

THE COLLINS CENTER UPDATE

“Deterrence In The 21st Century”

8-9 December 1999

Special Edition 2

March 2000



U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE
CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA
Professor D. B. Campbell, Director



Website: <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/search>

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By Mr. Larry Blotzer,
Research Analyst/Political-Military Affairs

The Center for Strategic Leadership at the U.S. Army War College conducted a two day Symposium on “Deterrence in the 21st Century.” More than 70 experienced national security practitioners, ambassadors, retired and active duty military officers, congressional aides, and academicians from the United States, Europe, Latin American, and the Middle East participated in the symposium. The purpose of the Symposium was twofold: 1) provide a diverse overview of deterrence policy and the contemporary challenges it faces, and 2) stimulate new thinking on deterrence so that America and her allies will be better able to deter the new 21st Century threats.

• Consensus

Since 1989, the nature of the global security system and the verities that shaped nations’ purposes, policies, and priorities have undergone fundamental changes—Cold War concepts of nuclear deterrence are no longer completely relevant.

In the chaos of the “new world disorder,” the threat of devastating attacks on the U.S., its interests, and its friends perpetrated by the former Soviet Union, China, and

other nuclear powers still retains a certain credibility.

At the same time, the challenges deterrence policy will face now and in the future will intensify with the growing sophistication of biological and chemical war, and cyber war.

The challenges to deterrence policy will be gravely complicated by “non-traditional” threats emanating from rogue states, sub-state and transnational terrorists, insurgents, illegal drug traffickers and other organized criminals, warlords, militant fundamentalists, ethnic cleansers, and anyone else with a cause—and the means to conduct asymmetrical warfare.

This combination of traditional and non-traditional threats to national security and survival in the contemporary global security environment requires a new look and new approaches to more effectively deter the myriad state, non-state, and trans-national nuclear and non-nuclear menaces that have heretofore been ignored or wished away.

Key Points

Symposium participants found that the naiveté of arguing that the U.S. is the only super power in the post-Cold War world—and has nothing

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE MAR 2000		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Collins Center Update "Deterrence In The 21st Century" Special Edition 2				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for Strategic Leadership 650 Wright Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013-5049				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 4	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

to fear from any other global political actor—has provided a false and dangerous comfort with regard to national security.

Nuclear weapons cannot deter all threats, or respond appropriately to all instances in which deterrence fails. As examples, non-state and trans-national actors, and cyber warriors, cannot be bombed away. Dealing with these and other similar problems requires serious “mind-set” changes.

Nevertheless, U.S. nuclear weapons can serve as a hedge against an uncertain future, and reductions in nuclear arsenals could promote instability because smaller countries and even non-state actors motivated by the dual idea of evading and frustrating superior conventional force may find it tempting to develop equivalent arsenals and “parity.”

At the same time, in the new world disorder, nation-states, extreme nationalists, irredentists, ideologues, militant reformers, civil and military bureaucrats, and demagogues of all stripes have at their disposal an awesome array of sophisticated conventional and unconventional weaponry not to dissuade, but to be used—even against their own people. Violence is a normal and accepted way of dealing with problems—changing what needs to be changed or keeping things the way they have always been. Normally, these actors do not pay a whole lot of attention to cost-benefit analyses of their actions.

A multi-polar world, in which one or a hundred actors are exerting differing types and levels of power within a set of cross-cutting alliances, could conceivably be more volatile and dangerous than the previous bipolar situation. Thus, it is incumbent on the U.S. and the rest of the global community to understand and cope with the threats imposed by contemporary actors, think “outside the box,” and replace the old “nuclear theology” with a broad concept of deterrence as it applied to the “Russian Bear, Asian Dragons, and 1,000 Snakes.”

In that context, the deterrence “Rule of Thumb” must move from U.S.-centric values, and determine precisely what a hostile leadership values most—and identify exactly how that cultural “thing”—whatever it is—might be held at risk. Conversely, a new deterrence “Rule of Thumb” must also consider what a hostile leadership values most—and as opposed to the proverbial “stick”—identify precisely what “carrots” might be offered as deterrents.

A successful deterrent policy and strategy must recognize that deterrence may fail. The possibility of failure leads to other requirements. As examples, beyond unilateral U.S. military reaction, there is the idea of enhancing collective security measures; the possibility of going to other already proven security measures, and the concept of developing “new” means of deterrence.

The American belief in the efficacy of technology—bolstered by Persian Gulf War footage of smart weapons unerringly destroying their targets—has fostered two dangerous and faulty perceptions. The first is that wars can be fought without significant loss of life. The second misconception is that high-tech conventional weapons can make nuclear weapons superfluous. Reliance on these approaches to deterrence puts into question U.S. political resolve, and heightens the probability of miscalculating the consequences of U.S. actions.

Discussions of deterrence must also address the relationship with other concepts such as compellence, dissuasion, defense, and denial and how to integrate these concepts into policy, strategy, doctrine, and operations with respect to new and emerging adversaries.

Success in deterrence cannot be reduced to buying more or better military forces, to superior intelligence, to genius in command, or to relative morality. Deterrence can work only if the intended deterree chooses to be deterred. There is no way that any kind of deterrence can be guaranteed. The problem is that deterrence is a dialectic between two independent wills. As a consequence, probably the single most important dimension of deterrence is clarity of communication between deterrer and deterree.

Finally, as we rethink contemporary deterrence, we must not think

of ourselves as much as “war fighters” as “war preventers.”

Conclusions

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of the global security system and the verities that shaped nations’ purposes, policies, and priorities have undergone fundamental changes. Old concepts of security are no longer completely relevant. In this connection, there are powerful internal and external forces that argue that there is no longer any military requirement for the U.S. to sustain a policy of deterrence—say nothing of nuclear deterrence. The consensus of the Symposium participants was strongly opposed to that idea. Participants argued that deterrence—nuclear, conventional, and non-conventional—is as im-

portant as ever. Moreover, participants argued that deterrence policy and the challenges it will face in the 21st Century will intensify with the growing sophistication in biological and chemical war, cyber war, and diverse state, non-state, and transnational political actions. Finally, consensus was that it is imperative to rethink and revitalize deterrence as a viable means to help protect U.S. security, interests, and well being for now and the future.

In elaborating these conclusions, Symposium participants further argued that:

The policy of “containment,” and its nuclear and conventional and non-conventional components, was a classic example of insightful and credible exercise of U.S. and allied power.

In much the same way that “containment” was conceived, philosophical underpinnings must be devised for a new policy to deal with more diverse threats—from unpredictable directions—and by more diverse state and non-state actors.

The “new” deterrence policy that emerges out of this effort must be coherent, unified, and use all the civil and military elements of U.S. national power.

Lastly, there is a clear need to take the discussion of deterrence out of TOP SECRET and highly classified realms and educate decision-makers, policy-makers, opinion-makers, and the American public regarding the realistic requirements for contemporary national security.

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Center for Strategic Leadership
650 Wright Avenue
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