

## CHAPTER 1

# Deterring International Rivals From War and Escalation

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Why do we seek to understand our enemies? If we are already at war with them the answer is we want to anticipate their actions so we are prepared to counter them effectively and minimize our losses. Forewarned is forearmed. The better we understand them, the more likely we are to win against them, the less likely we are to be surprised and defeated by them.

The ancient Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu, put it this way:

“One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements.

One who does not know the enemy but knows himself, will sometimes be victorious.

One who knows neither the enemy, nor himself, will invariably be defeated in every engagement.”<sup>1</sup>

When engaging a modern day adversary armed with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons capable of inflicting mass casualties, one should understand the enemy’s red lines or likely trigger points when he would be most likely to escalate to the use of both conventional force and weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

To understand this, one ought to know things like the following:

- past cases when the adversary leader and his regime have used military force;
- past cases when the adversary has used weapons of mass destruction;

- propensity of the leaders(s) to escalate crises or conflicts when blocked or stressed;
- the likely doctrine of the regime in question;
- the reliability of the command and control of the rival's military forces;
- things the rival leadership values most and what kinds of retaliatory threats they most fear and believe likely;
- personal, bureaucratic, political or cultural factors that might influence a rival to escalate or de-escalate a crisis;
- information possessed by a rival and their perception of U.S. retaliatory capability, and willingness to escalate a conflict if provoked.

## **Classic Deterrence Theory**

Classic "Cold War" theory states that for deterrence to be successful, four elements need to be present.

First, the United States must possess the capability to inflict a level of damage on the adversary that they consider to be unacceptable. In other words, the enemy would know the United States forces could mete out so extensive an amount of destructiveness that the adversary leadership would find the price too high to pay were they to attack.

Second, the rival leader(s) must believe that the U.S. president is willing to pull the trigger on that devastating response. The enemy must respect the U.S. Commander-in-Chief enough to be afraid of what he might order. In the year prior to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, it appears that Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev had underestimated the fortitude of President John F. Kennedy, leading him to place Soviet missiles in Cuba as a means of closing the missile gap then facing the USSR. Once Kennedy showed his willingness to go to war and escalate to nuclear use, Khrushchev backed down.

The Soviet leader knew all along the U.S. had superior force at its command. What he did not know until October 1962 was that JFK also had the will to pull the trigger if necessary. This combination of capability and will is termed credibility and this is the coin of real deterrence.

Third, it helps deter the rival if you possess such overwhelming retaliatory capability even if he were to attack first. A robust deterrent cannot be disarmed by a surprise attack. Rather, in the parlance of Cold War nuclear strategy, the United States ensures crisis stability and escalation dominance by possessing a “second strike” force where the retaliation is both devastating and inevitable. Knowing this, an adversary should draw back from war and escalation of war.

Fourth, none of this works unless the adversary is both rational and well enough informed to understand the outcome of starting a war or escalating one to high levels with an aroused United States. It helps to spell out the threat precisely to dictators like Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein who are both impetuous by nature and are surrounded by sycophants because of Saddam’s propensity “to shoot the messenger” for delivering bad news or contrary advice. This is why, on January 12, 1991, four days before the coalition air attack began, President George Bush wrote the Iraqi dictator a warning letter spelling out the consequences of escalating the war. His letter emphasized this point:

Let me state, too, that the United States will not tolerate the use of chemical or biological weapons . . . The American people would demand the strongest possible response. You and your country will pay a terrible price if you order unconscionable acts of this sort.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990-91 Gulf War, President Bush attempted to deter Iraq from the use of chemical and biological weapons by threatening the use of nuclear weapons in response. This appears to have been persuasive.

Why did Saddam Hussein not use such chemical and biological weapons? It is likely he was persuaded that the U.S. leader was serious. Clearly, if he believed that Baghdad and his massed military forces were about to be annihilated by nuclear explosions, radioactive fallout, and the accompanying firestorms from a few well-placed atomic and hydrogen bombs delivered by U.S. forces with clear air superiority, it would be irrational to proceed.

Further, if Saddam Hussein were in President Bush’s position, possessing such weapons, it would be difficult for him to imagine not using all the means at his disposal. After all, the Iraq dictator started his Ba’ath

Party career as a hit man. He rose to power as the bloody security chief, and once he had seized the Presidency he continued to ruthlessly kill his real and imagined opponents. He attacked Iran and then Kuwait. He has used chemical weapons on his own Kurds as well as on Iranian cities and armies. He has shown no regard for the lives of his countrymen since seizing power. It is easy to believe, when dealing with such a wielder of violence that he would find it all too easy to believe an enemy would use nuclear weapons if provoked by chemical or biological attacks.

