
Irregular Deterrence: How Irregular Activity Contributes to Integrated Deterrence

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Irregular Deterrence: How Irregular Activity Contributes to Integrated Deterrence

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At the core of the United States 2022 National Defense Strategy is the concept of integrated deterrence, using the full range of tools of statecraft to convince a potential adversary that an undesired action is not worth the cost. As technologies progressed after World War II, scholars and practitioners developed theories of deterrence centered around the destructive power of nuclear weapons and overwhelming conventional force. However, a new model of deterrence, one centered around irregular capabilities, ought to be further explored. This article outlines current major deterrence theories and strategies and proposes a conceptualization of irregular deterrence across the cooperation, competition, and conflict spectrum.

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Integrated deterrence is the centerpiece of the United States' 2022 National Defense Strategy. This strategy aims to utilize all elements of national power to convince a potential adversary that the costs of an undesired action, usually aggression, outweigh any possible benefits. Military scholars and practitioners alike have invested significant time and thought into developing theories of deterrence related to two primary military capabilities the United States has at its disposal: nuclear and conventional. However, a third deterrent model exists and warrants greater conceptual development: an irregular deterrent model that spans the competition continuum. Irregular deterrence is not necessarily new—it is a prominent feature in the defense strategies of many Baltic States—but the theory and explanation of its effect is underdeveloped and underutilized. Given that a tool of deterrence is only as valuable as a potential adversary perceives it to be, greater conceptualization and discussion can increase the value of the means themselves.

Deterrence Theory

As the United States preaches integrated deterrence, its theories and strategies must also extend beyond the nuclear and conventional deterrent to include the full range of its power, and thus, maximize the possible deterrent effect (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022b). As the theory currently stands, there are two primary strategies of deterrence that are embedded in the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) definition of the term: “[t]he prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022b, p. 63). The first strategy, deterrence by punishment, requires a state to signal to a potential adversary that if it takes an undesirable action, the state will respond with costly action(s). This is the fundamental logic of the nuclear deterrent and the concept of mutually assured destruction—a nuclear attack by one state results in a nuclear attack by the other that results in widespread, if not total, societal destruction. The second strategy, deterrence by denial, instead “seek[s] to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives” (Mazarr, 2018, p. 2). This is the goal of the conventional deterrent: to build a powerful force that makes it unlikely an adversary would be able to achieve its goals if it took military action.

Regardless of the strategy chosen, deterrence is fundamentally psychological. To craft a successful deterrent, an actor must “create[] the conditions whereby an enemy is forced to realise that their own strategic objectives are unattainable without the need for direct or conventional use of force” (Mumford, 2017). Ultimately, deterrence works if the cost is perceived by an adversary to be high, and as a result, it decides to forgo an action. Therefore, the theory places a premium on messaging and proving that a threat is credible. If a fearsome capability exists but is not communicated effectively, then it is worthless for deterrence.

To this end, the conventional and nuclear deterrent have proven themselves to be powerful tools for messaging and imposing costs. The power of nuclear weapons is known, and the threat is so great that just possessing them is a deterrent. The lack of war between nuclear powers since 1945 and the absence of first use of a nuclear weapon in combat testifies to the power of the threat of nuclear war and mutually assured destruction to deter open warfare between two nuclear powers (Post, 2023).

Many states, most prominently those that are part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), also rely on alliances with nuclear power(s) as part of their security, an extended nuclear deterrent (Mazarr, 2018, p. 3). However, due to the immense destructive power of nuclear weapons, their ability to deter is restricted to only the most extreme circumstances. It is the true upper limit of escalation in war and threatens the destruction of societies. Therefore, threatening the use of a nuclear weapon is rarely credible. With this limitation, and the fact that non-proliferation efforts prohibit more states from developing nuclear weapons, most states build their conventional capacity to raise the potential cost of an adversarial action.

Compared to nuclear weapons procurement, conventional warfighting capacity is easier to develop and often represents a more credible threat in the sense that committing military resources does not necessarily entail wholesale destruction of society. However, the actual cost that can be imposed by any given military is not obvious and consistently underestimated. Since the end of World War II, wars have not gone as intended. More powerful and technologically advanced militaries have consistently been beaten by lesser-equipped foes. War is unpredictable, which can either increase or decrease the strength of a conventional deterrent depending on the perspective of an invading force (Wirtz, 2018). However, there are more ways to impose costs than nuclear weapons and conventional military might.

