A GRAND STRATEGY ESSAY

Deterrence in the Drone Age

by Amy Zegart

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Deterrence isn't what it used to be. During the Cold War, the prospect of superpower nuclear war spawned a great deal of thinking about how to develop the logic and policy of deterrence. Much attention focused on *mutual assured destruction*, the unsettling idea that credibly threatening a nuclear Armageddon actually helped to avoid it. But deterrence theory was supposed to transcend the nuclear context. In essence, deterrence theory held that preventing any undesired action required making clear beforehand that the adversary would not achieve his objectives (deterrence by denial); even if he did, retribution would be so severe that the gains would not be worth it (deterrence by punishment). Effective deterrence hinged on three things: (1) understanding what the adversary wanted; (2) threatening a response that would make the adversary's move look highly unattractive in the first place; and (3) convincing the adversary that we meant what we said.

This theory hasn't held up so well. In recent days, the Obama administration has been a walking deterrence nightmare, repeatedly issuing threats like hail-Mary football passes, hoping against hope that somebody, somewhere, might somehow believe them. Syria's President Bashar al-Assad stepped right over Obama's redline, using chemical weapons against his own people. Russian president Vladimir Putin did, too, rolling into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine despite warnings from the State Department and White House that violating Ukraine's sovereignty would be "unacceptable" and that Russia would "pay a price."[1]

To be sure, no good theory can survive disastrous implementation, and the Obama administration's hollow threats rang hollow even at home. Yet beneath those recent deterrence failures lurks a deeper problem that is likely to afflict all future

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presidents, however more skillful and savvy they might be on the world stage. The fact is that deterrence theory is increasingly ill-suited to the evolving threat landscape America confronts. Today, adversaries encompass both traditional state actors–with return addresses and fathomable national goals–and nontraditional terrorist groups and hackers with often loose and fluid relationships to states, opaque leadership, murky membership, and objectives that may not involve costs and benefits in this world or in the ways we perceive. Moreover, the typical indicators of military strength, such as the numbers of submarines or nuclear weapons or troops, are often poor indicators of security against asymmetric attacks. In cyberspace, it is often hard to know when an attack has even occurred, much less who is behind it. In a world where attacks and capabilities are hard to see, attackers are hard to identify, and motives are hard to understand, it is becoming evermore challenging to prevent bad things from happening by effectively signaling, "Don't even think about doing that, or else you'll regret it." As many have noted, is time for a fundamental rethink of deterrence theory, its logic, requirements, and applicability in the shifting threat landscape.

Below, I challenge one key component in the deterrence literature: the idea that costly signals make the most credible signals. Although this idea has been taken as gospel by academics and military strategists for decades, the spread of lethal unmanned aerial systems (drones) suggests a very different future may be in store. We may be entering an era where cheap signals made possible by this technology become more effective instruments of coercion than the costly "boots on the ground" options of yesteryear. Drones may be turning deterrence theory on its head.

Thomas Schelling and other leading deterrence thinkers have long maintained that costly signals are most likely to persuade an adversary to back down.[2] Schelling famously wrote that an army could signal its commitment to fight by burning the bridge behind it and eliminating the only path of retreat. A similar logic yields in the hypothetical game of chicken, where two cars head straight toward collision; one wins if the other swerves but both die if they crash. In this case, the driver who demonstrably throws his own steering wheel out the window–leaving him no choice but to move straight ahead–is likely to prevail. Costly signals of commitment weren't just used in thought experiments and academic papers. During the Cold War, the United States stationed thousands of troops in Germany. These "tripwire" forces were not deployed to win a ground war against the Soviet Union; they were deployed to die. Their presence signaled to both the Soviets and NATO allies that any Soviet invasion would kill Americans, inevitably drawing the United States and its nuclear forces into war. Putting American lives on the line was a costly signal showing that US leaders meant business when they said the American nuclear umbrella covered Europe.

