OPERATIONALISING DETERRENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY: AN OVERVIEW

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting” – deterrence in the land environment is an age-old concept and recalling Sun Tzu is instinctive. Tzu advised commanders to only fight when entirely necessary, manoeuvring to a position of tactical or political strength so your opponent is either unable or unwilling to fight and, as the case studies examined in the workshop highlighted, deterrence (successful or not) has been a core activity since 1945. Despite this, since the end of the Cold War much less study has been dedicated to the subject and it has been suggested that Land understanding of deterrence in the current environment is not as comprehensive as it should be. Discussion on deterrence often defaults to nuclear capability. In the European paradigm there is a confidence that atomic deters atomic and MAD [mutual assured destruction] theory retains a balance of power. However, mounting Russian aggression, the development of ever more sophisticated technical capabilities such as counter intercontinental ballistic missile and cyber, continued political interest in the CND and the constantly evolving extremist threat means that deterrence in the Land environment is more relevant and important than ever. This article seeks to address this shortfall and ensure deterrence remains an enduring subject for study and consideration within the Land environment.

Theory into action

Deterrence theory from geopolitical to the tactical is reasonably simple, but operationalising the detail is far from simple. Deterrence can take on two shapes, punitive or denial. In the mind of your adversary (as it always must be) any action that they take will result in such severe reaction and punitive ‘punishment’ that the action becomes untenable. Alternatively, the in-place defence is sufficient to deny any chance of victory and so again render any potential action untenable. The ‘three Cs’ of capability, credibility and communication are often used to describe effective deterrence. In order to operationalise either punitive or denial deterrence we must have combat power, or capability, to effect on any potential opposition. This will be a blend of mass, proficiency, technology, positioning and posture that are ‘capable’ of either the punitive or denial activity. Capability in the Land environment is often scalable, allowing flexibility in confronting an evolving threat as well as a proportionate response within legal and resource considerations. The current geopolitical situation presents challenges of scale; the UK may struggle unilaterally to present sufficient sustainable combat power to deter Russian manoeuvring. Working alongside NATO allies allows us to mitigate this shortfall by contributing to a convincing coalition with significant scale, technical advantage and political power. Coalitions can, of course, present issues such as varying national political appetites, response criteria, chain of command issues etc.

A state may have the capability to mount any deterrence but to be credible it must also have the will to use that capability. The possibility that a national leader may not be prepared to use a capability can very quickly disarm the entire deterrence strategy, a situation that has been the subject of debate within our own parliament in recent months. It is worth highlighting here that history has shown that military action is not routinely authorised as part of a deliberate pursuit of grand strategy, but the decisions are emotional responses, often reactions to single events. Indeed, it is evident that risk appetites will also mature with events such as recent loss of life, the length and severity of a conflict to when a conflict matures into a perceived fight for survival. While this may be typical at the political level it makes sense that in the Land environment we have a more rigorous approach and deploy

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In the Indian and Pakistan conflict the dynamic has been different. The atomic parity has allowed limited conflict as each side is confident that escalation will not broach a certain level and prompt.
deterrence by design for best effect on the enemy.

Once the technical capability and political credibility of deterrence have been established it is crucial that they are communicated. This communication could be clear show of force or visible deployment of combat power; a military campaign can also have this effect, demonstrating capability and resolve. It is thought that the Falkland’s campaign, although a failed deterrence, demonstrated UK capability and led to a reassessment of UK power by the Kremlin. Other communication methods are available, diplomatic channels, defence engagement, information and outreach and media activity. The choice of method will depend on the desired audience but without clear communication it is likely any deterrence will be futile. The case study on the Falklands in this publication presents some fascinating insights into the failure to communicate political resolve resulting in failed deterrence.

Deterrence is of course an inherently political activity and so is as much about the home audience as the any external entity. There is a need to reassure the domestic population that their safety and security are the paramount concern of the state. This home audience will also have an influence on how any deterrence is mounted. Military capability is expensive and its deployment is currently politically sensitive in the UK in the post Afghanistan and Iraq environment. It can be difficult to communicate the need for a robust deterrence operation when a threat may not be immediately apparent and sufficiently menacing. More subtly, and perhaps more importantly, the communication must not present an aggressive picture. Deterrence during the Cold War actually presented a very threatening picture; both the West and the Kremlin were convinced that they were under threat from an aggressive and expansionist opposition. The reality was very much a defensive policy on both sides, but the communication and rhetoric resulted in ever increasing tensions. There is a real danger that this could happen today with the deployment of the Enhanced Forward Presence into Slovenia and other eastern European states. It is very easy for Russia to interpret these as aggressive moves, it should not be forgotten that the current issues and violence in Ukraine emerged as they moved towards closer relationships with Europe.

These concepts work well in a state-on-state paradigm, where much of this study focuses, but it was recognised that deterrence is less easy to conceptualise when facing a stateless or lone enemy. Indeed it was argued that it may be impossible to deter committed martyrs, although recent efforts to prevent attacks in the UK have been successful and the publicity generated – by the state – may serve to highlight the futility of their actions and deter others.

Strategic Planning / Understanding the Context

No military strategist would begin any planning process without seeking to understand their opponent. The importance of the depth of understanding required was a consistent theme throughout the workshop and is discussed in some detail in many of the submissions in this edition of Ares & Athena.

Several questions quickly emerge: Who is the UK trying to deter? Are they a ‘peer’ or state actor? How does the UK stance vary from deterring against Russian aggression in Europe, protection of overseas territories and the evolving threat from Daesh? Can all these threats be deterred simultaneously?

When looking for answers to these questions some seek to understand our opponents as ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’ actors, it could be argued that this is failing to understand the opponent at all. The UK may face a threat whose motives and actions are difficult to rationalise from our perspective, but that does not mean they are ‘irrational’. Only by really understanding the situation from a human perspective, relevant to the opponent will their actions be understood as ‘rational’. With this understanding we can design our deterrence narrative to resonate with an actor who has different priorities and considerations to ours.

There is a danger of being content with an understanding of superficial motivations. However, there are likely to be secondary pressures that motivate aggression towards the UK and her assets. An effective deterrence must be sufficiently persuasive to counter all those more complex pressures. Again an interesting example of this is the Argentine invasion of the Falklands. The combination of a legacy dispute, pressure from a malcontent population, and a poorly communicated deterrence made the invasion a worthwhile risk. However, as previously discussed, the political decision to fight to liberate the Falklands was a human action, influenced by both emotional and rational discussion. The launch of the taskforce was not triggered once a decision point was reached along a strategic decision support matrix; General Galticci reasoned that the political will was not strong enough. The Argentine example is simple when compared to the analysis required to understand the motivations and strategic goals behind current Russian aggression and the threats to the UK posed by Daesh. Arguably Putin’s motives behind the annexation of Crimea were as much about a reaction to EU expansion than appealing to internal post imperial sympathies.

This leads to one of the most important concepts when looking to operationalise deterrence. It is not sufficient to have a general cultural understanding of the countries and groups that present threats, it is vital that we understand the minds and decision triggers of our adversaries. It is easy for us to bemoan the fact that almost all of the Russian experts so valued in defence in the 1980s are now almost entirely gone, but what they were able to provide was a detailed personal understanding of personalities and decision makers. A study of Russian attitudes would present a kaleidoscope of opinion, what is important is what are the attitudes and likely actions of Putin and his influencers? This highly personal understanding takes significant investment that is difficult to justify when threats are more opaque. Deterrence often only becomes operationalised once a threat becomes reality. This reactive nature often ensures the deeper understanding that is so vital has not been available.