
Detering the Weak

Problems and Prospects

In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)

James J. Wirtz

Fall 2012



Security Studies Center

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Thérèse Delpech (1948 – 2012)

Thérèse Delpech passed away on January 18, 2012. As Director of Strategic Affairs of the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), Thérèse was instrumental in promoting and supporting several research programs on proliferation in France and abroad. But for her and her continuous support along the years, the *Proliferation Papers* would not exist. Ifri's Security Studies team is as sad as we are indebted to her, and would like to dedicate the 2012 issues of the *Proliferation Papers* to her memory.

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James J. Wirtz

Proliferation Papers

Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue with the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the weakening of international regimes and the discovery of frauds and traffics, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, Libya until 2004, North Korean and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

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Introduction

Deterrence is a simple concept that is often difficult to put into practice. It involves creating the idea in the mind of the opponent that the gains enjoyed following some action will not outweigh the costs suffered in the wake of a threatened retaliatory blow, or creating the impression in the mind of the opponent that a competitor can deny them their objectives through direct military action. A few conditions must be satisfied before threats, involving both conventional and nuclear weapons, actually deter an opponent from some unwanted endeavor. It is generally agreed that the effectiveness of deterrence is increased if threats are communicated clearly so that the opponent recognizes the “red lines” that will lead to the execution of a deterrent threat.¹ It makes no sense to surprise an opponent with unanticipated retaliation when a clear signal could have deterred unwanted activity in the first place. It also is generally agreed that deterrent threats require a combination of capability and credibility to be effective. In other words, one must have the capability to act on one’s deterrent threats. Hollow gestures or threats that can somehow be circumvented or defeated carry little deterrent value. Deterrence also has to be credible in the sense that opponents must believe that those making deterrent threats will actually execute the threat if defined red lines are crossed. If opponents believe that the party issuing threats lacks the motivation, will, flexibility, or incentive to act on those threats, then deterrence might not appear credible in the mind of the beholder. Assuming that the deterrence target maintains even a tenuous grasp of strategic realities, the more clearly deterrent threats are stated, the more unfettered capability a party possesses to execute the stated threat, and the stronger the incentive to act on the threat should deterrence fail, the greater are the prospects that deterrence will succeed.

Given this conception of deterrence, the ability of strong states to deter weaker competitors should be a foregone conclusion. Several observations support this assertion. The strong often believe that deterrence is a preferred strategy. Powerful states are attracted to

¹ Because deterrence theory is so sophisticated, it is possible to qualify virtually every definitive theoretical statement. For instance, identification of clear “red lines” might invite an opponent to engage in salami tactics – the practice of undertaking limited probes to achieve objective over time without triggering a deterrent response. Other deterrent strategies – French nuclear doctrine might be a case in point – embrace more ambiguity when it comes to defining vital interests in the hopes of inducing uncertainty and more caution in the target, thereby enhancing the general effectiveness and impact of deterrence. The choice of how to state deterrent threats in practice thus reflects an assessment of the type of risks one is willing to take in relying on deterrence as a defense strategy.

deterrence because they would rather threaten to use their superior military capability to deter war than engage opponents on the battlefield. Deterrence is a cost effective way to use superior military capability to prevent conflict before it starts. It prevents the outbreak of “unnecessary wars,” conflicts that will be decided in favor of the stronger party but at some cost. Strong states embrace deterrence as a strategy against weaker competitors, and can be expected to take some care in crafting and communicating deterrent threats. Strong states have strategic incentives to embrace deterrence as a strategy and they possess the capability to make good on deterrent threats.

The difference in military capability between the strong and weak also becomes increasingly easy to perceive as the gap in capability grows. When disparities in capability are significant, both powers in a potential conflict generally share an accurate perception of those disparities. Under these conditions, one would expect that deterrent threats would be easily communicated by the stronger party and easily understood and recognized by the weaker party. Deterrent threats made by strong states against weaker competitors should be inherently credible, *ceteris paribus*, because they strong have the capability to make good on their threats. In other words, the structural conditions needed for deterrence to succeed – i.e., there is little doubt in the mind of the targeted state that the stronger power can make good on its deterrent threats – exist in conflicts between strong and weak states. In the words of Geoffrey Blainey, “Any factor which increases the likelihood that nations will agree on their relative power is a potential cause of peace.”² Deterrence should work in these circumstances because an assessment of the nuclear and conventional military balance often leads the weak to recognize they are challenging a stronger state, and such challenges could lead to wars of attrition that the weak are destined to lose.

In a general way, the military balance between strong and weak states should also foster conditions for deterrence success. Because little in the military balance should create a sense of optimism in the minds of the leaders of the weaker state, they should refrain from challenging stronger states.³ Provocative behavior not only could lead to the execution of deterrent threats on the part of the stronger state, it could foster the outbreak of a wider conflict that threatens the very existence of the weak state’s regime. When disparities of power are significant, deterrence failure can create an existential threat to the weak state. Once again, under these circumstances, it makes little sense for weak states to challenge strong competitors because no matter what gains are expected from aggression, they are outweighed by the potential cost of challenging superior opponents.

Events, however, often fail to conform to the expectations of deterrence theory. Weak states challenge superior adversaries; deterrence

² Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, New York, The Free Press, 1973, p. 274.

