The Concept of Deterrence in Modern Proxy Warfare

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ABOUT COMMANDELEVEN

CommandEleven is a research organization focused on Pakistan's national security aspects and enhancing global understanding and collaboration opportunities for the nation.

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Concept of deterrence was of pivotal importance during the peak era of Cold War. Though deterrence itself is an old classical concept as represented by words of Lawrence Freedman as *"I exist, therefore I deter,"* however, this concept achieved focus after the beginning of nuclear arms race between both hegemons, United States and Soviet Union. Theories of deterrence formulated in that era were focused primarily on nuclear weapons. Later, once both adversaries decided to modernize their conventional forces once they realized that nuclear weapons were not solution of every problem, thus splitting the concept into two branches, nuclear deterrence & conventional deterrence. Theories related to nuclear deterrence successfully fulfilled their goals, as both super powers despite engaging in several regional conflicts indirectly, avoided all out nuclear war hence preventing nuclear holocaust. The collapse of Soviet Union saw a major decline in research work related to nuclear deterrence as threats needing to be deterred was extinct and other complex security issues of different scale were raising heads. The first Gulf war in 1991 against Saddam Hussain practically demonstrated the efficiency & lethality of advance conventional forces, shifting attention of researchers towards concept of Conventional deterrence.

As per Colin S. Gray, "*Deterrence is a condition in which a deterre-the object of deterrent menaces-chooses not to behave in ways which he would otherwise have chosen to behave, because he believes that consequences would be intolerable.*" Since deterrence is directly bound with concepts of war & conflicts, in most cases such *undesirable actions* are considered as armed aggression by one state against another. *If a state is deterring an antagonist by giving threat of use of nuclear weapons, then its* **nuclear deterrence,** *and if a state is relying on its overwhelming superiority in conventional forces to deter the hostile challenger, then it is termed as* **conventional deterrence**.

In the global geopolitical system, where major powers tend to explore more opportunities for securing their interests, raising of advance defense & offense capabilities and formation of alliance with other states with similar interests is key aspect. Smaller states serve as a catalyzing source for projection of interests of major powers, in return major powers take responsibility of security of those small nations; at least in general cases. This behavior was practiced during the Cold war when United States protected smaller European states from Soviet aggression by raising off shore bases and deploying strategic assets in Europe. This split up the concept of deterrence into two further categories as **central deterrence,** *in which a state deters an adversary from conducting undesirable actions against its mainland by threatening intolerable damage against that adversary,* and **extended deterrence,** *in which a state deters an adversary from conducting undesirable actions against its allies by threatening intolerable damage against that adversary.*

In contemporary era, rise of non-state actors based threats, which cannot be deterred according to principles of classical concept of deterrence, have considerable undermined the previous research on this subject. Deterrence works when the adversary knows that the risk of loss is much greater than the achievement of objective. Non-state actors do not have anything valuable to lose so they are hard to deter. Current security environment is shaped by militant based threats, which are countered by advancement in conventional capabilities particularly those in association with counter insurgency operations (COIN Ops), intelligence based operations (IBOs), capability to operate in urban, forest & mountainous terrains and induction of weapons, which can strike targets with pinpoint

precision minimizing the collateral damage. These advancements in conventional capabilities have helped to counter & neutralize insurgency based militant threats. But the question still stands **how to deter someone who cannot be deterred?**

This question is one of most demanding question of 21st century security paradigm. Deterrence holds great potential to thwart terrorist attacks in future. But there are three major challenges related to deterring terrorism:

1. In War on Terror, there are several adversaries needed to be deterred. There exists ambiguity about identification of real enemy and to pinpoint its supporting channels. A deterrence option applied on one terror group may not be applicable on another one.
2. Terrorism & related militancy is of several types. It's not possible to cure all diseases with same medicine. Rise of terrorism in any region of world has varying background & credible reasoning, which not only give birth to militancy but also helps to flourish it. If all such variable factors are not critically analyzed, its impractical to deal & deter with all such types of variable militant groups. Any wrong step might have catalyzing effect on militancy instead of inhibiting it.
3. During the Cold War, deterrence was a key pillar of U.S. strategy against the Soviet Union, but in the War on Terror, it should be only one element of a broader strategy. A comprehensive strategy requires offensive operations to attack and disrupt terrorist networks, defenses to protect the homeland, and efforts to counter ideological support for terrorism.

For deterring terrorism, two different approaches can be followed, one is *direct* and other is *indirect*.

In the direct approach, state can use threat against the key leadership, which constitute the foundation of any militant group. This leadership can be of social, political, military and religious domain. This approach is focused to deny the tactical success of militant organizations. Direct response strategies are those that aim to deter an adversary by threatening to retaliate against the adversary for taking hostile action. This type of strategy is probably the most widely understood form of deterrence. These strategies also are sometimes referred to as ''retaliation'' or ''punishment'' strategies. While it may be true that it is difficult to deter suicide bombers with retaliatory threats, not all members of a terrorist network are suicide bombers. Many terrorist leaders, financiers, supporters, radical clerics, and other members of terrorist networks value their lives and possessions. Simple threats of imprisonment and death against these actors can deter terrorist activity. Indirect response strategies are those that deter by threatening to retaliate, not against terrorists themselves, but against something else that terrorists hold dear. While it is sometimes difficult to retaliate against specific terrorists, states may be able to threaten (or convince terrorists that their own actions might harm) other things they value such as their families, assets, and communities.

As Arleigh Burke stated that *''The major deterrent to war is in a man's mind''*, so even dealing with non-state militant threats, the game is still of man's mind, which can be manipulated with fear. The popular *three ''Cs'' of deterrence i.e. Communication, Capability & Credibility* is

workable even in current security scenarios. These three 'Cs' could be evolved to include another element called '*Consistency*'. Thus, it can be stated that consistency of credibility of your capability for communicating with non-state actors might serve a driving vehicle for exploring narrow window of opportunity as far as deterring non-state actors are concerned. A ''perfect'' intelligence system to monitor & track militia groups, predict their motives & pro-active engagement to avoid the fulfillment of their goals can serve as effective mechanism to neutralize and even deter proxy elements. Deterring proxies lies in domain of conventional deterrence and with further modernizing of conventional capabilities, it's safe to assume that states will surely be able to deter non-state threats, thus keeping the applicability & cruciality of concept of deterrence in future times to come.

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