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Deterrence Theory — A Doable Reality or a Hopeless Cause?

Can the tenets of deterrence theory be applied to counterterrorism? This is the question that Andreas Wenger, Alex Wilner and others attempt to answer in "Deterring Terrorism — Theory and Practice," which according to Peter Faber represents a first-cut attempt to apply deterrence theory systematically to the terrorist phenomenon.

By Peter Faber for ISN

In pursuing the above goal, *Deterring Terrorism* is part of a post-9-11 progression in thought. The initial belief was that terrorist organizations were irrational and therefore undeterrable. This assumption then had a direct impact on counterterrorism policy, which first privileged prevention, preemptive force and eradication over deterrence. This initial paradigm of terror, however, did not last. It was followed by a follow-on belief that terrorists were actually "rational fanatics" who did indeed have practical priorities. By shifting their focus in this way, counterterrorism experts "reintroduced the logic of deterrence into the terrorist equation." It became possible, once again, to think about curtailing or containing this form of violence.

The reintroduction, however, did not lead to answers so much as it led to a slew of questions. How do theoretical propositions, any propositions, help deal with real-world and evolving terrorist threats? Which concepts of deterrence are best suited to deal with these threats – traditional or less-traditional ones? Is deterrence sufficient unto itself as a counterterrorism strategy or must it necessarily be a component part of a broader and more comprehensive approach? What metrics should we rely upon to measure the success or not of deterrence strategies? These questions (and many more) point to a truth articulated by a titan of deterrence theory, Thomas Schelling – "What is impressive is not how complicated the idea of deterrence has become, and how carefully it has been refined and developed, but how slow the process has been, how vague the concepts still are, and how inelegant the current theory of deterrence is." Deterrence theory, in other words, remains in Schelling's words a "chiaroscuro mess," particularly in terms of how it might function as a counterterrorism tool.

Terrorism and the Four Waves of Deterrence Research

In one way, this alleged "chiaroscuro mess" is surprising. It's not as if there hasn't been systematic thinking about this subject in the past. Indeed, as Wenger and Wilner point out, there have been three waves of deterrence research conducted since World War II. The first wave, for example, laid the conceptual groundwork for deterrence theory. It preliminarily looked at the impact of nuclear weapons on the study and practice of warfare in general.

The second wave of the 1950s-1960s then developed and articulated the core concepts of deterrence we know so well. Within the context of a bipolar world supposedly populated by rational unitary state actors, we saw the "deductive development of deterrence theory as an abstract framework to manage the [Soviet-American] nuclear rivalry." We saw, in other words, the articulation of concepts such as commitment, communications, capability, credibility and resolve. We also saw the formalization of deterrence theory into deterrence by punishment and by denial. (The first approach relied upon a threat while the second one sought to deny a perceived or hoped-for benefit. Each approach, in other words, tried to affect an opponent's cost-benefit calculations, but from opposite ends of a signal-sending spectrum.) The development of these "theoretical prerequisites," however, was not done inductively. The process featured scientific modeling and the application of game theory to deterrence relationships.

With the appearance of a third wave of deterrence research in the 1970s, we saw a period of soul searching. We saw, in other words, the "empirical evaluation and testing of the concepts, models, causal links and theories that had been previously proposed." As a result, new conclusions came to the fore. Deterrence success and failure, for example, was not just based on an actor's commitment or resolve, but also "on the types and nature of the interests at stake and by the costs of succumbing to a threat." The concept of utility (i.e., one's cost-benefits) got more malleable, while the negative twins (threats and denial) were joined by positive inducements and rewards as core tools of deterrence. Finally, there was new interest in how misperception in political signal-sending, the structure of organizations, and socio-political factors (culture, values, history) all impact deterrence-centered decision-making.

What the above wave thus provided, according to Wenger and Wilner, was "a more nuanced interpretation of the limitations, scopes, and boundaries associated with applying deterrence theory in practice." Fair enough, but now we are in a post-1991 fourth wave which has us, at least in some ways, going back to square one. We're now "mapping the contours of deterrence theory against the backdrop of novel and often asymmetric threats" (rogue states, cyber warriors, pirates, etc.)

Deterring Terrorism is part of this fourth wave mapping effort. It's interested in trying to deter terrorism, not terrorists; it's also interested in developing appropriate counterterrorism "influence strategies," while also recognizing the limits of counter-coercion within this context. In trying to promote the actual utility of deterrence in counterterrorism efforts, however, texts such as this one face some daunting challenges.

Deterring Terrorism – The State of Play

The first challenge is simple enough – past work on deterrence's relationship to terrorism has been "innovative but sparse." It has lacked a concrete research agenda, which this pioneering volume attempts to rectify, at least in part.

The second challenge is to make inroads against the continued primacy of prevention, preemptive force and eradication in most counterterrorism circles. That these tools still have an important place in one's kitbag of options goes without saying, but they do stand in the way of gaining a better appreciation of the theory and practice of deterring terrorism.

The third challenge is the methodological twists and turns that counterterrorism can trigger in deterrence theory. Targeted killings are an obvious case in point. Deterrence, Wenger and Wilner remind us, is indeed a bargaining tactic. You use threats or inducements to help modify an opponent's behavior, but that assumes that you provide the opponent a clear way out of their chosen trajectory. Absent that option, as in the case of targeted assaults, terrorists have no incentive to believe that an "alternative deterrence relationship" can be established, and that it would permit their survival.

But on closer inspection, is this seeming incompatibility between a specific counterterrorism option and deterrence real? Are terrorist organizations so monolithic that their members would not perform suitable cost benefit analyses individually? No they're not, argue Wenger and Wilner. "Special individuals" and "peripheral actors" do have disproportionate influence within these groups, so even in a context that seeks eradication as a specific goal, deterrence may yet apply.

Additionally, not all terrorist groups are the same – they do indeed have variable goals and aspirations and they do so at different stages of their existence. The type and nature of the organization (i.e., "its goals, assets, activities, and areas of operation, and on the specific actors and processes inherent to it") will inevitably determine the "contours" of a specific deterrence strategy.

So that's where we are, this much-needed text concludes. Further academic analysis on the deterrence-terrorism nexus must be done. Securing a place for deterrence within an already full (and proactive!) kitbag of options must also be done. But in order to do these things, analysts will have to unpack the hidden and convoluted ways that terrorism and deterrence link up with each other or not.

In drawing these conclusions, and by providing first-step ways ahead, *Deterring Terrorism* reflects other fourth wave scholarship. Its editors and contributors conclude that deterrence can indeed contribute to the management of terrorist threats, but its application remains limited in scope. Multiple tools must be used to counter terrorism, which means that offensive, defensive and deterrence-centered approaches will inevitably get blurred together. But maybe that's not a bad thing. Absolute success is not necessary now. Deterring *some* terrorists may indeed be sufficient.

[*Deterring Terrorism – Theory and Practice*](#)
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