Deterrence Is Dead. Long Live Deterrence

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Twenty years ago philosopher Anthony Kenny (1985, ix) could confidently assert that deterrence was “the key concept for the understanding of the strategy and diplomacy of the age.” Obviously, much has transpired since Kenny made his claim. In 1989 the Berlin Wall was dismantled. Two years later, the Soviet Union disintegrated. In short order democracy was introduced into Eastern Europe and NATO expanded into what was once part of the Soviet Empire. In 1991 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, only to be pushed out by a coalition of nations led and organized by the United States.

Later in the decade, Yugoslavia imploded. Concurrently, Pakistan joined the nuclear club. Then NATO went to war with Serbia over Kosovo. The United States unilaterally abrogated the ABM Treaty and began the deployment of a largely untested national missile defense system. And, of course, on September 11, 2001, terrorists brought down the Twin Towers in an act of inconceivable violence. Within weeks the United States drove the Taliban from power in Afghanistan and, in 2003, invaded Iraq and overthrew its Baathist regime.

As these events unfolded, the significance of deterrence, as both a concept and as a policy, came under intense attack. As a concept it was seen as largely irrelevant to the post–cold War era; or, as Colin Gray’s (2003, vi) put it, deterrence appeared to be in “semiretirement.” And, as a policy, it was judged “obsolete” (Krauthammer, 2002).1 Many strategic thinkers concluded that deterrence was an ineffectual strategem against terrorists and other “undeterrables” (Friedman, 2002). Deterrence was also thought to be an inappropriate policy toward risk takers like Saddam Hussein who operate in a world of half-truths, distorted intelligence, and incomplete information (Pollack, 2002). In Washington, the strategic doctrine of “preemption” was all the rage. To all the world it appeared that deterrence, like God in the 1960s, was probably dead. At minimum, it was seen to be on life support. The situation appeared so bleak that the New York Times (2002) felt compelled to write an editorial “in defense of deterrence.”

But, like Mark Twain, the news of deterrence’s demise may have been premature. Judging from the academic literature, this would certainly appear to be the case. Books and articles about deterrence continue to be published by the best academic presses and the major security studies journals. Among the significant book-length manuscripts on deterrence that have appeared since the turn of the century are Crawford (2003), Danilovic (2002), Freedman, (2004), Gray (2003), Morgan (2003), Payne (2001), Quackenbush (2003), and Sartori (2005). Taken as a unit, these works demonstrate that the core debates about deterrence’s theoretical underpinnings, its empirical robustness, its conceptual clarity, and its policy relevance continue.

1 Nonetheless, Krauthammer (2005) recommends that Israel pursue a policy of “active and relentless deterrence” in the wake of its withdrawal from Gaza.
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How can we account for the flurry of recent publications about one aspect or another of deterrence on the one hand, and rumors of its impending death on the other? It may be, as Gray (2003, vi) suggests, because “the leading alternatives suffer from severe limitations of their own,” that, in many situations, there is simply no other concept, approach, or policy that applies. But it is more likely the case that deterrence survives in the academic literature because it constitutes a fundamental human relationship that pertains across time, across culture, and across space. As the New York Times (2002) put it in its editorial defending deterrence, “the logic of deterrence transcends any particular era or enemy.”

One interesting way to think about deterrence is as a variant or as an extension of balance of power theory. The classical versions of both theories associate parity with peace (or with deterrence success) and asymmetric distributions of power with war (or with deterrence failure). But once this conceptual leap is made, there is no good reason not to relate deterrence theory to any other systemic or structural theory of war and conflict initiation, such as Organski and Kugler’s (1980) power transition theory, Doran’s (2000) power cycle theory, or Modelski’s and Thompson’s (1989) long cycle theory. When viewed in this way it is manifest that deterrence theory, however stipulated, is part and parcel of the perennial debate that is at the theoretical core of the field of international politics.

