

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

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Comparative Book Review: 21st Century Approaches to Deterrence

ELISE M. VANDER VENNET
COURSE 5605
DOING NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY
SEMINAR J

PROFESSOR
COL JIMMY M. RABON

ADVISOR
COL ROBERT D. ESKRIDGE

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Comparative Book Review: 21st Century Approaches to Deterrence

Keith B. Payne. *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*. (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001. Pp. 225, Notes, Bibliography, Index).

Stephen J. Cimbala, editor. *Deterrence and Nuclear Proliferation in the Twenty-First Century*. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2001. Pp. 185, Notes, Bibliography, Index).

The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review notes that, despite profound changes in the international environment, the concept of deterrence still has relevance for the twenty-first century. However, it must be updated to reflect the new realities of the post-Cold War world, particularly the new actors which the United States may need to deter. While deterrence during the Cold War became nearly synonymous with the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, deterrence in the 21st century must deal with a variety of situations and adversaries, and will involve all kinds of military and other coercive elements, not just strategic nuclear forces. Of particular concern is the emergence of “rogue states” seeking to acquire or develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile delivery systems, as well as the threat of terrorists or other non-state actors acquiring and using WMD. This poses a significantly different challenge for deterrence than did the relatively stable and well-defined Cold War relationship between the superpowers. Two recently published books take up the challenge of thinking about deterrence in this new security environment, and provide a sobering assessment that deterrence will be much more difficult and uncertain than it was during the Cold War.

Discarding Old Frameworks

Keith Payne’s *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* offers a new approach to deterrence, arguing that the Cold War framework, on which current policies are still based, was flawed in its assumption of the predictability of adversary responses to U.S. deterrence threats. Payne further contends that the extension of this mindset into the post-Cold War

environment is particularly dangerous given the greater variety of threats and contexts against which deterrence must operate and the fact that the U.S. is less familiar with the decision-making mechanisms of emerging adversaries than it was with the Soviet Union. Payne therefore proposes a new framework for analyzing potential opponents. He believes that better understanding an adversary's thinking will lead to a more accurate assessment of likely responses to U.S. deterrent threats. This in turn will help policymakers craft more effective deterrent strategies and may help avoid potentially disastrous deterrence failures. Warning that deterrence, by its very essence, will always remain uncertain, Payne also recommends greater emphasis on denial strategies and defenses in case deterrence fails.

Payne starts from the premise that the Cold War deterrence framework was based on a faulty assumption of the rationality and reasonableness, and therefore of the predictability, of the Soviet leadership. He believes this assumption, made by successive American administrations, was largely based on mirror-imaging, intuition and wishful thinking, with little consideration given to the impact of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the traits of individual leaders, or other factors that could have influenced crisis decision-making. This weakness was compounded by the nuclear character of the confrontation itself. The sheer destructiveness of strategic nuclear weapons reinforced the assumption of rationality (no "rational" leader could ever use them), and led to a situation in which deterrence strategy stagnated into mechanistic calculations of damage and the force structures needed to ensure the stability of mutual assured destruction.

Using numerous historical examples, from ancient Greece to Hitler during World War II, Payne persuasively demonstrates why the general assumption of a rational, reasonable, and predictable opponent doesn't stand up to analytic scrutiny. Drawing from these cases, Payne compiles a list of factors that can influence leadership decision-making during crises, including

personal beliefs, goals and values; political goals and ideology; perceptions of internal and external threats; determination; cognitive distortions (such as denial mechanisms); and other factors such as drug use or physical ailments. These factors can lead to highly unpredictable and risky behaviors that not only affect deterrence, but were not fully accounted for in Cold War frameworks. Accordingly, Payne judges “the deterrence theory assumption of well-informed leaders operating rationally, reasonably, and thus predictably, frequently does not correspond with actual crisis decision-making; and deterrence, therefore, can fail or not apply.” (p 39)

Payne makes a strong case, and his argument is bolstered by newly-available material from Soviet bloc archives and reassessments by American Kremlinologists that cast doubt on the accuracy of both sides’ perceptions of the other during the Cold War. Nonetheless, others will find his underlying premise contentious. It is not difficult to argue that, in fact, the Soviets did act essentially in a rational, reasonable and predictable manner and that U.S. policymakers did have a reasonably good understanding of the Soviet leadership and their decision-making processes and mindsets. Regardless, the proposition is debatable, and Payne’s relentless repetition of it detracts somewhat from the real value of the work, which lies in its comprehensive and practical framework for thinking about deterrence in the future. While the question of Soviet rationality is now moot, the salient point is that deterrence is an uncertain prospect at best, as it relies on the decisions and reactions of the adversary, and not on controllable factors like force structures and alert postures. Only a comprehensive and situation-specific analysis of an adversary provides even a reasonable chance of crafting a successful deterrence strategy.

