



## Deconstructing Deterrence

By

Paul Ingram and Ted Seay

Since October 7, 2023, the term “deterrence” has circulated with increased frequency. There is one problem: as it is currently defined and understood, deterrence does not work.

The *Oxford Essential Dictionary of the US Military* defines deterrence as “the prevention from action by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.” From this, readers can deduce that deterrence is a state of mind and a product of rational decision-making.

Basing security policy on either of these assumptions is foolhardy. It is challenging to calibrate deterrence. This requires distinguishing enough deterrence, where credible fear of counteraction keeps the peace, from too much deterrence, where credible fear of an opponent’s motives can lead to a preemptive attack.

First, some practical examples. Returning to October 7, 2023, it is possible to say Israeli deterrence failed. Since 1948 Israel has sought to maintain a level of strength and preparedness sufficient to prevent its enemies from planning and executing attacks, using the threat of overwhelmingly force to [maintain deterrence against its enemies](#).

The first major sign of trouble with this approach came in 1968, months after Israel’s defeat of its Arab neighbors in the Six-Day War, when Egypt began preparing a response. This came in October 1973 with [Operation Badr](#), the attack which kicked off the Yom Kippur War. Similarly,  [Hamas began planning its 2023 attack](#) immediately after a major defeat nine years before in the Gaza War of July–August 2014.

In both cases, deterrence failed years before the actual attacks. Israel’s overwhelming military superiority simply delayed the inevitable response to a situation its adversaries saw as absolutely unacceptable. Israel, overconfident in its deterrent capability, discounted the danger when [intelligence assets began to report trouble](#). Thus, a single-minded reliance on deterrence actually led to future conflict.

So much for recent practice. On the theoretical side, scholars and practitioners alike have sought to chart the proximate triggers of war. The Athenian general Thucydides offered a multi-dimensional explanation in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. He believed conflict resulted from three factors: *Phobos* (fear), *kerdos* (self-interest), and/or *doxa* (honor or reputation).

Deterrence, as we have seen, relies on threats of force which induce *phobos*, and therein lies a huge problem: it ignores the crucial elements of self-interest and honor or reputation. Thucydides named *phobos* as a principal trigger for conflict, even as definitions of deterrence, the current paradigm for conflict prevention, cite its reliance on instilling *phobos*. As the French might say, not only does deterrence fail in practice, but even worse, it does not work in theory.

### Nuclear Deterrence and Global Devastation

The shortcomings of conventional deterrence are well documented. Then there is its younger brother, nuclear deterrence. The story there is much simpler. Recent research on nuclear winter has lowered estimates of the megatonnage of nuclear detonations needed to trigger the phenomenon. Significant global effects [leading to the starvation of over a billion people](#) could be

triggered by the use of as few as one hundred “small” Hiroshima-sized (total 1.5 megatons) explosions over urban targets.

This is extraordinarily bad news for the nuclear weapons priesthood, which has been chanting slogans of escalation dominance in government ears since the 1960s. The only rational nuclear deterrence that can be relied upon, it now seems, is self-deterrence, where a conflict which seems unwinnable by conventional means is now far more likely to appear unthinkable in nuclear terms.

### Seeking a Realistic, Effective Alternative

Eliminating all nuclear weapons is clearly a necessary part of the journey towards lasting peace. But focusing on particular weapons is miscasting the problem and thus misunderstanding the nature of the solution. The world needs a transition away from the deterrence-based *para bellum* paradigm, the idea that achieving peace requires constant preparation for war, toward a new way of looking at conflict. This article proposes a radically different paradigm, Trinitarian Realism, which rests upon three principal assumptions.

First, in a concept borrowed from the Christian Trinity, one’s individual confession (*peccavi*) is important, but the collective and universal confession (*peccavimus*) is crucial in international peacebuilding. All need to recognize that each has sinned and fallen short, that no one comes to the table, any table, anywhere, with completely clean hands. Second, readers must truly grasp Carl von Clausewitz’s “remarkable trinity” in war, combining the irrational (war moves a citizenry to violence, hatred, and enmity); the non-rational (commanders face “the play of chance and probability”); and the über-rational (governments attempt to “subordinat[e war] as an instrument of policy”).

This guarantees wholly unknowable results. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb points out, “What is surprising is not the magnitude of our forecast errors, but our absence of awareness of it. This is all the more worrisome when engaging in deadly conflicts; [wars are fundamentally unpredictable](#) (and we do not know it).” Finally, that the July 16, 1945, Trinity event at White Sands, New Mexico, the first nuclear explosion, introduced a global catastrophic risk arising from the multiple and wide-ranging [ecological effects of nuclear winter](#).

A transition away from deterrence can begin by not reflexively demonizing anyone with whom there is a serious disagreement. Softening morality projections and focusing judgment on a better understanding of complex collective emotions is also helpful. We can do this with far greater humility, including recognition that we will get our assessments wrong.

Writing of diplomatic historian and Christian apologist Herbert Butterfield, political scientist Paul Sharp provided the bare bones of a [three-dimensional replacement for deterrence](#) which we call strategic compassion: “Butterfield’s writings on Christianity and international relations suggest...the moral principles of self-restraint [as antidote for fear/*phobos*], empathy [honor/*doxa*] and charity [self-interest/*kerdos*] upon which an effective diplomacy should be based.”

Finally, we believe that nations must abandon their attachment to nuclear deterrence postures for the reasons outlined above and must accept the eradication of all nuclear weapons—before they eradicate all of us.

*Paul Ingram is a Research Affiliate and former Academic Programme Manager with the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk (CSER) at Cambridge University. Edmond E. (Ted) Seay III is a*



*retired Foreign Service Officer with 26 years' experience in arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation. His final assignment was as principal arms control advisor to US NATO Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council Ivo Daalder. Opinions expressed in this article are the author's own.*