Policy Brief

Rethinking Deterrence: Adapting an Old Concept to New Challenges

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In Brief: Russia's aggressive moves have revived the Cold War concept of deterrence, a military strategy, using military threat and military means. Successful deterrence relies on rationality and the mutual understanding of one another's goals and intentions. However, the potential for misinterpretation is great, especially in times of crisis. NATO states must determine how they can deter hostile state and non-state actors from destabilizing Europe through military and non-military means. In the military realm, the central challenge is to assure credibility and define the nuclear dimension. Civilian tools also need to be developed and support from the population needs to be secured. Resilience is the new deterrence. Precautionary measures have to be set up; prevention and risk management thus become central tasks. But in the long run, deterrence alone is unlikely to assure lasting peace and stability; it requires the complement of dialogue.

Russia's aggressive moves have returned military power politics to the European continent. This has revived the Cold War concept of deterrence, which will be the focus of the 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit. However, discussions on increasing the number of rotational forces in Eastern Europe are only ad hoc measures that address islands of a deterrence policy, at best. Much broader conceptual work on deterrence is needed. How can deterrence work in a world in which security is much more than a military matter? In fact, it can work, but only if the psychological-cognitive dimension of deterrence is understood, and effectively utilized. The trick remains as ever to convince one's adversary that it is futile to try to use force in the pursuit of his interests, even if it is no longer (mainly) about tanks and nukes.

How Deterrence Works

Deterrence is a military strategy, using military threat and military means. Opponents are deterred from attacking by the threat of forceful retaliation and demonstrated military readiness. Cold War deterrence relied on conventional capacities, but also on nuclear arsenals as the "absolute weapon" to deter potential opponents from engaging in a military conflict, as nuclear wars cannot be won. One's own military potential is demonstrated to convince the

opponent that the costs of an attack outweigh the benefits. The adversary must conclude that it cannot achieve the desired results by employing its military or that the costs would be too high, and will therefore forgo attack. Deterrence can work by denial, namely eliminating the opponents' prospects of achieving their goals, or by punishment, that is, an intimidating military retaliation in the case of an attack. Deterrence is thus a strategy to prevent war, and one that works primarily psychologically. It gives the opponent the choice, while pointing out the costs a certain decision may imply.

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Successful deterrence relies on rationality and the mutual understanding of one another's goals and intentions. As long as all parties follow a rational cost-benefit analysis, deterrence, or the package of capability, communication, and credibility, can keep opponents from attacking. However, the potential for misinterpretation is great, especially in times of crisis. The acquisition of a new generation of weapons, for instance, may be intended as a deterrent action, but it can easily be interpreted as a sign of aggression (as preparation for an invasion) and consequently provoke a preemptive strike. This is the classical security dilemma: everyone attempts to produce more security for themselves, which paradoxically leads to less security for all, because actions by the other party are seen as a threat and provoke counter steps.

History has shown that deterrence can fail. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the

Argentinean attack on the Falkland Islands in 1982 are examples. In both cases, a militarily weaker actor attacked a stronger opponent. This can have several possible reasons: the credibility of deterrence may have been in doubt, or domestic political considerations and misjudgments may have been the cause. In the case of the Falklands, it was a credibility problem. Britain pronounced its claim to the islands, but inadvertently sent out a signal that it had no wish to fight over the islands when it withdrew the only British navy ship in the South Atlantic and Antarctic, the *HMS Endurance*. This put London's political rhetoric at odds with military reality. Motivated by domestic considerations, and believing that Britain would not fight for such far away territories, Argentina invaded the Falklands in April 1982 in an attempt to establish the sovereignty it had claimed over them, despite knowing that Britain was much stronger militarily. Britain eventually reconquered the Falklands, but not easily. In the case of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Tokyo seemed to have misjudged its opponent and initiated a pre-emptive attack thinking that the surprise would give them a decisive advantage.

New Conditions, Old Deterrence?

Russian policies have reintroduced military means as the core of its foreign policy, which has led others, particularly governments in Central and Eastern Europe, to reassert the importance of deterrence. For most of them, the measures decided on at the Wales Summit in 2014, while reassuring, are not enough to deter Russia from conventional, nuclear, or hybrid aggressions.

However, the new call for old deterrence is debatable. At NATO's southern flank, the greatest threats are instability, terrorism, and fragile states. Threats also emanate from non-state or state-like actors, i.e. terrorist groups such as the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS). For these challenges against these enemies, traditional deterrence hardly works. Current threats, from both Russia and ISIS, make alarming

use of non-military components such as propaganda, cyber-activities, and economic pressure. These civilian tools allow the aggressors to escalate a conflict in non-military areas and in a manner that remains below the threshold of the military violence that would prompt NATO to react. Though not completely novel, the scope and intensity of these actions and the new technological means enabling it have caught Western Europe wrong footed and challenge their policies.

Yet, while current crises raise doubts about the importance of military power, they — quite ironically — also underline its significance. The Ukraine crisis and ISIS are examples that organized violence in different forms and through different actors is a core element of the ongoing changes to global and regional orders that also affect Europe. NATO states may be reluctant to use force, but other actors are not.

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Leitmotivs for a New Approach

NATO states must determine how they can deter hostile state and non-state actors from destabilizing Europe through military and non-military means. States need to protect both territorial integrity and the social, political, and technical fabric of their societies.