To this end, Payne proposes a 6-step methodology for analyzing an opponent’s decision-making and the likely impact of deterrence options. The steps include: 1) identifying the

antagonist, issue, and objectives; 2) describing the factors likely to affect adversary decision-making on the specific issue; 3) constructing a strategic profile of the adversary; 4) assessing whether the adversary is susceptible to deterrence; 5) identifying U.S. deterrence options; and 6) identifying gaps between capabilities needed and those available to implement deterrence policies. Step 2, in particular, focuses on the cultural, political, and personal factors that must be considered when attempting to influence adversary behavior--the essence of Payne's approach.

In building his case for a new deterrence framework, Payne shifts the discussion from the Cold War focus on nuclear force structures and stability back to a more classic, and broader, view of deterrence, with its emphasis on adversary decision-making. In this regard, Payne stands on the shoulders of other general deterrence theorists, and even classical military thinkers such as Clausewitz, who reminds strategists that they must face a living, reacting enemy. Payne not only reinvigorates these classic ideas, but adds an important dimension by advocating a multi-disciplinary approach to his analytic methodology, including considerations that may just as likely be answered by psychologists or physicians as area specialists and intelligence analysts. Payne also stresses the criticality of understanding the uniqueness of each situation. There can be no "one size fits all" deterrence strategy in the current environment. Strategists must strive to understand the specific context of each situation in which they are trying to deter another actor.

Finally, Payne demonstrates the application of his framework through a notional case study in which the U.S. seeks to deter a Chinese military response to Taiwan declaring independence. Though Payne stipulates that his notional study is not exhaustive, the omission of some key aspects of Chinese decision-making weakens the effectiveness of his illustration. For example, he cites Chinese military views on using force against Taiwan, but doesn't mention how much influence the military has within the top leadership or how much influence the military would

likely exercise over decision-making on this specific issue. Even without providing a full analysis of this point, the power balance within the Chinese government should be acknowledged as an important factor in assessing crisis decision-making.

The book is well-researched and sourced, drawing on many academic and historical references as well as Payne's own extensive background in the field, and is written in a straightforward narrative style, which will be especially attractive to those not intimately familiar with deterrence theory. Payne provides thorough explanations of the terminology used in the book and of the basic psychological nature of deterrence relationships. He avoids the sometimes contentious issue of the rationality of certain state or non-state actors by focusing instead on the predictability of their responses to deterrent threats, arguing that even rational decision-makers (which most adversaries are) may respond in ways that are not easily understood by U.S. policy-makers or accounted for by simple cost-benefit analyses.

One minor weakness is the book's narrow focus. Clearly, the author intended this to be a book on deterrence, and strategists will find the analytic framework very useful for formulating such coercive strategies. But it seems obvious that better understanding an adversary's thinking and decision processes also would help in crafting non-coercive strategies. Payne's checklist is, indeed, very thorough, and has much wider applicability than proposed by the author.

Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence shakes the very foundation of current deterrence thinking and provides a shrill wake-up call that unexamined assumptions and stagnant thinking will no longer suffice in today's global environment. In fact, the book is quite sobering in making the point that deterrence will always be uncertain to the extent that adversaries will always be unpredictable. And while U.S. policymakers and strategic analysts can strive to understand an adversary's thinking and decisions, some things are ultimately unknowable and unpredictable.

Thus, Payne ends with a call for more attention to preparation for deterrence failures, specifically through defensive systems or greater consideration of using denial rather than punishment strategies. One should note in this regard that Payne has been a proponent of national missile defense, though the book does not seem to be an overt attempt to advocate this particular policy.

Updating Old Thinking

In contrast to *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, Stephen Cimbala's work attempts to build on rather than discard Cold War theories. *Deterrence and Nuclear Proliferation in the Twenty-first Century* is a collection of six essays by noted defense analysts with a short conclusion by Cimbala. Each essay deals with some aspect of deterrence theory or nuclear proliferation, considering how to update Cold War views to make them relevant in the current environment.