Deterrence theory, however, is not so often regarded as primarily a structural theory of interstate conflict. And indeed it is not so restricted. In fact, much of the early and innovative work on deterrence during the 1950s and the early 1960s was developed in decision-theoretic terms. While it may be somewhat of a stretch to say that Thomas Schelling was the “inventor” of this strand of the theory, as does Zakaria (2001), Schelling’s (1960, 1966) work is clearly seminal. But so are the contributions of Daniel Ellsberg (1959, 1961), Herman Kahn (1960, 1962, 1965), Oskar Morgenstern (1959, 1961), Glenn Snyder (1961), and Anatol Rapoport (1964, 1968), a major critic. When scholars refer to rational (or classical) deterrence theory, it is the decision-theoretic strand that they normally have in mind. Recently, this version of the theory has been challenged, conceptually (Morgan, 2003), theoretically (Zagare & Kilgour, 2000), and empirically (Huth, 1999; Danilovic, 2002).

So, is deterrence theory a structural or a decision-theoretic construct? The answer is that it is, and must be, both. It is well appreciated that deterrence is a type of power relationship, and power is obviously a critical determinant of system structure. But deterrence is also, in part, a psychological relationship, which implies that it must also be understood in decision-theoretic terms. To look at deterrence, then, as strictly a structural problem is to miss a core aspect of the problem. And to look at deterrence as solely an opportunity for a policy choice is to overlook the context in which such relationships are played out.

The relationship between structural and decision-theoretic variants of deterrence, then, is clearly synergistic, but much more so than is commonly appreciated. For example, consider the standard realist approach to structure. In this view, the international system is populated by like units (i.e., by states). These undifferentiated actors are assumed to be driven either by their nature to maximize power (Morgenthau, 1948) or by their environment to maximize security (Waltz, 1979). In other words, one way or another, all states are assumed to be the same.

2 For expositional purposes I here use the term “decision-theory” as an umbrella category that includes expected utility, game-theoretic, and psychological choice models. Schelling’s work, for instance, draws on all three genres.

3 If anyone invented deterrence theory, it was Brodie (1946).

4 For a review of both the structural and the decision-theoretic strands of classical deterrence theory, see Zagare (1996).
But the assumption that all states are similarly motivated is not innocuous. If this assumption is characteristic of interstate politics, deterrence is typically mutual; in essence it is a symmetric decision-making problem. But if, as suggested by other systemic theories, the objectives that states pursue are endlessly varied, deterrence could also be unilateral. In this case it is best analyzed as a one-sided or asymmetrical relationship.\(^5\)

It should probably go without saying that, in theory, the dynamics of mutual deterrence relationships differ markedly from those of unilateral deterrence relationships. These differences sometimes give rise to sharply divergent empirical expectations about conflict behavior (see, for example, Senese & Quackenbush, 2003). But the differences also have significant case selection implications, implications that are critical to our understanding of when deterrence succeeds and when it fails, when conflicts escalate and when they remain limited, when crises can be managed and when all-out wars are most likely to occur (Danilovic, 2001; Quackenbush, 2003).

Additionally, the axiomatic system that is used to analyze and understand contentious interstate relationships has significant policy implications. For example, Powell (2003, 87) poses a number of questions pertinent to the deployment of a national missile defense system. As he correctly goes on to observe, “the answers to these questions depend at least in part on one’s ideas about how nuclear deterrence works.” Even seemingly minor axiomatic differences can have far-reaching repercussions, as illustrated in the films *Sliding Doors* and *Run Lola Run* and as demonstrated in Bueno de Mesquita (1985) and Zagare (2004).

All of which is to say that deterrence, and the theories that seek to understand it, stand at the very center of the discipline of international politics. Thus, it should not be surprising at all that, despite suggestions to the contrary, research on deterrence is thriving, or that this scholarship is unlikely to go away now or in the foreseeable future.

Testimony to this conclusion is the collection of articles that comprise this special issue of *Conflict Management and Peace Science*. As the reader will no doubt become aware, in soliciting these manuscripts, every effort was made to include important scholarship that speaks to the intellectual vibrancy of the field. Of course, space and other considerations preclude a completely representative sample. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, the included articles illustrate the wide range of theoretical issues and empirical questions that those who study deterrence consider important.

A case in point is Frank Harvey’s penetrating analysis of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic’s decision to capitulate to NATO in June 1999. This work, which challenges the conventional wisdom of the Kosovo crisis on empirical, theoretical, and logical grounds, convincingly demonstrates that the imminent threat of a ground war invasion was not a decisive element of Milosevic’s calculus. If anything, Harvey contends, the threat of a ground attack rendered NATO’s threat to escalate its air war less credible and therefore less effective than it would have otherwise been.