Classical deterrence theory seems to have worked against Iraq in 1990-91. In this situation the United States had an overwhelming retaliatory force, postured in a secure second-state mode, led by a U.S. President who unmistakably meant business if pushed, and faced by a rational and informed enemy. In such conditions, peace not war should prevail and, if war were to begin, it should not escalate to strategic nuclear, chemical, or biological use. Given such conditions during the Cold War the peace was kept and some might argue that these conditions are all that are needed to work in the future.

In the years since Ronald Reagan's March 1983 speech calling for a strategic defense initiative, other U.S. defense analysts have also argued that classical retaliatory deterrence can also be improved by fielding effective air and missile defenses. The enemy, if knowledgeable about such defenses, could be deterred from attacks if he knew they would be ineffective. This kind of deterrence is called deterrence by denial.

### **Obstacles to Deterrence: Enemy WMD**

However, there are numerous obstacles to successfully deterring an international rival from future war or escalation decisions.

First, many of our adversaries have or are close to acquiring a significant nuclear, radiological, chemical and/or biological weapons capability of their own. Once in place, their leaders like Kim Jong-il, Ayatollah Khamenei, Bashar al-Asad, and Muammar Qadhafi might believe the United States to be deterred from attacking them if they were to invade or strike a U.S. ally, short of their launching a direct attack upon the United States. They might be willing to gamble that the United

States leaders would not be willing to put so many of its forces and citizens at risk in a WMD showdown in support of another country.

Indeed, one analyst of the 1991 Gulf War has argued that Saddam Hussein believed that his chemical arms and biological weapons gave him “top cover” against what he perceived as a casualty-adverse U.S. leadership at the time of his invasion of Kuwait.<sup>3</sup> If so, Saddam Hussein did not anticipate the American nuclear force trumping his chemical-biological cards.

### **Deterring Messianic Enemies**

A second obstacle to a successful deterrence policy by the United States is that certain non-state terrorist groups such as al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, appear to be willing to die in the process of striking murderous blows against U.S. citizens and facilities. U.S. retaliation may confer martyrdom, a price some are willing to pay.

Such messianic foes such as Mullah Omar of the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan may have been unwilling to compromise their militant policies despite the global reach of the United States or might simply be too ill informed or stubborn to believe the U.S. retaliation threat until it smashes their regime. Some may simply feel their Jihad is God’s will and that they will go down in flames to implement it regardless of the disparities of military power arrayed against them.

Terrorist groups such as al Qaeda are particularly difficult to deter because in many cases their cells and other assets cannot be located for retaliation targeting.

### **Obstacle: Deterring the Deaf**

Other adversaries might simply be too isolated or uninformed about U.S. capabilities and intentions to understand the likely outcomes of their actions. In each of the NASTI (NBC-Arming Sponsors of Terror and Intervention) regimes<sup>4</sup> like Iran, North Korea, Libya and Syria, the top leaders are caught up in a cult of personality where information flowing to them may well be biased, telling them what they want to hear

rather than what they may need to understand. In some of these regimes, the top leaders have had limited foreign travel or exposure, and what they have experienced is highly selective and unlikely to fully inform them about the United States.

### **Obstacle: Weak U.S. Credibility**

Another obstacle to successful U.S. deterrence of adversary warfare or escalatory moves, at least prior to the 1990-91 Gulf War, was a string of less-than-impressive U.S. actions against rivals.

The failures in Vietnam to win over an outgunned opponent, the 1983 withdrawal by Ronald Reagan of U.S. Marines from Beirut after losing 241 to lethal bomb attacks, and President Carter's failed rescue attempt to forcibly free U.S. hostages from Iran in 1980 all appeared to be weak responses to aggression. The U.S. withdrawal from Somalia after that peace operation began to cost U.S. lives also conveyed the idea that U.S. leaders were willing to withdraw U.S. forces rather than suffer many casualties.

Further, the ineffective U.S. retaliation against Iraq in response to an attempt to assassinate former President George Bush in Kuwait in 1993, and failure to force Iraq to fully comply with United Nations (U.N.) Resolutions after the Gulf War, all communicated a weak U.S. resolve during the Post-Gulf War decade.

### **Obstacle: No Equivalent Response**

Other obstacles to successful U.S. deterrence of adversary aggressions and escalations are the lack of overwhelming and relatively simple responses available to the U.S. President if he does not want to employ nuclear weapons. The United States has signed and implemented the 1972, Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and no longer has a tit-for-tat biological or chemical weapons response to the use of such weapons by an enemy.

