



The Role of Conventional Forces in Deterrence

Maren Leed

For decades, U.S. conventional forces' primary role in deterrence has been to maintain sufficient capability and capacity to engage in a large-scale, potentially long-duration fight with other large conventional forces. While nuclear forces remained the “ultimate” deterrent, conventional U.S. capability was one in the range of challenges an adversary might face when contemplating actions contrary to U.S. national interests.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially in the 21st century, the deterrence picture has become more complex in at least two ways. First, the Bush doctrine of preemption has given way to conventional wisdom that claims that Americans are no longer willing to support large-scale employment of U.S. forces. (This view is borne out by the inability or unwillingness of the U.S. Congress to reverse defense budget cuts, despite numerous and growing demands for U.S. military capabilities around the globe.) A second shift relates to the growing power of non-state actors, from terrorists to criminal networks to pirates, whose deterrence calculi have proven different than those with which many U.S. strategists had become familiar.

Both changes—domestic reluctance to employ large U.S. military forces, and their more limited salience to the full range of complex challenges facing U.S. leaders—affect the basic calculus of deterrence, which is a function of both will and capacity. Political constraints affect the “will” component, and the ability of non-state and irregular actors to pose asymmetric threats to conventional forces affect the relevance of their capacity. Given this reality, questions about how much of a role conventional forces can play in future deterrence strategies are well warranted.

It would be foolish, however, to underestimate their continued relevance. It is important to note that the large, near-peer state competitors for which conventional U.S. forces have been principally designed remain, and in at least one case is growing stronger. This reality implies that capacity will continue to be needed. That said, however, different and smaller capabilities may be more relevant to deterring other threats. The larger question with respect to potential U.S. adversaries is about will: not only whether U.S. leaders would commit forces if required, but, more importantly, whether others perceive that they would.

**SETTING “TRIP WIRES,”
LIKE RED LINES, ONLY
SERVES TO DETER IF,
WHEN TRIPPED, THE
CONSEQUENCES ARE
QUICK AND SEVERE.**

Here, the U.S. government has been clearly signaling its desire to keep its military commitments limited, and when commitment is absolutely necessary, small. While this is an accurate reflection of public desires, the question for U.S. leaders is whether more can be done within the “limited and small” framework to enhance the U.S. deterrent posture. For example, Russia’s move into Crimea was essentially a fait accompli by the time U.S. forces were deployed

on the ground. Could the small units of U.S. forces that deployed to Poland and the Baltic states have been positioned earlier as indications of Russian troop movements became clear? Elsewhere in the world, the tinderboxes in the South and East China Seas could flare at any moment. Should U.S. leaders be routinely approving freedom-of-navigation operations in the South and East China Seas as a demonstration of American commitment to international maritime norms and a political solution to maritime disputes in the region?

Such actions would of course involve risks. Employing forces proactively—however small—runs the risk that if others take actions against them, the United States could be drawn further into conflagrations it might prefer to handle differently. Setting “trip wires,” like red lines, only serves to deter if, when tripped, the consequences are quick and severe. On the other hand, taking more visible though tailored steps might change the trajectory of certain conflicts, forestalling larger problems and potential calls for more significant U.S. military intervention later on. Such actions could align more clearly with current U.S. public will. The capacity question—whether U.S. conventional capabilities are well suited to deter non-state actors—is more complex. In both instances, however, a more robust cost-benefit analysis of the degree to which smaller conventional force formations might better contribute to current deterrence challenges is both necessary and overdue. ►