It has long been recognized that classical deterrence theory is riddled with empirical anomalies (Jervis, 1985, 6). Nowhere is the discrepancy between fact and theory more glaring than on the Korean peninsula today, where an economically backward and diplomatically isolated regime continues to defy the planet’s dominant power on the issue of nuclear proliferation. In a nuanced discussion Patrick Morgan assesses the Korean problem in light of post–Cold War changes to the international system. Few are more qualified to do so than Morgan, whose seminal works have helped to clarify the concept of deterrence and to highlight problems associated with its implementation (Morgan, 1977, 2003).

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\(^5\) Deterrence could also be irrelevant if all involved are satisfied, status quo powers.
Morgan finds that standard renditions of deterrence theory are inadequate for explaining the relationship between the United States and North Korea. For example, classical deterrence theory is hard put to explain why the North has been successful in deterring an attack by the United States, or why the United States has been unsuccessful in compelling the Pyongyang regime to end its nuclear weapons program. Morgan offers compelling explanations of these and several related issues, but must go outside mainstream deterrence theory and the objective international environment to do so.

Whether it is over the terms of a trading relationship or of a security relationship, explicit bargaining is characteristic of many ongoing deterrence relationships. Yet, standard models all but ignore this reality. Not so in the innovative article contributed by Catherine C. Langlois and Jean-Pierre P. Langlois. Their dynamic complete information game model specifically allows for the possibility that long-term rivals may negotiate an adjustment to the status quo, slip in and out of a crisis, or even wage war, all before a final settlement is reached. Thus, the model they develop fully captures Clausewitz’s view of war as an extension of politics by other means.

Langlois and Langlois develop an ex post analysis that highlights three subgame perfect equilibria, that is, three rational ways the game can be played out if the rivals pay attention to the expected outcome of play. These are Nash equilibria, in the ex post evaluation of strategies, that are subgame perfect ex ante. The first, which is associated with successful general deterrence, is best for the defender but worst for the challenger. In the second case, general deterrence breaks down, but immediate deterrence succeeds and war is avoided. This dénouement is the best for the challenger but the worst for the defender. Finally, the third and most interesting rational strategic possibility is a compromise in which each side avoids its worst outcome. But to achieve this mutually second best result, both challenger and defender must run the risk of war.

Since both challenger and defender can do better by running the risk of war than by accepting an equilibrium that involves capitulating to the other side, the actual occurrence of war can be explained rationally in the bargaining model developed by Langlois and Langlois. This is an important result. Previously Fearon (1995) has argued that rational agents will choose war over a negotiated settlement only when one player has private information about its capability and resolve, or when there is a commitment problem that renders a negotiated settlement problematic. But Langlois and Langlois show that intense conflict may be part of an equilibrium that is not only ex ante but ex post rational as well. Thus, they uncover an additional, hitherto unrecognized, rationalist explanation for war.

Like Langlois and Langlois, Carlson and Dacey begin with a standard model of asymmetric deterrence to analyze crisis behavior. But their model is of one-sided incomplete information in which a challenger is unaware of a defender’s preferences. What sets Carlson and Dacey’s analysis apart from more standard game models, however, are the assumptions they make about the challenger’s utility function. Specifically, they assume two different types of challengers. Both are von Neumann–Morgenstern expected utility maximizers but with a valuation function derived from prospect theory. Each of their challengers has a utility function that exhibits risk aversion over gains, risk seeking over losses, and is more steeply sloped over losses than over gains (called loss aversion). One of the challengers, however, also has a Kahneman–Tversky-type probability weighting function that exaggerates the value of small probabilities and underestimates the value of larger probabilities. Thus, their modeling effort illustrates how mainstream rational choice theory can be integrated with arguments drawn from the experimental psychological literature.

Carlson and Dacey’s compelling formal analysis helps to clarify the conditions under which prospect theory and expected utility theory diverge in their expectations about the dynamics of deterrence. Equally important, however, is that their study demonstrates that
many of the theoretical arguments advanced by proponents of prospect theory either are in need of qualification or are simply wrong.  

Given the empirical, theoretical, and methodological breadth of even this semirepresentative collection of articles, it should be manifest that current research on deterrence theory is intellectually diverse, conceptually vibrant, and politically relevant. Despite occasional highs and lows, and opinions to the contrary, it is extremely doubtful that this state of affairs will ever change. Long live deterrence theory.

References