## **Obstacle: Destruction of Nonproliferation Regimes**

The use of nuclear arms could have many negative results even if their employment did destroy a rival regime and its military power. First, it would shatter the nuclear taboo that United States Presidents worked so many years to create. Second, U.S. nuclear first use would destroy any moral authority the United States might otherwise have in persuading non-nuclear states to remain so. Third, use of nuclear weapons, even in response to chemical and biological warfare (CBW) attacks, would violate a political pledge made by the United States at a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference during the Carter administration. Countries would brand the U.S. a liar that backed out on its pledge not to attack non-nuclear foes who are members of the NPT and who refrain from acquiring nuclear arms.

Worse still, much of the world would regard the United States as a pariah for using such disproportionate weapons on the battlefield. This could trigger massive economic reprisals, particularly by those in the Muslim world if the weapon was used against a Muslim state like Iraq, Iran, Libya, or Syria. Another oil boycott along the lines of 1973 might be the reaction, causing serious economic repercussions in the United States and other industrialized states. Also, the use of nuclear weapons would likely galvanize a worldwide anti-nuclear movement that might do far more harm to U.S. global interests than any positive results that might flow from the use of such mega-weapons.

## **Obstacle: The “Use or Lose” Dilemma**

Another obstacle to successful U.S. deterrence policies is the “use or lose” dilemma faced by enemy regimes whose WMD assets are being destroyed by U.S. allied conventional attacks in a conflict that has already begun. Will a dictator allow the U.S. to progressively destroy his end-game “ace-in-the-hole” without beginning to use this WMD capacity before it is extinguished? At what point does he launch his WMD salvos? When he has eighty percent of his WMD assets left? Fifty percent? Twenty-five percent? Is it reasonable to expect him to let the United States forces surgically remove them completely when the survival of his

regime in the war termination phase of combat might depend on that very capability to inflict fearsome damage on invasion forces or upon neighborhood allies of the United States?

### **Obstacle: Non-Rational Decisions**

Finally, U.S. deterrence strategy success depends on the enemy leadership acting rationally and believing it has other successful options short of escalating to mega-weapons usage. No amount of profiling of potential enemy leaders can state with great assurance how they will act in a crisis situation, defined as an event characterized by surprise, a very short time for decisions to be made, involving life or death stakes. Crises produce maximum stress on leaders, and how individuals will perform under such burdens, even they might be unable to predict in advance of the event.

Decisions taken during periods of acute stress may be characterized by illogical or wishful thinking, simplification, extreme emotions, and over-reactions. Stress can also cloud analytic thinking, shrink creativity, increase stereotyping, lead to selective perception, and may lead to more we/they emphasis. Decision-makers under stress may exhibit less flexibility and more rigid thinking than normal, with greater emphasis on following habitual and past formulas for solving new problems. Stress can also bring out the dominant traits of those making decisions. Aggressive risk-prone policy-makers may become even more aggressive and adventuristic under stress. Passive decision-makers may become even more so when feeling acute stress.

Moreover, in a number of states, groups of decision-makers may collaborate on the policies chosen and the decisions may be a product of what psychiatrist Irving Janis labeled as “group think,” not always the most rational of outcomes. In his classic study on the subject,<sup>5</sup> Irving Janis has examined how “group think” operated to produce U.S. fiascos in the 1961 Bay of Pigs crisis, in the 1950-53 Korean War, in the days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and during the Vietnam War. Cohesive decision-making groups became dominated by “group think,” according to Janis and, in each, crisis decisions were flawed in eight ways:

1. An illusion of invulnerability shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks;
2. Collective efforts were made to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions;
3. The group held an unquestioned belief in its inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions;
4. Members held stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak and stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes;
5. There was direct pressure on any other member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members;
6. Individuals engaged in self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member's inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counterarguments;
7. They had a shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, augmented by the false assumption that silence means consent);
8. There emerged self-appointed mindguards, members who "protected" the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

Face-to-face groups also tend to make riskier decisions than the situation may warrant. Experimental psychologists have discovered that in small face-to-face decision-making groups a phenomenon called "shift-to-risk" tends to occur. They find that when making decisions the group as a whole tends to follow the most risk-prone members and will make a more escalatory or risky decision than would the individual members of that same group if polled privately.

## **Obstacle: Bureaucratic Politics and Procedures**

Most regimes, even dictatorships, are power-sharing arrangements, and no one leader will make all the decisions alone. He will be influenced by the group he shares power with and group processes may influence outcomes. States should not, as Dr. Alexander George writes in his chapter at the end of this volume, be regarded as unitary actors all acting with one mind. In some cases, like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Stalin's Soviet Union, or Hitler's Germany, they may approach the totalitarian model, but most regimes are power-sharing networks where more than one decision-maker participates. This can yield uncertain and complex outcomes that may not square with the unitary state/rational decision-maker model implied by U.S. deterrence theory.