³ According to Blainey, “Wars usually begin when two nations disagree on their relative strength, and wars usually cease when the fighting nationals agree on their relative strength,” *Ibid.* p. 172.

failure is actually rather common in conflicts involving strong and weak states. In fact, deterrence often fails catastrophically, punctuated by some sort of action that presents the stronger power with a *fait accompli* or localized military defeat. Compellence, the effort to use threats to force a state to cease unwanted activity, also fares equally badly, sometimes in ways that are difficult to fathom. Saddam Hussein thumbed his nose at a global coalition when he ignored demands to withdraw from Kuwait. Slobodan Milosevich ignored calls to comply with international demands even though North Atlantic Treaty Organization aircraft carried out unimpeded counter-force and counter-value air strikes over Serbian territory. Although compellence is more difficult than deterrence and extended conventional deterrence can raise issues of credibility,⁴ the fact that both of these leaders undertook actions that were bound to pit them against the interests of states and international coalitions that possessed overwhelming military and financial resources seems to make a mockery of the very tenants of deterrence. Deterrence of the weak by the strong is not as easy in practice as it is in theory.

This paper explores the reasons why strong states often fail to deter vastly weaker competitors, and identifies factors that can increase the prospects that deterrence will succeed in these situations. The logic outlined here is applicable to deterrence involving conventional and nuclear weapons, or deterrence involving vital national interests or extended deterrence threats. It is applicable when potential conflicts involve states with significant disparities in nuclear and conventional military capabilities and becomes less theoretically and empirically relevant as states embroiled in a nascent dispute are more evenly matched in military capability. Deterrence fails between strong and weak powers not because the weaker party miscalculates the military balance or fails to perceive the existence of deterrent threats, but because of a perception that it is possible to circumvent deterrence. This perception, in turn, is often rooted in strategic, political and social factors that the leaders of weak states believe they can manipulate to their advantage. Deterrence fails because the weak believe that the strong will not be able to bring their superior military capability to bear in an effective way, not because they no longer believe that they are significantly weaker than their potential competitor. By contrast, the strong fail to recognize that weaker opponents have somehow discounted their superior military capabilities and have come to believe that they can neutralize or circumvent deterrent threats. In other words, the logic presented here describes a paradox that may lead to deterrence failure even when a challenger recognizes that they are the weaker party in a conflict and that defender possesses vastly superior military capability and has made deterrent threats to maintain the status quo.

To illustrate these points, the paper will describe the strategic, political and social factors that lead to sources of optimism on the part of the weak when it comes to circumventing deterrent threats issued by the

⁴ On way compellence is more demanding than deterrence see Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 29-35, and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1966, p. 100.

strong. It then identifies several considerations that should govern the behavior of stronger powers as they contemplate efforts to deter weaker competitors. The strong can deter the weak, but the effort is facilitated by an awareness of how deterrence can fail.

The Optimism of the Weak

In surveying three hundred years of history related to the outbreak of war, Blainey noted that optimism about wars' outcomes generally characterized the attitude of both sides contemplating conflict.⁵ In other words, states become involved in wars that they believe they can win at a reasonable cost. The unforgiving venue of war tempers that initial optimism, leading to a reassessment of the relative utility of diplomacy when it comes to achieving national objectives. What is perplexing about the effort of the strong to deter the weak, however, is the fact that the weak should find little reason for optimism when it comes to crossing deterrent "red lines" or generally antagonizing or provoking stronger opponents. Deterrence should succeed and war should not occur because the weak should find it difficult to imagine how they can defeat stronger opponents.

Nevertheless, three sources of optimism often animate thinking when the weak challenge the strong. First, leaders in weaker states sometimes believe that they can capitalize on strategic surprise to circumvent deterrent threats, presenting stronger opponents with a *fait accompli* that cannot be easily overturned. Second, they sometimes believe that they can capitalize on an international political setting or on the domestic politics of stronger powers that will prevent the stronger power from actually executing a deterrent threat or, if executed, will prevent the stronger actor from bringing the full force of its military power to bear against the weaker opponent. Third, weak actors can come to believe that moral or political constraints, arising from international or domestic public opinion, that emerges in the course of some provocation will restrain the strong, especially if threatened retaliation seems out of proportion or misdirected against innocent bystanders. In other words, the weak come to believe that eruption of violence itself will force the stronger party to reassess the utility of the use of force in general, or the execution of specific deterrent threats. Equally perplexing is the fact that the leaders of strong states often fail to recognize these sources of weak state optimism until it is too late, at the point when deterrence actually fails. The strong believe in deterrence as a strategy and in the efficacy of their deterrent threats, which helps explain why they are slow to recognize the circumstances when deterrence is likely to fail.

Strategic Optimism: The Problem of Surprise Attack

Michael Handel, a leading student of strategic surprise, noted that weaker states were often attracted to strategic surprise as an option when they

⁵ Blainey, *The Causes of War*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

contemplated challenging stronger opponents.⁶ Although Handel failed to trace out the logic inherent in this observation, this phenomenon is linked to the strategic path of deterrence failure. The link between weak state optimism, strategic surprise and deterrence failure is in fact explained by the theory of surprise.⁷ Strategic surprise suspends war's dialectic and removes an active opponent from the battlefield. Surprise transforms war into an act of administration, allowing the weaker opponent to achieve objectives that are literally impossible to attain when facing a fully prepared and engaged opponent.⁸ Strategic surprise is often a key component of what is known as "asymmetric warfare," because it creates a situation whereby the use of minimal resources can produce an overwhelming strategic and political effect. In a potential conflict, the weaker party is attracted to surprise because it allows them to achieve objectives that they cannot realistically achieve in a war against a vastly stronger competitor. Operations that rely on strategic surprise are extraordinarily risky because they will fail catastrophically if surprise is not achieved or if the effects of surprise "wear off" before objectives are reached. But when they succeed, they can produce spectacular results. Relying on strategic surprise, for instance, the Imperial Japanese Navy was able to destroy a large portion of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at its anchorage at Pearl Harbor at the cost of a few midget submarines, under 40 aircraft and about one hundred personnel.⁹ Al-Qaeda was able to destroy the World Trade Center with the aid of box cutters and mace in about two hours at the cost of a few hundred thousand dollars and about twenty personnel.¹⁰ Surprise allows actors to achieve objectives or accomplish operations that could not be undertaken in the face of a vastly superior active opponent.