The military alone is not enough. If the goal is to deter unwanted actions, then every means that can contribute to that goal is a possible form of deterrence. Military retaliation is not a credible or suitable response to every action. A broader framework will help identify other forms or methods of deterrence.

It is tempting to succumb to the path dependency of old debates, and thereby think only about old tools. Instead we must impartially analyze the strengths and weaknesses of deterrence as a policy for each case at hand. Is a specific form of deterrence helpful or not? Does it escalate the conflict, or does it offer protection by locking up resources that are needed elsewhere?

Keeping this in mind, NATO Allies should consider both non-military and military measures to successfully adapt deterrence to the current challenges.

Military Deterrence

In the military realm, the central challenge is to assure credibility and define the nuclear dimension.

Assure Credibility
Military deterrence only works if there are no doubts about one's interests and objectives, and if these interests seem greater than those of the opponent. It is credible only if it has full political and military backing and if all parties involved believe that weapons will be used if necessary.

At the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO decided to focus on military readiness and responsiveness rather than on permanent stationing of troops and equipment in the east. Some allies, including Poland, consider this insufficient. According to other Allies such as France, NATO's nuclear deterrence also offers protection. Yet, this only works if Russia (and the NATO Allies) believes that NATO will actually employ nuclear weapons. On the other hand, neither NATO Allies nor opponents would deem a nuclear threat credible without political support and conventional under-pinning. If NATO wants to protect its members, the political commitment has to be convincing, supported by militarily means, and flanked by a fast and efficient decision-making process within the Alliance.

Redefine the Nuclear Dimension of Deterrence

The nuclear options are — rightly — controversial. However, in view of Russian nuclear saber-rattling, NATO states have been forced to consider what adaptations their own nuclear strategy needs. Despite the sensitivity of the topics, this review needs to continue. The question is not only when and how NATO will react, but also when Russia would consider the threshold for nuclear action to be transgressed — and how the Alliance reacts in that case. Moreover, it is necessary to decide to what extent nuclear tools should become explicitly part of communication, an important element of successful deterrence. Finally the Allies need to better integrate the nuclear component in their defense planning process and decide which role they should play in exercises and training.

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At the same time, a nuclear arms race with Russia is a real risk. The balance is no longer bilateral, but multi-layered, fragile, and more difficult to predict. Any change in NATO nuclear thinking could be interpreted as a signal to invest in one's nuclear arsenal as well, not only by Russia but by many other states with nuclear ambitions or arsenals. Proliferation could increase in several regions, changing regional power balances and rationalities beyond the East-West confrontation we are familiar with. This would create less stable and predictable environments and thus reduce the overall security of NATO countries. This possibility has to be measured against the desired security gains.

Resilience is the New Deterrence

The second component is the non-military realm. Civilian tools need to be developed and support from the population needs to be secured.

A civilian dimension of deterrence is crucial, and it rests on resilience. Since security is more than territorial integrity, deterrence has to encompass broader areas too. NATO states are also vulnerable in non-military spheres. Societies can be destabilized from within through the incitement of minorities or via attacks on technical foundations such as water and electricity infrastructures. An attack or an escalation can be deterred by rendering the civilian structures of Western societies and the societies themselves more resilient, that is, more able to cope with attempts to exploit their vulnerabilities and capable of recovering more quickly from an attack. Put differently: resilience is the new deterrence. Precautionary measures have to be set up; prevention and risk management thus become central tasks. However, the main responsibility for developing resilience lies with individual states and the EU rather than with NATO.

In democratic states especially, support from the population is key to the total effectiveness of deterrence. In some countries, the concept of deterrence appears to be a relic of the Cold War. While it clearly enjoys support in some countries like Poland, it raises suspicion in others like Germany. A government may decide to launch armament projects because it deems them a necessary contribution to a credible deterrence. However, their populations could still reject deterrence measures by criticizing their escalation potential, leaving governments with a difficult choice between reacting to external threats and respecting public opinion. This causes a problem for the Alliance, which needs to be unified to be able to act. Consequently, the individual Allies and the Alliance as such need to invest in explaining deterrence and outlining pro and cons, benefits and risks.

Deterrence Does Not Work Without Dialogue

Even if risks are addressed through resilience and deterrence, security remains the sum of deterrence *and* dialogue. As important as it is, one should not exaggerate the power of deterrence. While it can help to ensure peace for a limited period of time, in the long run, peace by deterrence is bound to fail, mainly through miscalculation or attempts to exploit temporary superiority. In the long run, deterrence alone is unlikely to assure lasting peace and stability; it requires the complement of dialogue. It is hence not enough to reduce NATO states' vulnerabilities and deter attacks. Military deterrence needs to be accompanied by political dialogue. Starting from a basis of military strength, NATO should seek to engage in dialogue and constantly renew these offers, as they can contribute to de-escalation and open a path to a cooperative security order. Since the 1967 Harmel Report, military security and a policy of dialogue have not been understood as a contradiction, but as a necessary complement and intrinsically tied to each other. As a result, the Warsaw Summit should be one that leads to a more coherent approach to deterrence in the 21st century and the role of dialogue as an essential partner to it.

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