Recently, the United States and NATO have also started talking about deterrence by resilience as a subset of deterrence by denial, the premise being that building societal resilience is an “important aspect” of “persuading an adversary not to attack by convincing it that an attack will not achieve its intended objectives” because the population is able “to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023a; 2020 U.S. Department of Defense, 2022b, p. 8). The baseline resiliency requirement seeks to increase national, institutional, and individual capacity and capability to minimize vulnerabilities “that can otherwise be used as leverage or be targeted by adversaries” and decrease the overall likelihood of a successful attack (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023b). However, a robust irregular deterrent extends beyond societal resilience and can be built across the entirety of the competition continuum using the full range of government and societal powers.

The Irregular Deterrent

An irregular deterrent aims to present an adversary with a range of irregular challenges that complicate its decision-making process and prevent war (Jones & Love, 2022). It is a model of deterrence that expands beyond the traditional military conceptualization to leverage multiple elements of power and irregular capabilities to create doubt in an adversary’s mind that the costs of war outweigh any possible benefits. Irregular deterrence capabilities and activities exist across a variety of government departments and agencies, as well as in industry, the private sector, academia, and society as a whole, and should be leveraged in a coordinated campaign to increase the overall effect. A possible example against a state actor would be the layering of Treasury financial sanctions, Department of Defense assistance to build partner and allied resilience, State Department information efforts to increase awareness of the threat, USAID efforts to strengthen the key society sectors, US academic outreach to partner nation institutions to increase the study of threats, and empowering US businesses to increase trade to key regions.

Like irregular deterrence theory, what constitutes an irregular application of non-military capabilities is opaque and ill-defined in doctrine and in theory. For the purposes of this paper, we consider the intentional leveraging of non-military tools for security purposes to be irregular, and thus, a vital component of integrated and irregular deterrence. Because these irregular methods usually do not trigger war, they are also a means of testing the boundaries of a nuclear or conventional deterrent and assessing a state's resolve and willingness to impose costs. Given this, developing and leveraging these capabilities across the competition spectrum—in times of cooperation, competition, and conflict—is vital for maximizing the overall deterrent effect.

Irregular Deterrence in Cooperation

In cooperation, the focus of irregular deterrence is assisting partners and allies in creating irregular capabilities as a part of a deterrence-by-denial campaign. Overt cooperation itself and the publication of these efforts to develop capabilities together can function as a platform to communicate risk. It not only signals that the cost of aggression may be higher as a result of the efforts to build capacity with partners but also sends the message that other states have an interest in helping that state succeed, which could increase the credibility of other deterrence-by-punishment messages.

This model is the foundation of the *Resistance Operating Concept* (ROC), a U.S.-led multinational effort to assist allies and partners in developing resistance and resilience capabilities to deter aggression. The ROC was further enhanced by the subsequent publication of the NATO Special Operations Forces (SOF) Headquarters Comprehensive Defence Handbook. In the ROC forward, U.S. Air Force Major General Kirk Smith writes, “Many threatened nations belong to military alliances, but even those with strong alliances and friends do not necessarily have the power to prevent incursion. This could make those states appear to be easy targets. This book is intended to prevent that” (Fiala, 2018, p. ix). The ROC advocates for increasing societal resilience, which may include the foundational development of national resistance organizations prior to war to be able to impose costs throughout or after aggression.⁴ As discussed above, efforts to build resilience engage the whole of government and society to raise awareness of threats and prepare citizens to be able to impose direct and indirect costs on a potential occupying force (Binnendijk & Kepe, 2021, p. 83). Today, many Baltic states are adopting this model. For instance, many are building paramilitary organizations and legislating the requirements and rights to conduct violent and non-violent resistance (Binnendijk & Kepe, 2021, pp. 83-84). Various partner engagements and training exercises can assist in developing these capabilities. For example, the Ridge Runner exercise in West Virginia, which in 2023 included attendees and observers from 15 countries, offers states that are implementing the ROC a training ground to further test theories and develop capabilities (Irregular Warfare Center, 2023; West Virginia Military Authority, n.d.). Ultimately, investments in resistance to occupation capability give states an option to impose costs over the long term, and cooperation can assist their development.

