

Deterring violent non-state actors: dilemmas and implications

Deterring
violent non-
state actors

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to address the limitations of classical deterrence theory in dealing with violent non-state actors (VNSAs).

Design/methodology/approach – The study uses qualitative methods.

Findings – It suggests that two measures must be applied; the first one is to rephrase the assumptions of the theory towards a broader definition. The second one is to theorize certain approaches for deterring VNSAs which shall remain a key component in, but not the cornerstone of, national security strategies.

Originality/value – In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks and US war on terrorism, the need arose to “revisit” the “Deterrence Theory” to address several changes such as rogue states, cyber threats and VNSAs, especially after the end of the Cold War, when the theory was originally developed. The recent research on VNSAs relates to the fourth wave of deterrence, which highlights its proper role in a new security environment.

Keywords Deterrence theory, Terrorist groups, Deterrence by denial, Deterrence by punishment, Triadic deterrence, National security strategies, Deterrence by delegitimization, Transitional organized crime, Rogue states, Weapons of mass destruction, Global war on terror

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1. Introduction

Deterrence, as a leading theoretical framework during the Cold War (Levine and Levine, 2006), has been subject to criticism (Arie, 2016). Deterrence, and other terms such as assured destruction and massive retaliation, have become politically incorrect and lost respectability. The idea that the survival of Europe and the USA had depended on destroying dozens in retaliation for a nuclear attack was considered as immoral (Ece, 2004).

Deterrence has been largely neglected, both in confronting the so-called state-terrorism and also in response to threats from non-state terrorists (Ece, 2004). New opponents render deterrence a more complicated issue. These opponents include near-peer competitors, like China; regional states like Iran or North Korea; and non-state actors. It is difficult to assume that each set of actors will have the same reaction to deterrent threats.

Cyberspace poses a major challenge for deterrence (Jasiello, 2013; Libicki, 2009; Lotrionte, 2013; Lynn, 2011; Orji, 2014; Wilner, 2011). Military force is of limited utility in deterring cyber threats. A military response to espionage or crime would be a strange departure from the international law regarding the use of force (Lewis, 2010).



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Many scholars believe that in the absence of a conflict among super powers, Deterrence Theory has lost much of its value. Deterrence Theory is less used in dealing with rogue states or terrorist groups in a manner that requires readjusting deterrence as a theory and a policy (Paul, 2009).

Terrorist groups and other violent non-state actors (VNSAs) have gained a great attention, especially after the 9/11 attacks, US invasion of Iraq and the war on terrorism. In recent years, terrorism perpetrated by VNSAs has become in the forefront of international politics. Terrorist groups – in some cases – have engaged in provocative activities, which triggered off international conflict and interstate wars (Utka, 2006).

The paper investigates the drawbacks of Deterrence Theory in terms of explaining new forms of behavior. The main question it tries to answer is:

Q1. What are the limitations of classical Deterrence Theory in dealing with VNSAs?

To answer this question, the study explores deterrence in the bipolar and unipolar international systems. Then, it briefly describes the emergence of deterrence as a prominent theory against VNSAs. Next, it outlines a number of predicaments that undermine this pattern of deterrence. Later, it concludes that the key conditions of the theory do not apply to VNSAs. Finally, the study rephrases the assumptions of the theory towards a broader definition and theorizes certain approaches for deterring VNSAs.

2. Deterrence in the bipolar and unipolar international systems

There is no consent among literatures on a specific definition of deterrence (Huth and Russett, 1993; D'arcy and Herath, 2011). Probably, the most prominent and frequent definition is of Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, who both define it as “The persuasion of one’s opponent that the costs and/or risks of given course of action he might take outweigh its benefits” (George and Smoke, 1974). Alternatively, “it is a theory of defense that uses the threat of force to deter or prevent another party from doing something”. (Colby, 2007)

The Deterrence Theory is based on several assumptions: first, states are rational actors that depend on the cost-benefit analysis in their decisions. The first assumption reflects that the theory focuses on nation-states (Paul, 2009), and excludes other non-state actors. Second, as for deterrence to succeed, the deterrent must target the adversary’s high-value items. This requires the good understanding of the adversary, along with its culture, strategy, capabilities and conditions. Third, the adversary must believe that the deterrent state will use its military power to carry out a retaliation threat (Gray, 2010). Fourth, the effectiveness of deterrence increases if the adversary perceives the red lines, which will lead to the implementation of deterrent threat. This perception requires good communication among adversaries. There is no use to surprise the adversary with an unforeseen retaliation, in a time just an apparent signal may deter a certain action in the first place (Writs, 2012).

