

Deterrence Paradoxes

Strategic deterrence policy is a dangerous basis for force design

by LtCol Thaddeus Drake, Jr.

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

—Inigo Montoya, The Princess Bride

Many Marines have recently begun to use the language of coercion theory—and more specifically deterrence—to describe Marine Corps force design, goals, and planning efforts. Indeed, the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance (CPG)* uses the word “deter” or “deterrence” 13 different times, filling a large portion of the 23-page document with this idea. In the summary, he states specifically that the Marine Corps will be a force “capable of deterring malign behavior.”¹ More tellingly, the newly released *MCDP 1-4, Competing*, devotes the largest of its five chapters to an extended discussion of strategic coercion theory. In one sense, this is a useful addition to the pantheon of Marine Corps Doctrinal Publications; strategic coercion is not well understood by “practitioners,”² and as it again becomes a policy focus, it is crucial that Marines have a broad understanding of the “why.” However, even with a cogent and well-written description of the basic ideas such as the one found in *Competing*, the terminologies and elements of the theory used by different theorists and thinkers regularly contradict each other and have within them a number of inherent paradoxes. Although a Service-level understanding of a policy focused on deterrence is crucial for force employment and deliberate messaging, there are nonetheless significant issues that come along with the Marine Corps,

>LtCol Drake is the Inspector-Instructor, 1/24 Mar. He is a graduate of Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the School of Advanced Warfighting.

as a Title 10 Service, adopting a deterrence focused force design and *raison d’etre*.

The most glaring issue with the Service using the language of deterrence is that strategic coercion is not a Service decision to make. It is a policy decision that involves employing the entirety of government power in a deliberate messaging strategy focused on preventing specific adversary courses of action. In this context as a national diplomatic strategic messaging effort, coercion is clearly beyond the sole purview of any specific portion of the DOD. The Commandant is careful about this in his *CPG*, stating only that the Service will be “capable of deterrence” (a separate issue discussed later), and *Competing* is clear that the Marine Corps is only one part of a DOD-wide effort.³ Many Marines, however, have not been nearly so nuanced. Indeed, one can easily find specific calls for the Marine Corps to deter China in many Service and other military publications for the last several years.⁴ This is not automatically a problem, as service members often write as private citizens to advocate in print

or online for policies they prefer. It is, however, an issue if a military branch appears to be advocating for particular policy decisions. To even suggest that the *Marine Corps* intends to deter China (or any other nation) is to claim that the Service has the authority to make that decision. That said, recent policy documents such as the *2018 National Defense Strategy* and *2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)*, among others, do articulate shifts in the specific methods of U.S. deterrent strategy in general—from a strategy known as deterrence by punishment to one known as deterrence by denial—as well as tasking the DOD with specific deterrence requirements and objectives.⁵ Thus, the current policy is to pursue deterrence vis a vis key adversaries; however, the Marine Corps’ job in executing this policy should be to field the most effective, capable forces possible—not to try to design a force that is “capable of deterring.” Effective forces are usually capable of deterrence as long as the policy and information strategy are correct, but the inverse is not always the case. Although designing a force specifically focused on deterrence would fall within Title 10 Service responsibilities of man-train-equip, that does not mean it is wise. A force designed primarily for deterrence may not be positioned or designed to win the fight if deterrence should fail.

Presence Does Not Equal Deterrence

Many Marines seem to think that the mere existence or presence of Marines equates to deterrence—a sort of “of course our adversaries would think twice if Marines are around” line of reasoning.⁶ Particularly, many often pri-