The first essay, "Relating Nuclear Weapons to American Power" by George Quester, surveys the history of nuclear weapons and how U.S. power varied throughout the Cold War based on the perceived balance or imbalance of nuclear forces with the Soviet Union. It ends with a very brief discussion of the impact of the proliferation of nuclear weapons on American power in the world today. Unfortunately, this very shallow examination of the issue tends to look at American power in only one dimension, that of nuclear weapons. There is no discussion of how other aspects of American national strength play into perceived power balances, nor on the impact of the overall tenor and quality of geopolitical relationships between the United States and other states. Nonetheless, it offers a quick and thorough grounding in the history of U.S. and Soviet nuclear forces throughout the Cold War, providing the foundation for the essays that follow.

Lewis Dunn's "Rethinking Deterrence" is also an introductory essay, covering three of the most important aspects of the role and requirements of deterrence in American security policy in the 21st century. First, he discusses the U.S.-Russian relationship, and suggests it is time to

move beyond mutual nuclear deterrence to what he terms “mutual strategic reassurance,” which would not only recognize the changes in the geopolitical relationship but would ensure holdover Cold War mindsets wouldn’t hinder further progress toward better U.S.-Russian relations. Second, he examines whether deterrence will remain an element of U.S. security policy in dealing with hostile countries armed with WMD. He determines that there is still a role for deterrence, but notes that some of the mechanisms and assumptions will have to be updated to meet the new threat and, recognizing the difficulty of deterring some of these new actors, suggests that more emphasis must be placed on what to do if deterrence fails. Finally, Dunn considers the role of deterrence against terrorists or other sub-national groups armed with WMD. While recommending a continuation of the traditional emphasis on defense, prevention and consequence management, Dunn suggests that policymakers should not dismiss the notion of deterring these groups, though he doesn’t provide any specific recommendations on how to implement such a strategy. Dunn’s essay is right on the mark in its analysis of the issues and its comprehensive geopolitical approach to relations with Russia and dealing with rogue states and terrorists. Its only weakness is in not providing suggestions for solutions.

Two other essays, “Russian-American Nuclear Stability Issues” by Frederic Nyland and “Triage of Triads” by Stephen Cimbala, examine the U.S.-Russian relationship in the post-Cold War era, considering the impact of proposed and planned arms reduction measures as well as force posture and force structure changes on the stability of the bilateral deterrence relationship. These essays focus nearly exclusively on nuclear deterrence, and use traditional measures--such as calculations of first-strike stability under various alert postures--to illustrate the effect of proposed force structure cuts. While both authors acknowledge the radical changes in the U.S.-Russian geopolitical relationship, they argue it is still necessary to hedge against a reversal in this

situation, given the fact that only Russia currently possesses the nuclear firepower to obliterate the United States. However, the continued positive progress in the U.S.-Russian relationship under Bush and Putin, as demonstrated by cooperation in the war on terrorism, the recently-agreed nuclear force cuts, and Russian acquiescence in the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, tend to argue against the need for a hedging strategy. These articles are already outdated, but nevertheless provide some insights into considerations that have, in the past, affected the drawdown of nuclear forces, and which may yet come back into play should either U.S. or Russian perceptions of the current strategic partnership falter.

A related article, “Post-Cold War Nuclear Scenarios: Implications for a New Strategic Calculus” by Jim Scouras, attempts to bridge the gap between Cold War nuclear deterrence theory and a new “strategic calculus” for the current era. Given that the conditions and assumptions underlying deterrence of the Soviet Union no longer hold, Scouras asks whether deterrence is still an appropriate strategy and, if so, what role nuclear forces have in supporting it. After reviewing changes in the global arena, the current status of Russian nuclear forces, and other potential scenarios in which nuclear weapons might play a role, Scouras finds that nuclear weapons are still relevant for deterrence, particularly in avoiding the use of WMD, but that measures taken to apply deterrence in one case may have a deleterious effect on another case. In particular, he worries that building missile defenses to deter or mitigate the effect of a rogue state attack may weaken the stability of deterrence against Russia, which he contends is still needed. Despite his argument for a scenario-driven approach which considers additional paths to nuclear conflict besides the traditional massive Soviet attack scenario, Scouras tends to rely on Russo-centric examples in his analysis. He also tries to tackle too many issues in this short article, leading to rather general conclusions about the need for better strategic warning and broader

views of potential opponents without providing a firm basis for his new strategic approach.

