-32. See also Ashley J. Tellis, "China's Military Space Strategy," *Survival*, 49 (Autumn 2007), 41-72.

38. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 24.

39. Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 61-69. See also Richard Ned Lebow, "The Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?" in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 180-202.

40. The author thanks Michael Glosny for suggesting the terminology of opportunity versus necessity.

41. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica*, 47 (March 1979), 263-91. Kahneman alone was the recipient of the Nobel Prize because Tversky died in 1996, and the Nobel Institute does not give awards posthumously. For a brief examination of the role of Prospect Theory in conventional deterrence, see Rhodes, "Conventional Deterrence," 243-44. For a broader examination of the role of Prospect Theory in international security, see, for example, Barbara Farnham, ed., *Avoiding Losses/Taking Risks: Prospect Theory and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994).

42. Watman and Wilkening, 22-23; and Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, 62-63, 65-66.

43. The implications of Prospect Theory for deterrence have been recognized by the US Strategic Command and incorporated into the *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept*. This document contends, "Encouraging adversary restraint plays a critical role in deterrence operations because adversary decision-makers weigh the benefits and costs of acting (e.g., invading their neighbor, using WMD, attacking the US homeland) in the context of their expectations of what will happen if they do not act (i.e., their perceived consequences of restraint)." See *Deterrence Operations Joint Operating Concept* (Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.: US Strategic Command, December 2006), http://www.dtic.mil/futurejointwarfare/concepts/do_joc_v20.doc, 27.

44. Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 96.

45. The classic statement on deterrence credibility is Kaufmann, 12-38.

46. Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), 32.

47. Harknett, 89.

48. On the consequences of casualty sensitivity for the effectiveness of deterrence and other forms of coercion, see Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 130-51.

49. See Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security*, 30 (Winter 2005-06), 7-46.

50. In fact, some scholars have argued that the use of conventional force—i.e., a deterrence failure—could strengthen future conventional deterrence efforts by demonstrating credibility. See, for example, Guertner, 142; Robert P. Haffa, Jr., "The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies and Forces to Underwrite a New World Order," in Gary L. Guertner, Robert Haffa, Jr., and George Quester, *Conventional Forces and the Future of Deterrence* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1992), 16; and Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988).

51. See Byman and Waxman, 142; and Alistair Horne, "The Longest Battle," *The New York Times*, 17 February 1991.

52. For similar arguments, see, for example, Harold Brown, "New Nuclear Realities," *Washington Quarterly*, 31 (Winter 2007-08), 11; Byman and Waxman, 201, 206-07; Christopher F. Chyba and Karthika Sasi-kumar, "A World of Risk: The Current Environment for U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy," in George Bunn and Christopher F. Chyba, eds., *U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: Confronting Today's Threats* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 9-10; and John Deutch, "A Nuclear Posture for Today," *Foreign Affairs*, 84 (January/February 2005), 51.