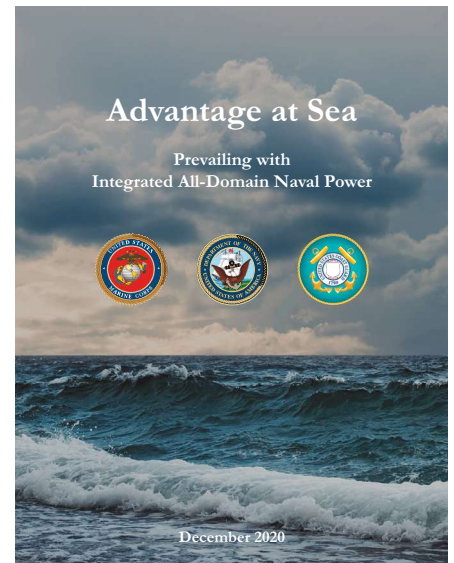
oritize the general geographic location of Marine forces. It is not uncommon to hear Marines referred to as providing deterrence purely because they are “forward based.”⁷ This may be true, but only in the unique context of what Thomas Schelling first referred to as “tripwire forces.” This term describes a friendly force that is clearly unable to win the fight with a specific enemy but is instead used to send a message to the adversary: if he attacks, significant retaliation will be not only likely but almost guaranteed. This is usually applied as an element of the strategy known as “deterrence by punishment.”⁸ Aside from using Marine forces to attempt to guarantee a response in this manner, many Marines have not truly considered how presence in a particular location might support deterrence. For example, how does the unit deployment program to Okinawa influence adversary decision making? Does the presence of an infantry battalion with no organic lift or long-range fires really influence the Chinese, Russian, or even North Korean leadership to avoid actions we do not want them to take? Does it limit aggression in the South or East China Seas? Does it influence the Chinese Communist Party to avoid an attack on Taiwan? Marines also often make more outlandish claims, like presence in Darwin, Australia, is a deterrent. Perhaps, if the intent is to deter the invasion of Australia. Otherwise, the deterrent effect created by the presence of this force is likely to be quite limited. Indeed, Darwin is roughly as far from the South China Sea or Strait of Malacca as Peru is from the Caribbean. Would we consider a Chinese task force training in Peru to be a deterrent limiting actions in the Caribbean? This is not to suggest that Marine presence in Okinawa or Australia does not support U.S. national interests in other ways (building ties with key allies, expanding basing options in the Pacific, etc.), just that many Marines can be rather sloppy when referring to the positioning of forces as deterrents. An example of this reasoning can be found in the newly released tri-Service strategy document, *Advantage at Sea*. One of the key “[i]mplications for the

Naval Service” found in this document is that “[o]perating forward deters coercive behavior and conventional aggression.”⁹ Although forward presence might contribute to deterrence, it is *not* the most important element.

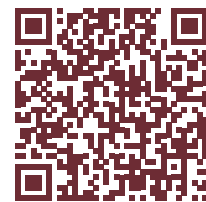
Beyond simple geography, there is at least a portion of the deterrence literature that suggests the presence of a deterrent force may make adversaries *more likely* to attack it preemptively and often leads to an increase in adversary’s capabilities as they build up their own forces to counter the deterrent.¹⁰ However, even if the deterrent is entirely effective at preventing a specific, local action, it is often likely to have the knock-on effect of *increasing* the likelihood of aggression in a different locale.¹¹ This pairs with extensive literature showing that diplomatic and military signals designed to deter are usually ineffective or misunderstood, military doctrine differences between adversaries can lead to deterrence failure, and an adversary’s overall national interest combined with domestic politics usually has a far greater effect on national decision making than the deterrent’s military capability—particularly when nations opt for aggression. These things combine to make positioning of Marine forces with a focus on their deterrence value seem to be a bit of a “forlorn hope.” In fact, it might actually suggest that not only does the presence of Marine forces focused on deterrence in a given location come with the risk inherent in the possibility of deterrence failure but also that their presence could actually exacerbate the potential for conflict—exactly the opposite of the desired posture effect.

Credibility

Given that presence does not inherently equate to deterrence, what does create the “credible deterrent” that the CMC and others have regularly called for? This is an important question, particularly when examined through the lens of coercion theory writ large. Ultimately, coercion—of which deterrence is one type—is a messaging strategy that uses force “to convince another nation to do something that it would not otherwise have done ... either to thwart



Advantage at Sea.



