



Small State Deterrence in the Contemporary World

by Ian Bowers

Deterrence has returned as a core operational concern in Europe. Yet, it is ill-defined for the 21st century geostrategic environment. In this IFS Insight, Ian Bowers explores what is required for small state deterrence in the contemporary world.

Takeaways

- **The ambiguity of today's threat spectrum undermines traditional deterrence concepts.**
- **The effective communication of capabilities, the setting of red lines and an understanding of what your opponent values are prerequisites for successful deterrence.**
- **Allies play an essential role in the deterrent approach of small states; however, an independent deterrent capability is still vital.**
- **Norway needs to articulate its deterrence posture clearly. Failure to do so will increase the likelihood of deterrence failure.**

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After years in the wilderness, deterrence is again a core component of European defence planning. This is largely due to the strategic and political unpredictability that characterises contemporary global geopolitics. Great power competition has returned, ending the period of relative stability that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. China's rise is challenging the United States' leadership in Asia. While in Europe, Russia is using its limited resources in a manner aimed at weakening the established liberal international order.

At the same time, three of the bulwarks of this order are facing internal political struggles that, for the foreseeable future, may redefine their approach to world affairs. The US, while still the most powerful country in the world, in relative terms is weakening and is increasingly hampered by an inward-oriented and hamstrung political system. The United Kingdom is struggling to understand and manage the political, economic and strategic consequences of the vote to leave the European Union. Finally, geopolitical ambiguity and a lack of confidence now characterise the strategic discourse in NATO.



Small states such as Norway are once again looking to deterrence as a solution to the uncertainty that now defines Europe's geostrategic environment. However, there are reasons to doubt the ability of small states to operationalise an effective deterrence strategy. There is an outstanding question regarding the ability of small states to deter larger ones without the support of an ally or patron. Additionally, given the increasingly ambiguous nature of contemporary warfare, the effectiveness of traditional conventional deterrent approaches for today's strategic environment requires critical examination.

WHAT IS DETERRENCE?

At its most basic, successful deterrence is about preventing war. It is a threat-based approach aimed at convincing an opposing state that aggressive or status quo altering actions would either fail or be so costly as to render them worthless.¹ It is not a long-term strategic solution to a hostile security environment but rather a temporary, dynamic operational posture aimed at buying time to resolve underlying geopolitical problems.²

Under this definition sit two core, but not mutually exclusive, operational deterrent approaches, deterrence by *denial* and deterrence by *punishment*. At the heart of deterrence by denial is the possession of capabilities that can convince an opponent that any attack would be, if not defeated, prolonged and costly in the immediate area of conflict.³ Deterrence by punishment relies on the threat that if an aggressive act occurs, the perpetrating state, even if it may succeed in reaching its objective, will be subject to significant punishment often in areas away from the immediate theatre of conflict.⁴

In an ideal world, a military force will have the force structure and operational capacity to operationalise both approaches. For example, by placing forces in an area of immediate threat the US military can deter by denial. However, it also possesses the power projection assets to threaten an opponent with substantial punishment in

multiple domains should an unwanted act occur.⁵

Traditionally, deterrence by denial is associated with the possession of large conventional forces. The development of precision-guided munitions in conjunction with heightened command, control and surveillance capacities may reduce manning requirements. However, forward-deployed forces that can mobilise and defend areas in danger of attack remain a prerequisite.⁶ Deterrence by punishment does not necessarily require forces pre-deployed to areas of potential danger. Instead, a state seeking to punish with military means must possess offensive power projection capabilities such as strike aircraft, cruise missiles or conventional ballistic missiles.⁷

Alongside these two forms of deterrence sits extended deterrence. Extended deterrence enhances security by ensuring that if a state is attacked, one or more states will assist in defending it. NATO's Article 5 nicely encapsulates this concept. Throughout the Cold War, the interlocking security guarantee provided by NATO contributed to deterring Soviet aggression in the European theatre.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF DETERRENCE

For a state to establish deterrence, it needs deterrence credibility.⁸ The deterring state requires sufficient capabilities – for either deterrence by denial or punishment – and the political will to use these capabilities. The deterring party must clearly communicate both of these conditions to any potential aggressor. It should also openly declare under what conditions and to what extent it will use military force. However, the required level of openness about defence and security is often incompatible with the current political environment. Most states are reluctant to reveal their military capabilities and do not openly discuss against which states and under which conditions they will use such capabilities.

If the deterring actor does not meet these criteria, the likelihood of deterrence failure



increases. Indeed, despite the ubiquity of deterrence in strategic documents across Europe and beyond, the reality is that deterrence is not perfect and often fails.