Deterrence has been a standard practice in international politics, and a key component in the super powers strategies. Its importance increased after the possession of nuclear weapons when the possibilities of a massive war mounted during the Cold War. The absence of a major war between the USA and the Soviet Union reflected the success of deterrence (Morgan, 2012). War became unthinkable and irrational as the cost of war was exorbitant (Zagare, 2004).

By the end of the Cold War, it seemed that deterrence had become something from the past. Since then, the rise of the rogue states, VNSAs and the cyber threats (Brenner and Clarke, 2010; Deadening, 2015; Elliott, 2011; Geers, 2010; Glaser, 2011; Stevens, 2015) has highlighted the continuous need for deterrence, but how?

Some scholars argue that our understanding of deterrence during the period of Cold War is still valid as the bases of deterrence are still the same. The core of deterrence revolves around managing threats and controlling others' behaviors without fighting them. However, compared to the Cold War period, the objectives of deterrence have differed, as well as the targeted adversary, the context, and the ability to deter.

In the context of the Cold War, deterrence has worked mainly between the USA and the Soviet Union, the major poles in the international system. The primary goal of deterrence was preventing a nuclear war between the two parties (Cimbala, 2012).

As the Cold War ended, the actors addressed by deterrence included: rogue states, VNSAs, and others. This influenced the deterrence objectives, strategies and methods, which vary from one actor to another according to the targeted adversary.

Therefore, the statement that deterrence needs reconsideration is not surprising. The starting point is to recognize that the Cold War concepts have reflected certain circumstances and contexts that have dramatically changed. Deterrence, that has been highly effective against the Soviet Union in the past, may not be effective in addressing future adversaries (Payne, 2003).

Deterrence Theory – in this context – experiences a “renaissance” after nearly 20 years of relative neglect since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The theory expanded its scope of interest to include terrorism, extremism, transitional organized crime and cyber threats. In the early 1990s, doubts had been shed on deterrence, and new methods had been explored to expand and apply the theory differently, especially after 9/11 and the US war in Afghanistan in 2001 (Wilner, 2014). Amid the contemporary debate, many experts have focused on how to deter VNSAs, while attaching less attention to its appropriateness in the first place.

3. The emergence of deterrence against violent non-state actors

Contemporary research and studies indicate that deterring VNSAs can be located in the frame of the fourth wave of deterrence research (Lupovici, 2010; Knopf, 2010), which sheds light on the appropriate role of deterrence now, and investigates untraditional prospects to deter rogue states and terrorism (Knopf, 2012). In other words, theorists and experts are trying to “update” or “revisit” deterrence based on its classical foundations to address the threats posed by VNSAs (Telleen, 2008).

Generally, non-state actors can be divided into two major categories: peaceful and violent. The first category is “the most numerous”. They abide by international law, and they include non-governmental organizations, international religious organizations, MNCs and transnational diaspora groups. There is no need to deter such actors, contrary to violent ones such as international criminal organizations, terrorist groups and rebel groups, the main target of deterrence (Blackburn *et al.*, 1996).

Many scholars have argued that the US' strategy based on deterrence and containment is no longer appropriate for deterring VNSAs. In addition, terrorists who sacrifice their lives to carry out a suicide attack would not be deterred easily, by any threat of retaliation. Accordingly, the US military doctrine has changed from deterrence to preemption.