The opportunities created by strategic surprise have a mesmerizing effect on the weaker party. Enormous amounts of effort and planning are invested in some gambit that is a true masterpiece of operational art, tactical brilliance or brashness, not to mention nerves of steel. Less effort is made, however, to devise a way for surprise or a *fait accompli* to be integrated into an overall strategy to overcome a stronger opponent. In attacking Pearl Harbor, for instance, Japanese officials believed that Americans would not think that it was worth the price in blood and treasure to reverse Japanese gains in the Pacific. They expected that they would reach some sort of compromise peace with Washington. Before occupying Kuwait, Saddam Hussein told the American Ambassador to Iraq that the

⁶ Michael Handel, "Crisis and Surprise in Three Arab-Israeli Wars," in Klaus Knorr and Patrick Morgan (eds.) *Strategic Military Surprise*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1983, p. 113.

⁷ James J. Wirtz, "Theory of Surprise," in Richard K. Betts and Thomas G. Mahnken (eds.) *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Michael I. Handel*, London, Frank Cass, 2003, pp. 101-116.

⁸ According to Edward Luttwak, "Without a reacting enemy, or rather to the extent and degree that surprise is achieved, the conduct of war becomes mere administration." See Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 8.

⁹ Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1962.

¹⁰ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, New York, Norton, 2004.

West in general and the United States in particular did not have the stomach for a bloody fight to counter Iraqi ambitions in the region. After U.S. opposition to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was obvious, Saddam still believed that American casualty aversion would lead the George Bush administration to reach a compromise settlement.¹¹ When multiple confidants warned Nikita Khrushchev, that the United States would react vigorously when it detected Soviet medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba, the Soviet leader reassured them that the Americans would simply learn to live with nuclear deployments close to their shores.¹² When Pakistani officials decided to occupy Indian-army positions that were temporarily abandoned due to the incredibly harsh winter conditions near the Siachen Glacier, they failed to think through what might happen when Indian military patrols discovered them.¹³ Islamabad apparently believed that the crisis would somehow turn out to its benefit. They believed that Indian officials would agree to negotiations under international pressure to avert escalation.¹⁴ In all of these situations, the weaker party recognized that it had attacked or provoked a stronger opponent. Nevertheless, they also all chose to believe that the stronger party would *choose* not to bring their superior forces to bear to reverse a *fait accompli*.

Stronger parties that rely on deterrent threats against weaker opponents are vulnerable to strategic surprise because they tend to focus on their superior capabilities when it comes to deterring weaker adversaries. Their military superiority and the strength of their deterrent threats shape their perception of the outside world. From their perspective, it makes little sense for inferior opponents to challenge them because they lack the military capability to achieve their objectives *in wartime*. As a result, they find it difficult to anticipate how weaker opponents might come to believe that they can challenge stronger competitors in a significant way. In the minds of leaders of strong states, deterrence is robust because the outcomes of plausible conflicts appear to be decidedly in their favor. In hindsight, the strong often appear to be complacent in the face of a potential threat; nevertheless, they perceive *ex ante* that their deterrent is virtually impossible to circumvent.

¹¹ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 52, 236.

¹² When Polish Communist leader Wladyslaw Gomulka learned during the summer of 1962 that Khrushchev planned to present the United States with a nuclear *fait accompli* in Cuba, he warned the Soviet leader that Washington would never simply ignore such a challenge. "Khrushchev assured him," according to Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, "that all would turn out well. He told Gomulka the story of a poor Russian farmer who lacked the money to buy firewood for the winter. He moved his goat into his hut to provide warmth. The goat was incredibly rank but the man learned to live with the smell." Kennedy would learn to accept the smell of the missiles." Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, *We all Lost the Cold War*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 77.

¹³ James J. Wirtz and Surinder Rana, "Surprise at the Top of the World: India's Systemic and Intelligence Failure," in Peter R. Lavoy (ed.) *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 217.

¹⁴ John H. Gill, "Military Operations in the Kargil Conflict," in Peter R. Lavoy (ed.) *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 92-129.

When confronted with signals of a brewing surprise attack, intelligence analysts and officials in strong states tend to dismiss these indications as too hare-brained or far-fetched to be taken seriously. Prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War, for instance, Israeli intelligence analysts and defense officials refused to believe that their deterrent was about to fail because in their minds, Egypt lacked the military capability to defeat Israel. For Israelis, it made “no sense” for a weaker opponent to launch a surprise attack, thereby starting a war that they were doomed to lose.¹⁵ As a result, Israeli officers and officials failed to respond to several clear indications that deterrence was failing and that they were about to be attacked. Surprise often succeeds, and deterrence failures occur, because the strong fail to understand that the weak have imagined ways to achieve their objectives without having to confront directly the military capability of the strong.