As a case study in deterrence failure, the 1982 Falklands War highlights the importance of deterrence credibility and communication. In part, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands because they did not believe that the UK had the military capability or the political will to retake them. The UK failed to communicate fully both its resolve and military potency and did not appreciate Buenos Aires' misperceptions and aggressive intent.⁹ These failings severely undermined the deterrent value of the UK's formidable military.

The conflict also demonstrates that the overall balance of military forces is not as important as the local balance of forces. It is often the immediate or imminent presence of capabilities in a contested or vital area that will determine the success or failure of a deterrent strategy.¹⁰ This particularly applies to cases of deterrence by denial or if the deterring party does not possess useable punishment capabilities. The UK is a nuclear power and was superior in terms of conventional capabilities. However, it was unlikely to use its nuclear arsenal in a Falklands scenario and did not have substantial forces deployed in the South Atlantic at the time of the invasion.

Deterrence dynamics, particularly in long-term deterrence relationships, also demand that a deterring state continuously adjusts to the posture of their opponent. This requires flexibility in capabilities, operational concepts and threat perceptions. Such flexibility can be difficult if a state's strategic planning processes are particularly rigid. Additionally, frequently altering defence capabilities in response to the opposition is complex and costly given the long lead-time and large sunk-costs in contemporary weapons systems.

IS DETERRENCE STILL RELEVANT?

Modern understandings of deterrence

developed out of the Cold War when there was an open threat of nuclear war and a Soviet invasion of Western Europe was a credible possibility. Although the deterrent-based nuclear standoff remains, few countries now face the threat of invasion. Instead, state-level threats now occur below the threshold of war and present themselves in multiple domains.

This so-called 'grey zone' threat environment is problematic for strategic planners responsible for the operationalisation of deterrence. This does not mean that deterrence has no value in today's strategic environment. Rather, modified deterrence postures will continue to be a vital policy tool. However, politicians and planners alike should be aware of the utility and limitations of deterrence in the contemporary world.

Russia's annexation of the Crimea, China's acts on the seas of East Asia and North Korea's provocations along the demilitarized zone with South Korea all demonstrate the difficulty of operationalising deterrence in the grey zone.

The primary problem is that a grey zone threat environment makes the use of force as a response to unwanted acts more challenging. This is because such acts are either difficult to attribute, or are not sufficiently aggressive to warrant a military response.

Yet the challenge is surmountable if the political will exists to clearly define red lines – triggers for the escalation of force – and planners are able to calibrate the deployment of capabilities and use of force to the threat.

Russia's annexation of the Crimea, aided by disguised paramilitary and military forces, demonstrated the difficulty of responding to operations that occur below the threshold of war. Yet it may have provided a road map for other states involved in disputes over territorial sovereignty. Similar actions are deterrable if the political will and military capabilities exist to threaten significant escalation beyond what the revisionist force finds acceptable. This requires military forces either in-situ or readily



deployable which can respond immediately to ambiguous intrusion. It also requires the deterring government to be willing to use force if required. Japan is operationalising this kind of deterrence strategy as a response to China's claims over Japanese controlled islands in the East China Sea.

South Korea, in its long deterrent relationship with North Korea, has altered its deterrent strategy in response to repeated provocations, which although violent, have been insufficient to trigger a full-scale war.¹¹ For much of its post-Korean War posture, South Korea has operationalised deterrence by denial. It maintains sufficient capabilities to absorb a North Korean surprise attack, and by delaying such an act, buy time for the arrival of US reinforcements to transition from defence to offence.

Although denial remains at the core of South Korea's deterrence posture, it has now added elements of punishment. If North Korea commits a provocative or violent act, South Korea has vowed to respond with overwhelming and disproportionate force. This response will only target the source of the aggressive act. Importantly, Seoul has clearly communicated the conditions of its punishment response. Such communication increases the likelihood that deterrence will succeed. It also reduces the risk of North Korea confusing a South Korean retaliatory response for an all-out attack.

Cyber warfare is another and particularly apt example of the difficulties of deterrence in the contemporary world. Cyber-attacks are often difficult to immediately attribute, are aimed at both state and private organisations, and the perpetrators can be state-level actors, non-state groups and lone actors.¹² Such ambiguity undermines the clarity that successful deterrence requires and there is an ongoing debate regarding the applicability of deterrence in this increasingly vital domain.¹³

Cyber defences can be effective. However, erecting barriers is not deterrence by denial, as cyber defences do not alone discourage attacks. Instead, the threat of responsive cyber-attacks or even the reactive use of military force may offer the best potential

for deterrence by punishment approaches. However, the linkage between the cyber realm and conventional military responses is currently ill-defined, leaving a potential window in the minds of the attacker. Additionally, offensive cyber capabilities are usually closely guarded secrets. Such secrecy can undermine deterrence as the opponent may not fully understand the consequences of their acts and therefore will be undeterred.