The 9/11 attacks have revived the fears of a “nuclear holocaust”, in case terrorists or extremist movements get hold of mass destruction weapons. In Afghanistan, structural designs of mass destruction weapons have been found in underground hideouts of Al-Qaeda (Malik, 2003). In addition, in the mid-1990s, Tokyo witnessed a “Sarin Gas attack” by “Aum Shinrikyo” on “Tokyo subway line” (Cilluffo and Kupperman, 1997) to widely disseminate destruction and mess, believing that the consequent imbalance and disorder may result in the collapse of the political and social regime. This is a shining example to follow regarding

the possibility of VNSAs to possess weapons of mass destruction in a manner that affects countries and societies alike (Bowen, 2004).

Up till September 2001, most experts have thought that nuclear terrorism (Levi, 2004; Medalia, 2005; Todd, 2009) is not a significant danger. While others believed that the potentials of nuclear terrorism are extremely small compared to the most common forms of terrorism (Jenkins, 1975; Kamp, 1994; Sprinzak, 1998).

However, after 9/11, terrorism and organized crime have become alarming possibilities, especially for the USA (USA Government, 2006). They have become the most dangerous threats to the national security. Therefore, deterring them resulted in larger and partial shifts in security studies and international relations. Since then, many writings on deterrence of VNSAs have accumulated. Thus, new theories, concepts and forms of deterrence have been suggested (Wilner, 2014).

Deterrence has emerged as a significant strategy to counter both conventional and nuclear terrorism, due to their potentially devastating consequences on the one hand, and the context within which terrorist groups operate on the other hand.

The USA has already embarked on a variety of strategies and policies that aimed to undermine and prevent terrorism; the most important were the counter-proliferation policies, to stop the spread of nuclear technology and materials to VNSAs as well as governments.

Other strategies have focused on eliminating terrorist threats, particularly through counter-terrorism operations amid the “global war on terror”. In addition, the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (Raphael, 2007), issued by the Bush Administration in 2007, considered deterrence as an important tool to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists. It suggested new measurements for deterrence that must include deterrence of terrorists as well as their supporters.

However, there are considerable limitations on the strategy of counter-terrorism; it relies on the offensive military force, so it cannot be employed as a long-term strategy, due to its high costs. It is too difficult to defeat terrorism by “targeting” the perpetrators given the transnational nature of terrorism. Without addressing the root causes of terrorism, counter-terrorism strategy solely shall remain inadequate.

It is practically impossible to prevent all terrorist attacks, even when reliable intelligence information indicates a possible attack in the near future. Just as Robert Art clarifies, “defense is first if defense has failed or has not been possible, deterrence shall have the second priority”. Given the above-mentioned characteristics of the new environment, it is not surprising to suggest deterrence (Telleen, 2008; Byman, 2003; Gilles, 2004/2005; Art, 1980; Smith, 2007).

4. Why is it difficult to deter violent non-state actors?

It is difficult to deter VNSAs for multiple reasons that can be summarized as follows:

First, there is no single approach to be applied to VNSAs, due to their variances. They vary in their motivations and characteristics. In addition, we cannot equate the international criminal organizations with terrorist or rebel groups. However, the study of terrorist groups has had the greatest attention.

It is difficult to evaluate and determine the objectives and ideologies of VNSAs as they are incompatible. They are composed of distinct factions that have multiple political objectives. Groups like Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have witnessed internal disputes among its factions with respect to the goals to be achieved, specifically, whether to focus on the Western States. The state of uncertainty about the ideological composition of VNSAs

hampers the ability to adapt a collective response towards what they face (Lonardo and Tyso, 2016).

Second, it is difficult to deter actors who are willing to sacrifice their lives, for religious and ideological motivations, that make suicide an acceptable and even necessary action. This renders terrorism “a way of life”; in other words, exposure of the members of these groups to gross losses shall not result in individuals’ refraining from joining the said groups. This can be envisaged considering the privileges that these groups provide such as power and wealth.

Third, deterrence may not be the ideal choice to confront VNSAs, because deterrence and eradication do not fit together. The US failure to eradicate terrorist groups led to deterrence. Moreover, destroying or eradicating any terrorist groups would not result in the elimination of terrorism, given the difference between the two. Without addressing the underlying reasons behind that phenomenon, and fighting thoughts and behaviors that nourish terrorism, deterring any terrorist group – in fact – will prove ineffective.