When evidence emerges that deterrent postures might be challenged, strong states tend to take steps to highlight their military superiority. In the wake of Japanese aggression in the Pacific, the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, over protests from U.S. Navy officers, forward-deployed the U.S. Pacific Fleet to Pearl Harbor in an effort to increase the salience of its military capability in the minds of Japanese officials. Although U.S. Navy officers believed that the move increased the vulnerability of the Fleet, the Roosevelt administration apparently believed that moving the ships would deter further Japanese aggression by increasing the visibility of American military might. Ironically, the Japanese were undeterred by this show of strength and capitalized on the opportunity to destroy the U.S. fleet.¹⁶

Strategic surprise and the failure of deterrence relationships between the strong and the weak are clearly linked in the history of international crises and the outbreak of war. The weak become captivated by the possibilities created by some surprise military initiative, which in their minds will allow them to present the stronger power with a *fait accompli* that will effectively nullify a deterrent threat. The weak believe that a *fait accompli* makes both conventional and nuclear deterrence irrelevant, because it presents the stronger opponent with strategic failure before it can bring its superior force to bear. In the minds of the weak, deterrence failure transforms the conflict into a test of who is willing to engage in an attritional struggle to reverse the status quo. The weak believe, and are in fact banking on the fact, that the strong will fail that test. The strong, by contrast, focus on their obvious military superiority and the inherent

¹⁵ Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and its Sources*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2005.

¹⁶ Navy officers wanted the Pacific fleet to return to the West Coast to prepare for war and believed that the lack of facilities at Pearl Harbor made forward deployment a hollow deterrent that only served to give the American public a false sense of confidence in U.S. defenses in the Pacific. When its commander, Admiral J.O. Richardson, failed to convince his superiors to reposition the fleet in California, he penned a message to President Franklin D. Roosevelt that led to his relief: “The senior officers of the Navy do not have the trust and confidence in the civilian leadership of this country that is essential for a successful prosecution of a war in the Pacific,” see George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890-1990*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 151.

credibility of their deterrent posture. They remain strangely unmoved by indications that deterrence is failing because they find it incredible that the weaker party would intentionally initiate a conflict that they realistically cannot hope to win. The ultimate and dangerous irony involved in the relationship between strategic surprise and deterrence failure is that the initial estimates of both the strong and the weak are validated by ensuing events. The weak often manage to present the strong with a *fait accompli*, while the strong often emerge victorious following the failure of deterrence to keep the peace. In the history of international relations, the term “strategic surprise” generally corresponds to the failure of the strong to deter the weak.¹⁷

Political Optimism: The Balance of Power Paradox

“If the strong won’t fight, and the weak can’t win, why is there war?” is a question that captures the essence of the “Balance of Power Paradox.”¹⁸ The paradox emerges from an important indeterminate prediction of international outcomes contained in Kenneth Waltz’s *Theory of International Politics*.¹⁹ According to Waltz, in a bi-polar setting, the superpowers should have sought to avoid becoming embroiled in peripheral conflicts because those would have constituted a dangerous and destructive sideshow that served as a distraction from the significant threat they faced, namely the *other* superpower. In 1967, for instance, Waltz explained his opposition to U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia:

“Two states that enjoy wide margins of power over other states need worry little about changes that occur among the latter... Because no realignment of national power in Vietnam could in itself affect the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union – or even noticeably alter the imbalance of

¹⁷ Although it is difficult to make theory always conform to the procrustean bed of history, Nazi behavior at the outset of World War II in Europe generally fits the pattern of behavior outlined here. Hitler was deterred by the prospect of a long war of attrition against the French, British or the Soviets until he was convinced that the operational strategy of Blitzkrieg, which relied on initial and continuous surprise produced by the rapid movement of ground forces, could knock out opponents before they could bring their superior material resources to bear. This would suggest that he in fact did perceive Nazi Germany as the weaker party in the European conflicts that he was contemplating. He believed that surprise, combined with operational innovation and superior execution, could nullify an opponent’s conventional deterrent. The Nazi strategy produced significant initial success but doomed Hitler and his fellow Nazis to defeat in a long-war of attrition against opponents that in fact possessed superior resources. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to address this incident in light of the logic presented here. See John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985.

¹⁸ James J. Wirtz, “The Balance of Power Paradox,” in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (eds) *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 127-149.

¹⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1979.

power between the United States and China – the United States need not have intervened at all.”²⁰

From Waltz’s perspective, the superpowers during the Cold War, and the great powers today, should strive to avoid conflicts on the “periphery.” As a consequence, for the great power, the risks and costs of involvement in peripheral battles generally outweigh the benefits to be gained, especially when the benefits are a common good shared across the international community.

For the weak, the military balance militates against aggressive or disruptive policies because intervention by stronger competitors can lead to disaster. The weak can always engage in a series of minor provocations or “salami tactics” to inch themselves slowly closer to their objectives, but they risk inadvertently crossing important red lines, which would trigger a massive and overwhelming response by a far stronger antagonist. For the weak, an overwhelming imbalance of power creates a situation where the use of military force offers no realistic way to achieve objectives once far stronger opponents are engaged on the battlefield. International history, however, fails to support the intuitive deterrent effect a gross imbalance of power should have on the weak when they face a stronger competitor. Conflicts that the strong should hope to avoid and the weak cannot realistically hope to win populate the pages of diplomatic histories and are the stuff of current headlines. Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz is a case in point. Two phenomena can account for this turn of events.