Cost in the deterrence context can be usefully thought of encompassing three related but distinct components: blood, treasure, and political will. Costly signals involve taking actions that put human lives on the line, entail substantial funding commitments, and require deep and long-standing political support to be maintained. Committing ground troops to combat is costly in all three respects. Until recently, the logic of costly signals made intuitive sense.[3]

The spread of drones, however, raises serious questions about this logic today. Although the United States has utilized drones far more than any other country, Israel and the United Kingdom have also used lethal drones in combat; Hezbollah, the Iranian-supported terrorist group, tried to use lethal drones in its 2006 war with Israel.[4] China and Iran are believed to have lethal drone capabilities: both have shown their drone technology and said they would be prepared to use it in a crisis.[5] Russia, South Korea, and Taiwan are developing sophisticated lethal drone capabilities; India, Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and others have expressed interest in acquiring it.[6] The Government Accountability Office estimated in 2012 that at least seventy-six countries had some kind of drone program, up from forty-one in 2005.[7]

Lethal drones offer a host of capabilities, including “persistent stare”–the ability to hover over a target for up to fourteen hours without being refueled--and precision strike capabilities that inflict relatively low levels of collateral damage. At the same time, drones are low in cost in every respect. Because drones are remotely piloted, they pose no risk of a pilot being killed or shot down over enemy airspace. US drone operations in Afghanistan, for example, were flown by pilots sitting at Creech Air Force base in Nevada. The financial costs of drone operations are also much lower than alternatives. The MQ-9 Reaper, one of the mainstays of the US arsenal, costs about $12 million. By contrast, the manned F-22 costs ten times as much. The air force’s newest aircraft, the manned F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, is expected to cost between $148 million and $337 million apiece in 2015.[8] The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments estimates that deploying ground troops isn’t cheap, either: the cost of one deployed service member in Afghanistan in FY2014 will be $2.1

million a year.[9] Finally, the political costs of utilizing drones are much lower than operations that require boots on the ground or aviators in the air. Although much has been made of President Obama's use of lethal drone strikes in counterterrorism operations, polls show that a war-weary public still overwhelmingly favors the use of drones for counterterrorism purposes.[10]

Precisely because drones are lower-cost options to fulfill a threat, they are more likely to be initiated, sustained, and supported by a domestic public. With drones, the low-cost threat becomes credible for the first time: "I can send drones at you, all day long, with no risk to me" becomes plausible, sustainable, attractive, and true. Indeed, the drone threat could become more credible than higher-cost signals to put boots on the ground. Why? because high-cost signals may show a willingness to initiate a course of action but not a willingness to sustain it. In the long run, domestic audiences are more likely to maintain support for options that do not risk large numbers of American lives; presidents, legislators, and adversaries should know this at the outset.

Notes

1 Bob Schieffer interviews John Kerry, CBS Face the Nation, March 2, 2014, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/bob-schieffer-interviews-secretary-of-state-john-kerry/ (accessed 10/5/2014); Justin Sink, "Obama: Russia will 'pay a price,'" The Hill, March 24, 2014, http://thehill.com/policy/international/201485-obama-russia-will-pay-a-price (accessed 10/5/2014).

2 Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Barry Nalebuff, "Rational Deterrence in an Imperfect World," World Politics 43 (April 1991), 313-35; James Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," American Political Science Review Vol. 88, No. 3 (September 1994): 577-92.

3 James Fearon, Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands Versus Sinking Costs, The Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Feb. 1997): 68-90.

4 Micah Zenko and Sarah Kreps, "Limiting Armed Drone Proliferation," Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 69, June 2014, p. 6.

5 Ibid.

6 Zenko and Kreps, pp. 3, 7; Richard N. Haass forward (India).

7 Agencies Could Improve Information Sharing and End-Use Monitoring on Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Exports," Government Accountability Office, GAO-12-536, July 2012, p. 9.

8 http://www.cnbc.com/id/101883138#.

9 http://www.csbaonline.org/publications/2013/10/chaos-and-uncertainty-the-fy-14-defense-budget-and-beyond/

10 http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2013/02/06/the-american-public-loves-drones/.

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The certainties of the Cold War, such as they were, have disappeared. The United States now confronts several historically unique challenges, including the rise of a potential peer competitor, a rate of technological change unseen since the nineteenth century, the proliferation of nuclear and biological capabilities, and the possible joining of these capabilities with transnational terrorist movements. There has been no consensus on a grand strategy or even a set of principles to address specific problems. Reactive and ad hoc measures are not adequate.

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