Within a government there are different sets of interests imbedded in different parts of the bureaucracy. Bureaucratic politics can influence government policies and this may or may not square with what is the most rational policy for that regime to follow.

Furthermore, when groups meet to make policy there may be considerable bargaining and outcomes may also be influenced by decision momentum where past policies are defended by groups previously mobilized to implement them.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond all this, there is declaratory policy and action policy, and the two do not always marry up. States are not unitary actors, rather, they are made up of various collections of individuals organized into several different departments, agencies, and services, each with its own domain for implementing decisions, each with its own interests and perspectives.

Decisions made may be the product of bureaucratic bargaining rather than the clear logical output of a single policy-maker. Also, different bureaucracies each have their own standard operating procedures (SOPs) for taking actions.

In his classic study of the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis,<sup>7</sup> Graham T. Allison described how Khrushchev and the Soviet Politburo made the decision clandestinely to place Soviet missiles into Cuba, hoping to present the United States with a fait accompli. The early part of the implementation of that decision went smoothly when the KGB secretly shipped the missiles to Havana in large cargo ships without detection

because they were accustomed to operating using clandestine procedures. Deception and secrecy characterized all their operations.

However, once in Havana, the medium and intermediate range missile launchers, radars, and accompanying surface-to-air missiles, along with the offensive MRBMs and IRBMs were handed from the KGB to two different commands. First, the Soviet Air Defense Command was to install the SAMs, and then the engineers and technicians of the Strategic Rocket Forces were to install the offensive missiles. Their mode of operations did not include much secrecy, deception or camouflage. Rather, they operated in standard fashion, typical of how they did things within the borders of the Soviet Union. The SAM sites were erected in a trapezoidal pattern around the construction of the new MRBM and IRBM launchers just as they were normally constructed in the USSR, a sure tip-off to U.S. photo-reconnaissance experts that Soviet missiles were being installed. Carelessness gave away the operation. When unloading the missiles from the ships at Cuban docks, while Soviet technicians did not wear their uniforms, they nonetheless “formed in ranks of fours and moved out in truck convoys . . . These units (also) would display large insignia”<sup>8</sup> marked by “Red Army Stars” clearly visible to U.S. Intelligence.

Thus, the secret decision reached in Moscow, implemented capably in secret by the KGB, was revealed to U.S. intelligence by the SOPs of engineers and technicians in charge of erecting the missile launchers in Cuba.

This illustrates how verbal decisions made by central decision-makers can be skewed by how their subordinates carry out those orders, which rely on doctrine and standard procedures, which may or may not reflect the original intent of the orders.

## **Many Causes of a Failure to Deter**

In summary, central decision-makers and those charged with implementation may make poorly informed decisions due to a lack of good information and biased perceptions. They may decide policy responses to U.S. warnings based on psycho-logic and “group think” rather than logic and clear thinking.

Thus, a rival’s response may be distorted by the interplay of bureaucratic politics, decision momentum, stress on the decision-makers, standard operating procedures and doctrine. What central decision-makers

thought they decided in a meeting at headquarters may be implemented quite differently by the organizations charged with carrying out the decisions reached.<sup>9</sup> This can happen even when everyone is trying to cooperate with their leadership.

Further, what also may occur may be that some members or groups, or those in a regime, will take unauthorized action and use regime assets in a way not wanted by the leadership.

Thus, international crises escalate and wars begin even when one would expect rational actors and unitary states to keep the peace, because governments are not always rational or unitary. Deterrence can fail even when the state attacked has superior military power.

## **Superior Strength is No Guarantee**

Indeed, the history of warfare in the last two centuries shows many wars have been started by demonstrably weaker military powers initiating combat against clearly stronger enemies. This is counterintuitive and would not be predicted by deterrence theory.