Although the leaders in weak states understand their inferior position, they believe that because of a variety of more pressing political and strategic reasons, the strong will not be able to bring their full power to bear to interfere with the weak’s initiatives. The leaders of weak states actually accentuate the outcome of Waltz’s cost-benefit calculations about the merits of Superpower intervention in the periphery. They often seem to believe that international and domestic political constraints will prevent Great Powers from intervening effectively in limited wars or responding forcefully to provocations.²¹ As the North Vietnamese began to justify their decision to launch the Tet Offensive, for instance, General Vo Nguyen Giap offered an explanation of why the United States would not be able to bring its superior power to bear to stymie Hanoi’s military effort to unify Vietnam:

“The U.S. imperialists must cope with the national liberation movements [in countries other than South Vietnam], with the socialist bloc, with the American people, and with other

²⁰ Kenneth N. Waltz, “International Structure, National Force and Balance of Power,” in James Rosenau (ed.) *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, New York, The Free Press, 1969, p. 310.

²¹ Pakistan, for instance, might have been banking on the fact that diplomatic pressure, especially pressure exerted by the United States, might have served to moderate a potential Indian military response to the Mumbai attacks. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for referencing this example.

imperialist countries. The U.S. imperialism cannot mobilize all their forces for the war of aggression in Vietnam.”²²

Giap recognized that the United States possessed the military resources needed to end the conflict quickly, but he also believed that it faced competing interests and pressures that would restrain its freedom of action in Vietnam. Similarly, Saddam Hussein believed that “casualty aversion,” a domestic political constraint, would prevent the United States from interfering with his occupation of Kuwait. As the United States and an international coalition increasingly appeared to use force to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait, Saddam apparently believed that Soviet opposition to American intervention would deter U.S. military action in the Middle East.²³ When Moscow, preoccupied with the collapse of its empire, failed to protect its client, Saddam berated the Soviet leadership for failing to act like a Superpower:

“He who represents the Soviet Union must remember that worries and suspicions about the superpower status assumed by the Soviet Union have been crossing the minds of all politicians in the world for some time... Those concerned must choose this critical time and this critical case in order to restore to the Soviet Union its status through adopting a position that is in harmony with all that is just and fair.”²⁴

Both the North Vietnamese and the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad believed that the threat posed by other Great Powers, international political opposition or domestic political restraints, would be sufficient to hold superior U.S. military power at bay.

The balance of power paradox thus sets up a different path to deterrence failure when compared to strategic surprise. Unlike strategic surprise, which creates a *fait accompli* that tends to render existing deterrent threats obsolete, the balance of power paradox helps leaders of weak states to believe that strong states will not be able to execute deterrent threats because of international or domestic constraints that will become highly salient as deterrence begins to fail. Surprise uses military action to render deterrent threats irrelevant by temporarily neutralizing the opportunity of the stronger party to react, while the balance of power paradox shapes the weaker party's perceptions of the stronger party's ability to execute the threat. The balance of power paradox undermines the political credibility of deterrent threats.

²² Vo Nguyen Giap, “The Big Victory, the Great Task,” contained in Patrick McGarvey *Visions of Victory*, Stanford, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, 1969, p. 237.

²³ Hope that the Soviet Union (Russia) would somehow constrain U.S. freedom of action also seemed to influence Saddam Hussein's behavior leading up to the Second Gulf War and Slobodan Milosevich's actions in Kosovo in 1999.

²⁴ Saddam Hussein quoted in Freedman and Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991*, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

The balance of power paradox is also different in the sense that it tends to create situations in which stronger states confront a gradual failure of deterrence or compellence policies. As provocations continue to mount, stronger states often reinforce deterrent threats by restating them or by undertaking demonstrations of power to overcome what they perceive to be a misperception of reality by the leaders of weaker powers. The movement of the U.S. Pacific Fleet to Hawaii in the months preceding Pearl Harbor is a case in point. It had little deterrent effect, however, because the Japanese believed that Washington would soon be pre-occupied by the war in Europe and would not be able to bring all of its military might to bear in the effort to stop Japanese ambitions in the Far East. In the weeks leading up to the First Gulf War, the Bush administration repeatedly attempted to warn Saddam Hussein of the threat he faced if he failed to withdraw his forces from Kuwait. Soviet envoys also attempted to amplify and clarify increasingly specific threats emanating from Washington by informing their counterparts in Baghdad that America possessed overwhelming military power. Restating or reinforcing existing threats cannot overcome the negative effects produced by balance of power paradox, however, because the weaker power believes that political constraints will prevent the stronger power from fully executing its deterrent threats. Ironically, when confronting deterrence failure produced by the balance of power paradox, the stronger party tends to believe that deterrence failure is occurring because the weaker party has somehow miscalculated the military balance. The strong tend to see deterrence failure as stemming from a misperception of capability, not a disagreement over the credibility of the threat. In order to rectify this situation, they engage in activities to demonstrate their military capability, short of an all-out response. In the early 1960s, for instance, U.S. military actions against North Vietnam were intended to highlight the systematic constraints faced by Hanoi, namely military inferiority. Commenting on the results produced by a high-level meeting of Johnson administration officials in April 1965, for instance, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara noted that the United States objective in Vietnam was to break the will of the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies by "depriving them of victory." In other words, U.S. policy was intended to alter Hanoi's apparent misperception of the military balance, thereby reinforcing deterrence and setting the state for a political solution to the conflict. Years later, Maxwell Taylor explained the administration's reasoning:

"In 1965 we knew very little about the Hanoi leaders other than Ho Chi Minh and General Giap and virtually nothing about their individual or collective intentions. We were inclined to assume, however, that they would behave about like the North Koreans and Red Chinese a decade before; that is, they would seek an accommodation with us when the cost of pursuing a losing course became excessive."²⁵

This strategy led to a deliberate policy to escalate American military pressure against the Hanoi regime gradually in an effort to bolster deterrence by highlighting the costs of conflict to the North Vietnamese

²⁵ Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares*, New York, Norton, 1972, p. 401.

leadership. These limited actions, however, tend to reinforce the perceptions of the weaker party who interprets restraint as evidence of the effects of strategic or political constraints. It also creates a situation in which deterrence fails incrementally.