MCDP 1-4

Competing

U.S. Marine Corps

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MCDP 1-4, Competing.



the adversary's action or to punish it."¹² The academic literature generally considers credibility the primary requirement for achieving this: the actor to be convinced must *believe* in the message the deterrent is sending. It generally highlights three main elements necessary to build credibility "capability, cost, and intentions"¹³ and also makes clear that deterrent credibility only applies vis a vis the perception of the state that is being deterred. Many Marines tend to take a solipsistic, internally focused view of deterrence—assuming credibility is only or mostly determined by the overall capability of the deterrent force and over interpreting the effect such a force might create.¹⁴ No matter how "good" a military might be or how committed a nation, if the forces it fields as a deterrent are not perceived as such by its adversary, then deterrence is likely to fail.¹⁵

The three elements of credibility are interdependent, but in the case of a geopolitical superpower like the United States, the first and most important question is that of will (intentions in the formulation above). It applies regardless of the specific type of coercion (compellence, deterrence by denial, deterrence by punishment, etc.), and relates back to the policy question referenced above: the first question an adversary force asks is not "can the deterrent force stop me from taking what I want?" but is instead "will the state making threats really be willing to follow through on them?" If the answer to this question is yes, only then does the *perceived capability* of the deterrent force come into question. For deterrence by denial strategies, the question then becomes "is the deterrent force *able* to stop me from getting what I want?" Of course, even this question is not solely about force capability, as related questions of national will also arise here. Indeed, this is where the final element of credibility applies; if the cost the defending or "denying" forces can inflict on the aggressor is high but the aggressor is willing to accept the price, then the deterrent is not credible and is thus better employed simply as defense. One can find many examples of this sort of "interest mismatch" after World War II, perhaps most tellingly in Vietnam—

where the United States fought a limited conflict focused on strategic compellence while the North Vietnamese used a very different interpretive framework to determine acceptable cost.¹⁶ Many more recent thinkers have suggested that this applies to modern U.S. deterrence vis a vis China and Russia, among others.¹⁷

Assuming that credible deterrence is possible, there are still significant issues with designing a force specifically to deter. Indeed, the entire concept of deterrence by denial is predicated on the idea that deterrent forces are able to forcibly prevent an adversary's action if

employ expeditionary advance bases to "compete below the level of conflict."²⁰ As *MCDP 1-4* describes, Marines are nearly always taking part in competition to some degree.²¹ Nonetheless, there are several potential problems for deterrence that come along with steady state competition below the level of conflict. First, "competition forward," in the parlance of the new tri-Service strategy, implies a force that engages and directly competes with adversaries regularly and often. This almost automatically has potential to degrade deterrence, as the more our forces engage with adversary forces, the less intimidating they will seem to be.

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deterrence fails—or at least convince him of this. The implication is profound: it means that forces optimized for deterrence should not necessarily be the most capable forces possible but instead must *seem* to be the most capable. Although this seems semantic, it is actually a very important distinction. As James Holmes describes Edward Luttwak's theory of "naval suasion," "Whichever force most observers believe would have triumphed in wartime triumphs in peacetime—regardless of whether the observers' opinion makes military sense." Luttwak used the example of the Soviet navy in the 1970's—a far less capable surface force than Western navies, but one that *looked* fearsome.¹⁸ This is a key problem; indeed, there are significant trade-offs involved in optimizing for deterrence over pure capability that should give us pause.

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Many Marines, including the Commandant, have called for Marine Corps forces in the Western Pacific, particularly to serve as a "counter gray zone competition maritime force"¹⁹ and

Indeed, in the case of deterrence, the old saw that "familiarity breeds contempt" is quite apropos.²² Beyond this is also the paradox that any force that is configured and employed to operate and compete below the threshold of armed conflict will necessarily be less useful in a deterrence by denial role. Given geopolitical realities, force elements operating in the "contact" layer (to counter gray zone activities below the conflict threshold) are likely to be small, risk worthy, limited in capability, and often employing limited signature management profiles—precisely the opposite of the requirements one would associate with a deterrence by denial strategy.