Finally, William Martel's essay on "Proliferation and Pragmatism" makes a solid case that U.S. nonproliferation policy is no longer credible because it is still based on Cold War-era regimes and norms that do not reflect current reality. He points out that states have valid national interest reasons for wanting nuclear weapons, and that the U.S. approach which views all proliferation as inherently bad is both discriminatory and counterproductive. Martel argues that some cases of proliferation might be considered stabilizing if they serve to prevent regional conventional conflicts, a valid point despite his somewhat dubious use of India and Pakistan as his example case. He then proposes four principles for a new U.S. nonproliferation policy: that acceptability of nuclear ownership be based on behavior conforming to international norms, that the U.S. should take more active and credible actions against nuclear aspirants who don't adhere to such norms, that the U.S. should work to reduce incentives for nuclear ownership, and that U.S. policy should emphasize safety and security in helping nurture stable deterrent relationships where proliferation has occurred. U.S. nonproliferation policy has long suffered from logical inconsistency as well as from inconsistency of application. This well-written and provocative article makes a persuasive case for a more nuanced and consistent approach. One minor critique is Martel's tendency to criticize current nonproliferation measures without offering new ones for implementing his proposed policy. In several areas, he simply argues for applying the "old" measures more selectively. He also fails to address the significant implications of more actively opposing selected cases of proliferation...though the Bush administration may find justification here for preventive or preemptive strikes on "axis of evil" states Iraq, Iran or North Korea.

Overall, *Deterrence and Nuclear Proliferation in the Twenty-first Century*, is a valuable work in that it examines the major issues relating to nuclear forces, deterrence and proliferation facing

U.S. policymakers at the start of the new millennium. It provides a useful format for discussion of these issues, offering concise, relatively easy-to-read articles that don't require the reader to have a deep grounding in deterrence theory. Each essay provides sufficient background to understand the Cold War roots of the specific issue and provides an update, including--if not the answers--at least the relevant questions for today.

The book suffers slightly from its organization--the chapters could have been grouped more logically--and focuses a bit too heavily on issues relating to the bilateral deterrence relationship between the U.S. and Russia. In those cases, the analyses and prescriptions still tend to view deterrence as an equation of force structures and postures, rather than assessing it within the context of the broader political-military relationship. Finally, given the concern in recent years over the emergence of WMD-armed "rogue states" and the threat of WMD-armed terrorists, the book would have more relevance to today's deterrence analysts and policymakers if it had devoted more space or additional essays to these issues.

Conclusion

U.S. policymakers will face a difficult task in crafting deterrence strategies in the 21st century. New adversaries and contexts for deterrence have changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, as has the very conception of deterrence. Freed from the stifling nuclear paradigm of mutual assured destruction, there is a need for fresh thinking on how, and even whether, deterrence can operate effectively in the current global environment.

The two books reviewed in this paper are a first step in answering this question. Both books offer the assessment that deterrence--nuclear or otherwise--remains relevant, if problematic, today. And both provide coherent explanations of the challenges to effective deterrence in the current era. While neither book offers easy solutions for formulating deterrence policies in

today's complex global environment, both provide useful frameworks to assist analysts in thinking about the problem. In particular, the comprehensive analytic framework proposed in *Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence* offers strategists a practical tool for understanding the context in which coercive--or even persuasive--policies must operate.

Both books also raise cautions about the greater uncertainty of deterrence in today's environment. These cautions must be regarded as a valuable warning that Cold War-style reliance on an overarching posture of nuclear deterrence no longer provides the security assurance it once did (or once was believed to have provided). This important observation thus points the way to two future paths for additional analysis. The first is to begin conducting strategic assessments of potential new adversaries so that policymakers will face any future crises armed with a better understanding of the adversary's thinking and decision processes. Such assessments will also help identify knowledge gaps that may focus future intelligence collection and assessments. The second path is to consider what defensive or denial capabilities and policies are needed to ensure America's ability to protect its security and interests if deterrence fails, and to avoid being deterred itself. Given the uncertain environment of the 21st century, failure to do so could have catastrophic consequences.