Social Optimism: The Manipulation of the Risk of Death and Destruction in Local Conflicts

Although it might make perfect strategic and political sense for the strong to issue a deterrent threat against the weak to prevent some unwanted action, would it actually be in the interest of the stronger party to carry out that threat in the face of deterrence failure? This question may in fact have to be answered in the negative. The costs of executing deterrent threats may outweigh the potential gains. Thus deterrence can fail because the weak can come to believe that they can alter the incentives faced by the strong in the event of deterrence failure. They can come to believe that ex ante incentives to retaliate may lose their salience when politicians focus on the material and political costs of executing a deterrent threat, or begin to question the relevance of existing military options to reverse a deteriorating position on the ground at “acceptable” costs. Although the strong face an immediate trade-off between the costs of deterrence failure and the costs produced by the long-term erosion of the credibility of their deterrent threats, the weak can come to believe that they can alter this calculus in their favor.

Because the weak face potentially existential threats when confronting vastly superior opponents, they may have already recognized the possibility that they may suffer significant losses in the quest to achieve their objectives. In fact, they may seek to manipulate the risk that significant death and destruction will occur in territory under their control or territory in dispute as a result from their activities in an effort to actually deter the execution of deterrent threats by stronger opponents. In other words, the weak can manipulate the balance of interests that might exist between them and their stronger opponents by creating conditions in which retaliation by stronger powers will lead to widespread mayhem and destruction, especially among civilian populations. The weak may actually seek to create conditions that lead strong powers to see execution of deterrent threats as simply exacerbating an already perilous situation. The weak might gamble that their willingness to suffer death and destruction might exceed a stronger power’s willingness to inflict death and destruction to achieve its political objectives. Conflict itself can highlight the asymmetry of interests that might exist between weak and strong powers, reducing the stronger party’s perception of the efficacy behind its use of force or the relevance of executing deterrent threats in the face of a deteriorating situation.

An obvious path to achieve this objective is for the weaker state, or key political, economic or military elements of the weaker party, to somehow hide among innocent local civilians, neighboring third parties, or allies of the stronger state. By creating the impression that victims and victimizers are inseparable, or at least beyond the discrimination of available retaliatory instruments, the stronger party might find itself at a loss

for options that will not exacerbate existing conditions, especially when provocations avoid targeting the homeland of the stronger state. If deterrent threats are executed, they could communicate to all concerned that existing political institutions or the status quo is unworkable, tilting the political balance in favor of the weaker party.

Concerns about the manipulation of material conditions to directly alter political perceptions regarding the relevance and effectiveness of traditional military options is a reoccurring concern among military analysts, particularly in recent decades. “Fourth generation warfare,” is one of the latest terms used to describe the effort to influence outcomes in war through political, not military instruments.²⁶ According to Thomas Hammes, “Fourth generation war uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy’s political decision makers, that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. It is rooted in the fundamental precept that superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power.”²⁷ Fourth generation warriors are not focused on defeating superior military opponents on some battlefield. Instead, they focus on using civil disorder or low-intensity warfare to manipulate social, political and cultural ties to alter local and global political perceptions in their favor. Innovative campaigns are designed to manipulate political perceptions of what is at stake in a given conflict and to create situations that make conventional military operations appear irrelevant or of limited utility. The goal is to create a situation in which the use of superior firepower and intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance capabilities offer few good remedies to local turmoil. Under these circumstances, execution of advertised deterrent threats might be viewed by friend and foe alike as doing little more than exacerbating conflicts and increasing suffering among local civilians or third-party bystanders.

An even more pernicious manifestation of this path to deterrence failure has been described as the “deterrence trap.” In other words, the weaker party might actually seek to provoke a stronger party to retaliate to create death and destruction in the hope of benefiting politically from the chaos that would follow. According to Emanuel Adler:

“In asymmetric conflict situations, which pit nation-states against terrorist networks and other non-state actors, such as insurgent groups and radical revisionist states that support them, deterrence may not only not prevent violence but may actually help foment it. The use of force against the weaker side enhances its social power and the credibility of its performance

²⁶ For a description of how the issues identified by Hammes are in fact a long-standing development in international affairs see James J. Wirtz, “Politics with Guns: A Response to T.X. Hammes’s ‘War evolves into the fourth generation’,” in Terry Terriff, Aaron Karp and Regina Karp (eds.) *Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 47-51.