Fourth, there are numerous types of terrorists. During the Cold War, deterrence was confined to the two super powers. However, terrorism includes several groups with different tools, and without a unified leadership in some cases. Terrorism is not one block, and it is not feasible for only one theory to apply to the different terrorist groups (Davis and Jenkins, 2002).

Fifth, the effectiveness of deterrence varies according to the nature of the targeted actor. Understanding how deterrence worked throughout the Cold War era is no longer useful. Unlike States, VNSAs do not exercise sovereignty over a given territory; however, they seek to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the State by threatening its ability to exercise sovereignty over its own territory. Even if possible to deter a country by threatening its ability to control its territory, yet this represents a major dilemma in the relationship between the State and VNSAs. It is often possible for VNSAs to deter States but not vice-versa.

Sixth, VNSAs lack major strength positions that can be targeted easily. For a state, targeting the capital, political leadership or the military forces will affect its national security, public well-being, and decision-making process. As the state’s territory can be easily targeted and “held at risk”, it becomes possible to deter and control a nation. However, it is difficult to locate VNSAs or determine their strategic valuable assets due to their transnational nature (Kusman and Lawson, 2001).

Such differences among States and VNSAs would make it more difficult to deter those actors. The success of any deterring strategy depends on the objectives and calculations of those actors, who cannot be definitely identified, upon designing and developing a deterrence strategy (Lowther, 2012).

Seventh, deterrence is based on a hostile relationship among adversaries. Currently, US acts as if Al-Qaeda shall use nuclear weapons to attack. However, the real intentions of Al-Qaeda are not known. It is practically impossible to deter an adversary who does not contemplate an attack. More importantly, deterrence in such a case may not only be imprudent but can be more dangerous. The threat to deter a non-existent attack may lead to provoking the adversary. Al-Qaeda may consider US threats aggressive and provocative.

In fact, an attempt to deter an enemy while oblivious of his intentions can be a double-edged weapon. As deterrence may sometimes be successful in discouraging the use of force, but it could also be the main cause of encouraging such a use (Tellegen, 2008).

5. Do the conditions of deterrence apply to violent non-state actors?

Literatures fail to agree on the applicability of deterrence to VNSAs. While some scholars argue that deterrence can be applied to the VNSAs (Ece, 2004), others doubt that. The first

major trend includes three sub-trends; each could be considered as an approach for deterrence.

The first approach – in the first major trend – involves indirect deterrence, which targets third parties that facilitate terrorist acts, rather than terrorists themselves. The second approach reflects a renewed appreciation for deterrence by denial, the old concept by Glenn Snyder. The third approach entails a general trend in the fourth wave toward expanding the scope of the concept of deterrence and exploring new sources that are non-military in nature, such as “Deterrence by Delegitimization” (Knopf, 2012; Lonardo and Tyso, 2016). For example, Obama’s Administration addressed the expansion of the scope of deterrence to include not only advanced conventional weapons but also missile defense. However, deterrence has focused traditionally on nuclear retaliation (Pifer *et al.*, 2010).

The second major trend argues that Deterrence Theory lacks clarity on the situations in which it can initially be applied. The theory offers little with regard to its applicability, leaving policymakers uncertain about when and where strategies of deterrence are appropriate.

Alexander George and Richard Smoke, for instance, stated, “Deterrence theory *per se* provides no criteria to indicate when a deterrence theory should be applied in foreign policy”. In addition, Robert Jervis suggested, “we still lack evidence and well-grounded arguments about the bounds of the theory and the conditions under which it applies”.

The endeavor to apply deterrence, regardless of its applicability, is potentially counter-productive, and costly. Policymakers may believe that if strategies are properly implemented, the outcome projected by deterrence theory will hold true. Yet, this belief in the power of deterring party to achieve successful deterrence on its own ignores the interactive nature of conflict as well as intrinsic characteristics of the adversary.