⁴ The ROC defines resilience as “[t]he will and ability to withstand external pressures and influences and/or recover from the effects of those pressures or influences” and resistance as “[a] nation’s organized, whole-of-society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government (potentially exiled/displaced or shadow) to reestablish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power” (Fiala, 2020, p. xv).

As states consider the lessons of the past decades of conflict, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it should be clear that invading a sovereign state, even with superior military capabilities and technologies, does not guarantee victory. Even if an initial invasion goes smoothly and the resistance to invasion fails, history evidences that the ultimate goal of holding territory becomes difficult and costly in the face of an organized resistance movement. The Viet Cong and the Taliban thwarted the United States through organized resistance that diminished the political will to fight. The mujahadeen did the same thing to the Soviet Union in the 1980s (Jones & Love, 2022, p. 34). By investing in resilience and resistance prior to war and communicating the will to fight, a state creates a tool for denying an adversary's goal over the long term. If this deterrent fails, the capability it created may not reap immediate gains, but it is effective in the long term, which should make potential aggressors pause.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, an alternative approach to deterrence through cooperation guided the United States' strategic posture and explicitly leveraged economic policy for security purposes. This approach intentionally integrated former adversaries into the world economy to incentivize everyone to maintain peace. After decades of competition and conflict, the United States' policy toward Russia and China attempted to convince the remaining hard-liners in their governments that not only would they be unable to achieve their objectives against the liberal world order but that they also would be better off by joining it. The United States' 1993 National Security Strategy, the first after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, extensively discussed the importance of "help[ing] these countries integrate themselves into the free market economic system" and connecting economic policy to security objectives, stating that "nothing would more profoundly enhance our security than to have our former adversaries succeed in establishing stable democratic, free-market systems" (U.S. Department of Defense, 1993, p. 6). While the United States also benefited economically, a primary goal of this economic policy was to build a system that disincentivized conflict by providing benefits to each major player for cooperating. Deterrence switched from keeping an adversary at bay through the threat of imposing costs to an attempt to build common objectives. Despite a period of cooperation, the United States took the basic logic of mutually assured destruction and applied it to economic and trade policy, flipping the calculus and deterring action by interlinking benefits, not by imposing costs.

Irregular Deterrence in Competition

In competition, the foundations and preconditions of irregular deterrence are further built and tested as states seek to ensure their own resilience while denying or limiting the same to an adversary. Competition over scarce resources, particularly over physical resources, generates leverage that can be imposed as part of a strategy of deterrence by punishment. Gaining access to, or pushing an adversary out of, a strategic location can contribute to a broader deterrence by denial campaign.

Today, China systematically uses its economic might to achieve security objectives, gaining access to critical resources that the world economy and foreign militaries rely on. It dominates the rare earth mineral mining and refinement sector, as well as the refinement stage of the supply chain for many other critical minerals (Castillo & Purdy, 2022, pp. 6-8). Access to these resources and the ability to dictate their outflow gives China leverage. Withholding or slowing production down could increase the costs of consumer products in the United States, which could generate domestic pressure to appease China or could slow the development or progress of military technology. Beyond controlling access to

tangible resources, Beijing also uses irregular means to gain access to and hold key locations. Most prominently, over the last decade, China has created artificial islands in the South China Sea to position military forces and project power (Nguyen & Ngan, 2021). These actions are not merely preparatory and useful for a future conventional offensive campaign; it is a means to deter the United States or other potential partners from getting involved. The more Beijing can develop and entrench itself, the greater the cost to another state that would like to stand against it.

To further consolidate control, Beijing uses ships—ostensibly private fishing vessels—to assert Chinese sovereignty through its physical presence by anchoring in contested waters in violation of international law. By regulating the transit of foreign ships in a coastal state's exclusive economic zone, harassing other nations' (e.g., Vietnamese and Filipino) fishing boats to interfere with the right of a coastal state to fish in its exclusive economic zone, and interfering with the navigation of U.S. naval ships, Beijing consistently reinforces its deterrence by denial message (Poling et al., 2021, p. 14). The lack of clarity about how most vessels fit under international laws of war and norms of escalation complicates actions taken against them (Luo & Panter, 2021; Poling et al., 2021, p. 14). Raising costs in irregular deterrence need not merely be through physical destruction but by setting the conditions to lose a broader battle over influence.