²⁷ Thomas X. Hammes, “War Evolves into Fourth Generation,” in Terry Terriff, Aaron Karp and Regina Karp (eds.) *Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 42.

in front of domestic and foreign audiences, thus allowing it to win the war of the narratives, gain and maintain the support of the majority of the targeted population in question, delegitimize its enemies, and, ultimately weaken its victims until they are beaten.”²⁸

In a sense, weaker opponents might attempt to “hijack” the military forces of their opponents if they see the eruption of widespread violence and chaos as a means of achieving their goals. Terrorists who embrace purely negative goals or dark millenarian fantasies might also taunt stronger opponents in the hope that promised retaliation might further their objectives by destroying the existing social or political order.²⁹ Under these circumstances, the stronger party faces a dilemma. Because executing deterrent threats can be politically very costly, immediate self-restraint by the stronger party might appear rational, though it comes at the price of generally undermining the future effectiveness of deterrence or deterrent threats directed at other parties.³⁰

How do the strong respond to weaker parties that seek to manipulate the risk of death and destruction? Some simply retaliate. Adler points to the Israeli response to terrorist provocations. Another path would be to place forces on the ground to restore order, either directly or working through third parties. This might have been the path taken by the United States in dealing with the disorder that followed the defeat of Iraq in the Second Gulf war as various parties in the country attempted to use violence and disorder to achieve their objectives. Regardless of the response, deterrence fails because the weaker party no longer sees the eruption of violence as somehow being diametrically opposed to achieving its objectives. In extreme situations, deterrence fails because the opponent *recognizes* or even *welcomes* the capability and credibility behind the deterrent threat.

²⁸ Emanuel Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era” in T.V. Paul, Patrick Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (eds.) *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 85-86.

²⁹ S. Paul Kapur, “Deterring Nuclear Terrorists,” in T.V. Paul, Patrick Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (eds.) *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 109-130.

³⁰ Adler, “Complex Deterrence in the Asymmetric-Warfare Era”, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

Responding to the New Complexity

Although the foregoing survey offers a rather dismal appraisal of the prospects for successful deterrence when the strong face weaker opponents, it does lead to three observations that practitioners of deterrence should keep in mind when it comes to keeping weaker opponents at bay. Each of these observations is linked to a specific source of weak state optimism when it comes to their assessment of their ability to circumvent the deterrent threats made by stronger antagonists. Because the path to deterrence failure is different depending on the strategy adopted by leaders of weak states, the strong have to be aware that their strategies can also fail for different reasons.

In terms of strategic optimism generated by the opportunities created by surprise attack, the leaders of strong states have to be aware that their deterrent threats are tied to specific strategic contexts. Because strategic surprise can present the strong with a *fait accompli*, deterrent threats can be rendered irrelevant quickly. The capability and will of the strong remain unscathed, but the circumstances needed for deterrence to be effective no longer exist. Surprise changes the context in which deterrent threats were issued and it leaves the strong with few desirable options. The strong can live with the *fait accompli*, engage in a demanding compellence strategy to force the weaker party to give up their new gains, or simply take concerted military action to restore the status quo. The history of surprise attack suggests that the weak are banking on the hope that the strong will choose the first option.

The history of surprise attack also suggests that it is difficult for the strong to detect this impending deterrence failure.³¹ In part, this might be because deterrence remains robust, and continues to appear robust, until it fails quickly and catastrophically. It behooves the weaker party not to alarm the stronger party by acting provocatively or seeking limited objectives

³¹ Although the problem of strategic surprise, intelligence failure and the failure of deterrence are linked in practice, scholars tend to study each subject separately. This is regrettable because the act of embracing deterrence as a response to a potential challenger could in fact weaken analysts and policymaker's ability to recognize indications that they face an imminent threat to their preferred strategy. For an analysis that traces the organizational and perceptual problems that prevents this sort of net assessment see James J. Wirtz, review of special issue of *International Journal of Intelligence and National Security*, H-Diplo ISSF Roundtable, Volume III, No. 6, 2011.

because these can alert the opponent, which might curtail the opportunity to benefit from surprise. The strong also contribute to strategic surprise by taking steps to simply strengthen existing deterrent threats without reassessing the possibility that the weak intend to alter the strategic context without altering the fundamental military balance between the weak and the strong. To block the path to deterrence failure created by strategic optimism, the strong might be better served by not relying on static threats, capabilities and infrastructure. By posing a threat that remains static or narrow, the strong give the weak the time and opportunity to devise schemes to alter the strategic setting in ways that can circumvent what appear to be relatively robust capabilities. Instead, it might be better to confront weaker opponents with a changing problem. For instance, day alert postures could be altered in a random manner, making deterrent or war-fighting forces less vulnerable to pre-emptive attack. Operating plans and forces also should evidence ongoing change and evolution, making them less susceptible to long-term study in the effort to identify potential vulnerabilities. New weapons systems and strategies might also be introduced to continuously improve the material and strategic basis of deterrent threats. Increasing the redundancy across command and control systems combined with improving the resilience of operational forces can also make deterrent strategies appear less vulnerable to surprise attack.

In terms of political optimism produced by the balance of power paradox, the strong face a more gradual failure of deterrence. Here gradual escalation of military action on the part of the strong tends to confirm the weaker party's optimism that domestic or international constraints will in the end prevent the strong from bringing the full weight of their military capability to bear. Under these circumstances, the strong must fight their tendency to believe that the weak are acting on the basis of some sort of misperception of the military balance. Instead, they need to assess why their weaker opponents might believe that political considerations will prevent them from executing fully deterrent threats. If this occurs, the strong would be better served by initiatives directed toward increasing their freedom of maneuver and not by actions that seek to more strongly communicate existing deterrent threats. The strong need to inventory their own political situation to determine if events are conspiring to create the impression that their ability to act on their threats is waning. Political optimism flows from the perception that politics will conspire to prevent the execution of deterrent threats. In that sense, the strong need to strengthen their political, not their military, position to defeat the more damaging manifestations of the balance of power paradox.