Forces intended specifically to support deterrence by denial would instead ostentatiously appear capable of defending the terrain or location they operate in would show essentially zero strategic or operational ambiguity in order to support strategic deterrence messaging and potentially signal that they have more capability than they actually possess. An example of this sort of mismatch can be found in the early days of Operation

DESERT SHIELD, where U.S. Central Command's posturing and aggressive publicity surrounding the arrival of Army and Marine Corps forces to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia potentially deterred further Iraqi aggression. Had this deterrence effort failed, however, these forces would likely have been proven far less capable than the deliberate signaling suggested.²³ Finally, there is some concern that even if signaling is deliberate, intentional, and transparent, it relies on subjective interpretation by the adversary that is to be deterred. Therefore, even if Marine Corps forces were deliberately manned, trained, equipped, and postured as a deterrence by denial force, it might not work. If the adversary misinterpreted capabilities, intentions, or cost, the credibility of the force would be in doubt no matter what was done on the friendly side—and there is some evidence that instead of deterring, this misinterpretation may *actually make conflict more likely*.²⁴

Others have suggested that Marine forces operating within the “contact layer” might be useful as a deterrent trip wire force.²⁵ This is unlikely to be the case, as a trip wire force must necessarily be significant enough to signal to an adversary that its loss would trigger significant retaliation and or commitment on the part of the deterring state. Since Marine forces competing within the weapons engagement zone are specifically intended to be “risk worthy,” it is reasonable to infer that these forces would also not be sufficient enough to serve as a major deterrent tripwire.

A final tradeoff for a force optimized to conduct deterrence by denial is that it may be paradoxically less prepared for an actual fight. Indeed, a force that intends to defend will necessarily be less able to conduct its assigned tasks effectively if it has been used for deterrent purposes. Since deterrence is essentially a policy built around messaging and signaling, deterrent forces are readily

and regularly shown to the adversary with the intent of influencing them. This would obviously cause the loss of tactical surprise, as well as constraining operational maneuver and supportability while operating within the weapons engagement zone.²⁶ Continually advertising capabilities and presence inherently means the adversary can prepare for them. To phrase it bluntly, if you really think you are going to get in a fight to the death with someone, you do not talk about or show them the knife in your pocket—you just stab them when the fight starts. Similarly, optimizing for deterrence and deliberately preparing to fight and win a war may not necessarily align.

Conclusion

The conversation about strategic coercion and deterrence often seems to be a purely academic one that “practitioners” find generally distasteful.²⁷ Although there is an element of truth

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to this, using the right terminology and framing problems correctly is hugely important. To paraphrase a recent report from Chris Dougherty, will adjusting the way we talk and think about deterrence and the Marine Corps' part in it really change our key mission, the likelihood of winning a major fight, or even if deterrence holds in the Pacific or Europe? Probably not. However, words and ideas matter. Otherwise, we would not debate them with such vigor.²⁸ It matters whether we intend our future force to be focused on deterrence or pure capability, just like it matters whether its core missions will be forcible entry, sea denial, or the "seizure and defense of advanced naval bases."²⁹ These different phrasings and associated mission sets change the development of the force and its overall employment. Regardless of broad policy aims and how the combatant commands who are responsible for their fulfillment employ Marine forces, Marine Corps leaders should focus on creating the most effective warfighting force. National and theater leadership will employ available force along with the many available levers of power to achieve particular policy goals. To attempt to construct a force specifically or even partially focused on the singular policy goal of deterrence is a distractor that could potentially result in significant unintended consequences for the Corps of the future. Warfighting prowess must be our focus; whether it is threat-based or capability-based, our force must be designed agnostic of potentially transitory policy positions.

Notes

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3. Gen David H. Berger, "The Case for Change," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: June 2020); and Headquarters Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4, Competing*, (Washington, DC: 2020).

4. For example, see: Gordon Emmanuel, "Smash Bullies," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (June 2020), available at <https://mca-marines.org>; Jeff Cummings, Scott Cuomo, Olivia Garard, and Noah Spataro, "Marine Warbot Companies: Where Naval Warfare, the U.S. National Defense Strategy, and Close Combat Lethality Task Force Intersect," *War on the Rocks*, (June 2018), available at <https://warontherocks.com>; and Walker Mills, "Deterring the Dragon: Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan," *Military Review*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army University Press, September–October 2020).

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15. Ibid.

16. Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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20. Noel J. Williams, "Force Design: It's about Winning," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (July 2020), available at <https://mca-marines.org>.

21. *MCDP 1-4*.

22. This idea has often been applied to terrorism and crime; I contend that it also applies to conventional deterrence in this context. For example, see Shmuel Bar, "Deterring Terrorists," *Hoover Institution Policy Review*, (June 2008), available at <https://www.hoover.org>.

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