SMALL STATE REALITIES

For small states, deterrence is a challenging approach to operationalise successfully. In a deterrence relationship where one state is significantly smaller than the other, an open question exists whether the smaller state has the capacity, in terms of military power, to deter the larger state. Essentially, if a large state desires something badly enough, they will always have the ability to take it.

However, this is an oversimplification of what are often highly complex deterrent relationships. When the strategic stakes are lower, small states can deter by maintaining the capacity to raise the cost of hostile action or other detrimental acts across domains. Further, small states that are in extended deterrent relationships can adapt their military forces to enhance the deterrent effect of their ally or patron.

The uncertainty that characterises today's geopolitical and geostrategic environment makes small state deterrence even more difficult. During the Cold War, small states such as Norway or Denmark could tailor their deterrent strategies to the singular threat posed by the Soviet Union. In the contemporary world, the threats are more ambiguous and thus deterrent postures must be more reactive and multi-faceted.

The reality that most publics will not support the build-up and maintenance of large military forces means that small states are now investing in smaller but more mobile forces. Supported by substantial, networked air and sea power assets, these capabilities can act as force multipliers and could enact denial and punishment operations. However,



a small state pursuing the latter option must possess sufficient offensive capabilities to convince an aggressor not to undertake aggressive acts. It is often difficult for small states to first generate such capabilities and then sustain them in the event of combat.

For small states, the lack of an overt threat that requires the build-up of large military forces may counter-intuitively raise the risk of deterrence failure in lower-stake, grey zone scenarios. Small, flexible forces may not be sufficient to instil a deterrent effect in opposing actors. Further, for deterrence to be fully effective there needs to be a connection between political rhetoric and military strategy. While politicians must be clear about when and how they will utilise force, smaller states are often unwilling to set such red lines.

To mitigate against the possibility of deterrence failure, small states are re-investing in extended deterrence. In Northern Europe, NATO and non-NATO states are attempting to draw the US closer. They are pursuing this in a number of ways including procuring US equipment, permitting the deployment of US forces on their territory and providing niche, value-added capabilities that can add to US defence. These capabilities include Special Forces and intelligence gathering assets.

However, while extended deterrence may function well in an existential context, the difficulties of interest asymmetry may become apparent when hostile acts are below such a threshold. Small states must face the reality that their primary ally may not provide the expected assistance if it judges that the stakes are not sufficient to risk conflict escalation with another major power. There is a potent deterrent effect in having a powerful ally, but it is not a panacea against the threat of a low-level attack or *fait accompli*.

THE FUTURE OF NORWEGIAN DETERRENCE

The deterrence concepts raised in this IFS Insight pose three fundamental questions for

Norway.

First, what are the threats that Norway faces and under what conditions is the Norwegian government willing to use force? The Norwegian government has been reticent to publicly declare what kinds of threat Oslo is trying to deter and under what conditions it will use military force. By neither openly declaring Russia as the target of deterrence nor highlighting the specific threats that Russia poses, Norway could be undermining its own deterrence posture. During the Cold War, Norway attempted to reassure Russia while also deterring it. This was possible because the threat Russia posed was clear and the deterrence red lines well communicated. While it is understandable that the Norwegian government is attempting to retain amicable ties with Russia, the ambiguity of today's threat environment may require the setting of new red lines across a range of domains if deterrence is to be successful.

Second, how will the introduction of new weapon systems and platforms alter Norway's deterrence posture? New capabilities including the F-35, Joint Strike Missile and potentially the new submarines will change the spectrum of operations the Norwegian military will be able to carry out. In particular, the F-35 will be capable of effective denial operations, but it also gives Norway a potent offensive capability. The extent to which Norway will integrate offensive capabilities into its deterrence posture will be an important element in defining the future of Norway's deterrent relationship with Russia. Ambiguity in this area is potentially dangerous as it may lead to Russian misperceptions regarding Norway's intentions and consequently may undermine the effective operationalisation of deterrence.

The third question that Norwegian defence planners must consider is the deterrent role of the US and other allied forces. By allowing the rotating deployment of US Marines, Norway is bolstering further the possibility of effective extended deterrence. The integration of NATO and other forces into Norwegian deterrence



planning must be tempered by the realisation that third parties may not be an effective deterrent against grey zone threats. Consequently, although developing strong extended deterrence linkages is vital, Norway's military must equally be able to deter and defend independently.

Deterrence is hard, but it can be an applicable approach for Norway. To be effective, it requires effort and constant adjustment to the type and level of threat Norway may face. In the contemporary strategic environment, policymakers and military planners need to have honest and open discussions with the public about the efficacy of deterrent approaches and how they are best operationalised. Finally and most importantly, it is worth remembering that deterrence can buy time, but it is not and should not become a long-term strategic solution to Norway's geostrategic challenges.



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