Social optimism is created by the perception that the balance of interests and the actual outbreak of violence actually favor the weaker party. It is based on the notion that the execution of deterrent threats will actually damage the stronger party's interests by contributing to an already dangerous and destructive situation or that the execution of deterrent threats will be out of proportion to the interests at stake for the stronger antagonist. Under these circumstances, developing a menu of options that directly threaten the interests or leadership of the weaker side without threatening civilians or parties not directly embroiled in the conflict can strengthen deterrence. In the words of Michel Fortmann and Stephanie Von

Hlatky, the highly discriminate weapons created by the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) “might become the basis of a new age of deterrence, because precision-guided warfare can be less destructive than nuclear war. RMA deterrent threats are credible because if deterrence fails, policymakers... are likely to make good on their threats.”³² By developing precise military options that pose little risk of creating widespread death and destruction, the credibility of deterrent threats can be strengthened in the mind of the opponent. In this situation, the effectiveness of deterrence is less likely to be altered by the assessment that the stronger opponent cannot achieve its objectives without generating widespread death and destruction. Instead, deterrence is more likely to be strengthened by the perception that policymakers will actually act on their deterrent threats because they pose a politically and militarily effective response without the risk of widespread collateral damage.

³² Michel Fortmann and Stephanie Von Hlatky, “The Revolution in Military Affairs: Impact of Emerging Technologies on Deterrence,” in T.V Paul, Patrick Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (eds.) *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, p. 317.

Conclusion

From a systemic perspective, recent history supports the way that deterrence of the weak by the strong is depicted in this analysis. During the Cold War, for instance, deterrence became more stable as the Soviet Union and the United States approached a rough parity in their nuclear deterrent forces, leading to a situation of Mutual Assured Destruction. In other words, when optimism about a positive war outcome faded from both Soviet and American strategic calculations, both sides became reticent about challenging the status quo. Crises and provocative behavior waned as stability, defined as the absence of Great Power War, became the order of the day.³³ In fact, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the most dangerous confrontation of the Cold War, occurred when the weaker party attempted to present the stronger party with a *fait accompli* that was intended to alter the military balance quickly to circumvent existing deterrent threats. Nikita Khrushchev believed that the John F. Kennedy administration would simply accept the abrupt alteration of the nuclear balance,³⁴ a gamble that quickly came to be perceived by all concerned as a discernible path to nuclear war.³⁵ This sort of thinking is a common thread in the type of optimism created by strategic surprise. By altering the context of existing deterrent relationships, the weak hope to escape the execution of deterrent threats.

Other scholars have noted that the logic inherent in the effort of the strong to deter the weak is alive and well in today's strategic setting, although it is often ignored by scholars and policymakers alike. Thomas Christensen has noted that there is a peculiar twist in the ongoing debate about the "Rise of China." Whether or not scholars depict China's rise as relatively benign, resulting in a prosperous and increasingly democratic status quo state, or more sinister, leading to an increase in military rivalry and tension in Asia, both sides in the debate seem to accept the premise that Beijing would never confront the United States until it achieves conventional and nuclear parity with Washington. Instead, Christensen suggests that it is more likely that Chinese leaders, acting out of perceptions of their own weakness, might search for methods to distract, deter or bloody the United States in an effort to achieve some immediate objective. What is particularly disturbing, in Christensen's view, is that the thinking emerging in China is eerily similar to Japanese strategy on the eve

³³ Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis: Revised to Include New Revelations from Soviet & Cuban Sources*, Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1989, p. 15.

³⁵ James Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Savage, Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

of Pearl Harbor: a casualty-averse or financially strapped United States will seek a negotiated settlement following some military setback.³⁶ It is in fact easy to devise such a scenario. By launching a limited attack against U.S. military bases on Guam, Pearl Harbor, Japan or San Diego, or a quick cyber or space campaign to temporarily curtail U.S. information dominance, the People's Liberation Army might be able to separate Taiwan from U.S. military support long enough to alter the political status quo on the island. Given the emergence of a *fait accompli* produced by strategic surprise, would U.S. officials, despite the fact that they still enjoy a superior military position, be willing to execute deterrent threats given new strategic and political realities in Asia?

Globalization and the information revolution remain fixtures of international politics, linking developments in foreign lands with everyone's domestic politics. The opportunity to involve innocent civilians and third parties in localized conflicts is only increasing. Under these circumstances, conventional military responses to civil disturbances, acts of terrorism or social movements might in fact appear to observers as out of proportion to the interests at stake. Deterrent strategies thus have to become more finely crafted with an eye on shaping the domestic and international political and strategic situation while threatening minimal amounts of death and destruction in the event of deterrence failure. Unlike the Cold War when the ability to inflict catastrophic societal damage under any circumstance created the basis of deterrence, the credibility of deterrence today seems to rest on the availability of militarily effective and politically acceptable uses of force. In the age of globalization, the credibility of deterrence increases as the amount of force used in deterrence threats to deny the weaker opponent its objectives decreases.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the opportunities for the weak to sidestep deterrence by the strong are growing, especially when it comes to manipulating the incentives for the strong to actually execute their deterrent threats. The key to reversing this trend also does not lie solely in the realm of military capabilities. Instead, the leaders of strong states that rely on deterrence need to keep three notions in mind. They must be alert to the possibility that strategic surprise can eliminate the context for effective deterrence. They must be alert to the possibility that their response to limited provocations can actually undermine their overall deterrence posture. They also must be alert to the fact that their deterrence strategies need to minimize the potential for death and destruction while still denying their weaker opponents the opportunity to achieve their objectives.

³⁶ Thomas Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy", *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 4, Spring 2001, pp. 5-40.

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