One revealing study of the failures of deterrence in the 19th and 20th centuries showed that 22 percent of the wars from 1816 to 1924 (17 of 76 conflicts) were started by the much weaker party. Indeed, the record was higher in the 20th century when 33 percent or 14 of 43 wars were begun by significantly weaker states.<sup>10</sup>

There were many reasons why the weak would attack a much stronger adversary. In some cases the instigators of the conflict felt they had no choice, that it was a case of surrendering later or fighting now when the odds were better. In some cases, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, those initiating the war gambled and lost, hoping that they could strike a compromise peace with the United States that would allow them to keep the Asian prizes that they had seized by force. The U.S. oil embargo imposed before the Japanese attack had placed the Tokyo leaders in a bind. They determined that without oil they either had to abandon their dreams of conquering an empire in SE Asia or had to smash the U.S. Pacific fleet and grab the territory and oil fields they coveted. These Japanese leaders in late 1941 were “beyond deterrence” and considered themselves in an “intolerable situation.” In the words of

one analyst, Japan “might lose, but defeat was better than humiliation and submission.”<sup>11</sup>

In other cases, nationalistic fervor won out over good sense. In some wars, it was considered a matter of honor to oppose the stronger nation, regardless of the costs. As Patrick Henry said during the American Revolution, “give me liberty or give me death.” Similar sentiments have propelled some weak states into ill-advised conflicts with stronger enemies. Some wars were accidental conflicts begun based on misperceptions. Some wars, such as the 1982 Argentine attack on the British in an attempt to seize control of the Falkland Islands, were started by the internal domestic pressures on the regime that started the bloodshed. A domestic crisis can precipitate an international conflict. In some cases there was an emotional rebellion against the policies of the stronger state. In a few cases, the *causus belli* was where smaller power terrorism was found out and retaliated against by the greater power. Such aggressive wars by weaker states have also begun out of hatred born of a clash of very different cultures.

In a few cases, wars were launched by leaders with severe psychological problems. One such case of a blindly irrational war was the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) launched by Paraguay’s crazy leader, Francisco Solano Lopez, who invaded Brazil, then declared war on Argentina, and finally also provoked Uruguay into joining the fray. Taking on three much larger and more powerful enemies at once almost annihilated the Paraguayan population, which was reduced from 1,400,000 persons in 1864 to only 221,000 by 1870. This Chaco War left Paraguay with only 29,000 living male adults by the war’s end.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States and its allies are facing “holy war” declared by fanatical Islamists who follow Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization. To the independent observer, this appears to be a case of the flea attacking the flesh of the elephant, but perhaps the Al Qaeda attacks were meant to be provocations aimed at stimulating an overreaction by the United States that would, in turn, help mobilize the Muslim world in a we-they confrontation across the globe.

Whatever the reasons for such attacks, clearly weaker parties have not in the past always been deterred from war or escalation of war by the superior military strength of their opponents. Deterrence fails all too frequently.

## **Profiling Helps - Tailored Deterrence Needed**

Clearly knowing one's enemy helps one to anticipate him, defeat him in battle, and can aid in efforts to deter him from war or escalation, but such understanding is no sure path to influence. Understanding the adversary is probably a necessary but not sufficient condition of successful deterrence. While such knowledge cannot by itself determine the outcome of events, it is a useful instrument in the tool kit.

When dealing with the Saddam Husseins, Kim Chong-ils, Bashar al-Hafezs, Muammar Qaddafi, and Mohammed Khameneis of this world there is probably no single deterrence policy that will work equally for all. Rather, actions and messages need to be tailored to each to maximize the effect on such different personalities, who are from very different strategic cultures, that the United States may be confronting in a number of very different scenarios.

Because there will likely be great disparities between adversaries, their perspectives, their relative military and political capability, their information about an unfolding situation, and a difference in the kind of crisis that could erupt, there likely should be a tailored U.S. deterrent policy for each. To put together a uniquely effective deterrence mix of actions and messages, it is first important to understand the adversary leaders and their strategic cultures. That is the purpose of the following chapters on Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, North Korea, al Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Armed with such insights, U.S. and allied leaders will then be in a far better position to influence opponents and, hopefully, to deter conflicts or escalation of conflicts with such enemies.

### **Notes**

1. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated, with introductions and commentary by Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 179.
2. "Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on President Bush's letter to President Saddam Hussein of Iraq," (Washington, D.C.: The White House, January 12, 1991).
3. Avigdor Haselkorn, *The Continuing Storm: Iraq, Poisonous Weapons and Deterrence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

4. See Barry R. Schneider, *Future War and Counterproliferation: U.S. Military Responses to NBC Threats* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 3-6.

5. Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink, A Psychological Study of Foreign Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 13.

6. See Barry R. Schneider, Chapter 3, "Decision Momentum," *Danger and Opportunity, Decision-making, Bargaining and Management in Three United States and Six Simulated Crises*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1974.

7. Graham T. Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missiles Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 102-113.

8. *Ibid.*, 109.

9. The classic study of this is by Graham Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

10. Barry Wolf, "When the Weak Attack the Strong: Failures of Deterrence," A *RAND Note*. N-3261-A (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1990).

11. See Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 10.