Irregular Deterrence in Conflict

Where there are clear tensions and existential threats, even if there may not be direct military involvement, the possibility of open war increases the focus and intensity on proving the credibility of a deterrent. The tools of irregular deterrence during conflict are often the most extreme and start to impose costs, often indirectly, as the edges of a state's resolve and boundaries are tested.

Deterrence is about communicating the will to act, and choosing to engage in a proxy war can become a means of signaling resolve to an adversary, including the use of covert action to provide the executing nation plausible deniability but still cause a behavioral change in an adversary. During the Cold War, when containment faltered and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the United States chose to support the Afghanistan mujahadeen who resisted the Soviet invasion to deter further Soviet efforts to expand. By funneling resources to the mujahadeen, the United States indirectly imposed monetary and human costs on the Soviet Union (Glaster, 2001). Furthermore, it increased the United States' credibility by proving that the United States would not stand passive at further encroachment, but it would act to thwart Soviet expansion (McInnis, 2022). In this time of conflict, the United States attempted to change the cost-benefit calculations through an irregular method (proxy warfare) to increase the overall deterrent effect. The irregular activities did not undermine or negate the power of the nuclear or conventional threats against the Soviet Union but buttressed them.

Today, a few Asian and Pacific states are sending a similar message, leveraging sanctions and providing aid to Ukraine to send a message to China that an attack against Taiwan would be met with costly resistance from the international community (Brown, 2023). At the May 2022 meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an ongoing diplomatic exchange between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States based on a mutual commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, the leaders "discussed our respective responses to the conflict in Ukraine and the ongoing tragic humanitarian crisis, and assessed its implications for the Indo-Pacific... [w]e underscored unequivocally that the

centerpiece of the international order is international law, including the UN Charter, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states. We also emphasized that all countries must seek peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law” (White House, 2022). Ukraine is not merely a regional conflict. Despite significant differences between Ukraine and Taiwan, the threat against the two is perhaps the most prominent evidence of a deeper struggle over the world order. Japan’s 2022 National Defense Strategy, for example, explicitly made this connection, warning that the “unilateral change to the status quo by force that is occurring in Europe could also occur in the Indo-Pacific region,” and therefore, “Japan must clearly demonstrate the intention that Japan will never tolerate unilateral changes to the status quo by force and such attempts” (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022, pp. 8-9). For Japan and other states, mere involvement in the war in Ukraine is a message to another potential adversary.

However, irregular deterrence in conflict does not need to only involve military assets or indirect statements through war. Taiwan is positioning its industrial might and centrality to global economic production, particularly its role as the world’s leading producer of semiconductors, to deter Chinese aggression (Neill, 2023). Commenting on the global importance of these chips, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen explicitly connected the importance of the chips and the existential threat it faces from Beijing, heralding the importance of “jointly producing democracy chips [with the United States] to safeguard the interests of our democratic partners and create greater prosperity” (Blanchard, 2022). Publicizing and pushing the idea of the “Silicon Shield” with the United States represents a clear, non-military means of highlighting the potential cost of an invasion and attempt to further integrate themselves for protection.

Conclusion

Deterrence is ultimately about creating a psychological effect on an opponent, which requires developing a capability and credible communication of the threat that it generates. In relationships marked by cooperation, allies and partners can work together to build the foundations of such a campaign. In competition, the capabilities and resources required for sustainment are contested as states jockey for position. In conflict, costs are imposed as states test the limits and measure reactions to try to evaluate where the true lines lie and better calculate the ultimate cost. Given this escalation and the multifaceted ways in which a campaign can play out, irregular deterrence ought to be embedded in a broader campaign of statecraft to buttress a conventional or nuclear deterrent.

While irregular deterrence is often more abstract or difficult to measure, it is not toothless. Recent experiences in Afghanistan and Vietnam evidence that societal resilience and resistance do not necessarily lead to an immediate victory but rather warn technologically superior states that campaigns that appear simple may not be. The weaponization of supply chains and economic activity is also not empty, as economic stability weighs on populations and often mobilizes political action. Although the strength of each of these deterrents cannot always be fully predicted, a truly integrated deterrent should leverage all available capabilities.

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