Thus, it is important to determine whether the deterrence strategies that aim to tackle VNSAs are successful and then rises the need for approximation of initial appropriateness. The question of whether it can deter VNSAs from attack shall be preceded by the question whether deterrence is an appropriate response. There is no doubt that the difficulty of defending against terrorism makes deterrence strategies understandably appealing. However, this does not mean that deterrence should simply be attempted without further analysis (Telleen, 2008).

The US counter-terrorism efforts are not founded on deterrence as a strategy against terrorism. Moreover, in recent years, the US began to use deterrence in its fight against international terrorism. Scholars started to study how some terrorist activities can be deterred, but they have not come to broad approaches on deterrence.

To sum up, to judge the applicability of the theory of deterrence to VNSAs, three important issues shall be addressed:

First, *Rationality*: many scholars have argued that terrorists, criminals and rebels are irrational. They do not follow the cost-benefit analysis while making their decisions; they are ready to bear any cost, including death, to advocate their goals. Thus, it was thought that the threat of retaliation would be incredible by nature, and inadequate (Kroenig, 2010).

But, the applicability of this condition on VNSAs is controversial; in addition, literatures do not unanimously agree on this point. Some literatures have concluded that some terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, follow the cost-benefit analysis and value-maximizing behavior. Thus, they can be deterred (Telleen, 2008).

Second, *the nature of VNSAs*: Classical deterrence theory does not apply easily to VNSAs, which vary in structures, values and communication methods. Therefore, understanding the intrinsic characteristics of each actor is essential. Some of which prevent the applicability of deterrence, such as the identification of their locations.

Third, *Motivations of VNSAs*: One of the most important aspects related to deterrence is the strength of the adversary's motivations in using force or launching an attack that profoundly influences the chances of successful deterrence. The desire of these actors to challenge the status quo and their willingness to take risks, influence the chances of successful deterrence. However, the more intolerant the actor is, the less effective deterrence may be (Morgan, 2011; Telleen, 2008).

In short, deterrence may not be applicable, because it depends on VNSAs motives, which are likely to be extreme. Moreover, these groups are fanatical in their goals; are far away from ethical standards and remain impervious to negotiation and temptation.

6. Detering violent non-state actors: implications of the theory

How can deterrence be revisited to overcome the abovementioned limitations? The study suggests two measures; the first one is to rephrase the assumptions of the theory towards a broader definition. The second one is to theorize certain approaches for deterring VNSAs.

The paper argues that for the theory to be effective against VNSAs its assumptions should be rephrased as follows:

- Both states and non-state actors can be deterred, although it is more difficult to deter VNSAs. Thus, the approaches and methods used to deter the two differ.
- Most states abide by cost-benefit analysis in their decision-making process. Terrorist leaders – on the contrary – may not have anything to lose, but at least some of their financiers and supporters have something to lose. That means using indirect ways for deterrence and breaking down the terrorist systems and networks (external suppliers, supportive populations, lieutenants, etc.) into parts.
- The military tools may adequately deter states, but not VNSAs, as the latter requires other supporting tools such as the diplomatic and economic tools.
- There is no one size- fits- all approach for deterring VNSAs. Each case requires “situation- specific responses”.
- There are many contributing factors that affect the ability to deter VNSAs such as the context, the regional environment, the number of superpowers in the international system, the goals the terrorist groups seek to realize, counter-terrorism strategies, central leadership and territories VNSAs operate in and across.
- Detering states may be a core strategy to achieve the deterrent goals, but deterring VNSAs is only a key component that works along with other decisive strategies.

The abovementioned assumptions require a broader concept of deterrence that should describe actions in need of military intervention, as well as the offensive and defensive capabilities needed for credible retaliation threat. The concept should analyze different ways to deter VNSAs, including direct targeting or indirect influence through a proxy actor. It means generally influencing counter-terrorism operations. Symmetric approaches, such as engaging in long-term conflicts, are ineffective.

This broader concept requires specific means to deter VNSAs, such as:

First, heavy investment in intelligence is a must; though sharing and gathering intelligence data cannot be considered as a deterrent *per se*.

Second, an effective financial campaign based on intelligence information of how VNSAs finance themselves. The financial campaign may include imposing economic sanctions, countering money laundering and undermining any use of charitable organizations.

Third, deterrence by denial: It includes the ability to prevent or minimize damage in any potential attack, thus alleviating its consequences. This requires the capacity to respond to any use of chemical and biological weapons and radiological incidents. Partly, this requires advance preparation, acquisition of vaccines, medical and regulatory measures. Further, this requires intensifying efforts to detect and intercept suspicious shipments. It aims to convince the enemy that the attack does not really fit in time, resources and efforts required (Bowen, 2002).

Fourth, deterrence by punishment: VNSAs, particularly terrorist groups, may be deterred by identifying “high-value targets”, to make the most radical leaders consider the potential costs and benefits. It could also work through targeting regimes that assist terrorism. For example, the US war in Afghanistan in 2001 sent a message that the USA and its allies have the intention, determination, and ability to punish regimes that support, harbor or tolerate Al-Qaeda.

Fifth, an effective international legal framework can strengthen the deterrence of non-state actors. Nevertheless, the currently exerted efforts are inefficient, derailing from the deterrence effectiveness. The ultimate objective of deterrence is compelling VNSAs to recognize and accept restrictions on their behaviors. Therefore, the nature of deterrence changes per the changing nature of the international community (Morgan, 2011).

Sixth, triadic deterrence, it is:

Using punishment and/or threats against a state to deter it from supporting a non-state actor, if not to compel it to stop assisting it. When does deterrence of host states succeed?

The structure of complex asymmetric conflict requires attention to the relationship between the target regime and its community. The more powerful this regime is, the more effective deterrence will be. Powerful actions against VNSAs require local institutional and political legitimacy, and territorial control, which require powerful regimes to do so.

Many conflicts in the international system today involve a state, a VNSA, and another state hosting or assisting the latter (Atzili and Pearlman, 2012). Examples include the US war on Afghanistan to eradicate Al-Qaeda (Bowen, 2004), as well as the Israeli attacks on Lebanon to fight Hezbollah (Vinson, 2015; Ganem-Rosen, 2011; Fleet, 2015), and finally India’s warnings against Pakistan (Izuyama, and Ogawa, 2003; Ghoshal, 2016; Chari, 2003) in its response to the actions of Kashmiri separatists (Atzili and Pearlman, 2012).

7. Conclusion

Deterring VNSAs requires a broad understanding of deterrence. The main focus of the theory remains unchanged, which is preventing undesirable actions. However, deterring VNSAs should include methods that transcend the traditional deterrence theory. The possibility of deterring violent ideologies, recruited militants and their supporters cannot be addressed easily by the classical theory, which focused on the sovereign nation-states.

Many VNSAs do not have the traditional assets based on the territory, which can be targeted through the threat of punishment associated with traditional state-based theory. The clear majority of VNSAs lacks a certain territory in which classical threat of retaliation could be issued. This dilemma is well known as “the return address problem”.

Instead of focusing on the values associated with the classical deterrence based on the State, sovereignty, spheres of influence and economic power, deterring VNSAs requires targeting the value system they follow, such as propaganda, operational success, strategic and tactical victory, leadership, public sympathy, social acceptance, religious motives, political legitimacy, freedom of movement, safe shelter, wealth and other physical assets.

In other words, the concept of deterrence must be re-applied in different ways that go beyond the threat of punishment and behavioral manipulation. As a result of the expansion and extension of deterrence to VNSAs, a number of coercive processes have been developed. However, these processes differ from those contained in the classical theory of deterrence that focuses on the states.

In conclusion, the classical deterrence theory may be re-applied to provide practical and empirical insights to confront contemporary threats and potential conflicts. Deterrence is a key component of national security and great power politics, but it is no longer the cornerstone of states interactions as it was during the Cold War period. Applying multi-faceted means such as the direct and indirect use of force besides non-military policies, and models to confront potential enemies and future threats may increase the effectiveness of deterrence.

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