

Sukin L. The Elements of Deterrence: Strategy, Technology, and Complexity in Global Politics. *Perspectives on Politics*. Published Online 2025:1-2. doi:10.1017/S1537592725000258.

The basic principle of deterrence—that the threat of a conditional punishment will persuade an adversary from taking any action that would trigger the condition in question—beats at the heart of U.S. foreign policy today. When Washington threatens sanctions, escalates-to-deescalate, or declares that “all options are on the table” after an adversary misbehaves, that is deterrence theory at work. Although deterrence is a largely accepted principle of international politics, effectively implementing deterrence is a delicate operation. It requires threatening the right type of action, at the right level of intensity, at the right time, against the right adversary, and in the right way. With a widening portfolio of military and non-military options at their fingertips, the policy choices that underlie states’ attempts at deterrence are becoming increasingly complicated. Yet, these choices remain as important as ever. As Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay remind us in their masterful new book, *Elements of Deterrence: Strategy, Technology, and Complexity in Global Politics*, deterrence that fails, “fails catastrophically” (p. 1).

In *Elements of Deterrence*, Gartzke and Lindsay tackle the challenge of revisiting and revising classical deterrence theory for the modern era. *Elements of Deterrence* presents a tour-de-force review of the principles of deterrence. The book re-assess this cornerstone concept of Cold War thought on international security, updating the conventional scholarly understanding of deterrence—which was primarily informed by work in the nuclear domain—through the integration of deterrence theory with the insights of James Fearon’s “bargaining model of war.” This approach allows Gartzke and Lindsay to identify several essential ways that states seek to influence the outcome of political contestation. In doing so, the authors shed light on how states continue to use the old principles of deterrence to get their way in modern international politics.

Gartzke and Lindsay identify four strategies (coercion, defense, deception, and accommodation) that, respectively, enable states to influence four parameters of the bargaining model (the demands that states make over disputed resources, their military power, the cost of conflict, and the amount of uncertainty that exists about the first three parameters). Manipulation of these parameters can allow states to secure more favorable bargains and avoid fighting wars.

Each strategy that Gartzke and Lindsay identify carries a different strategic objective, although the strategies may fruitfully be used in tandem, and, indeed, states often value multiple strategic objectives. *Elements of Deterrence* explains that states attempt coercion to acquire or maintain political influence by drawing “a brighter line between peace and war” (p. 52). States can thereby persuade their adversaries to accept a deal in the bargaining range, rather than fight. Defensive strategies maximize states’ military power to improve their military effectiveness. States who choose this strategy can shift the bargaining range and achieve more favorable bargains. Deception reduces the costs of conflict to create greater policy efficiency. Though this strategy might increase the attractiveness of military action, lowering costs may be desirable in its own right. Finally, an accommodation strategy reduces uncertainty to enhance strategic stability and avoid costly miscalculation.

Although in their review of these strategies, Gartzke and Lindsay provide a careful discussion of how states might strive to reduce uncertainty and reduce cost, this runs counter to some frameworks of deterrence—such as Nixon’s “madman” theory—that suggest states should, instead, intentionally increase uncertainty to convey a higher likelihood and cost of punishment to their adversaries.

The bargaining model approach that Gartzke and Lindsay apply to deterrence theory moves beyond the traditional breakdown of deterrence into strategies that enhance a state’s capabilities, resolve, (and, although less studied, their assurances to adversaries). In particular, the role of deception has been under-studied in relation to deterrence. Gartzke and Lindsay excel at providing an assessment of how tools of deception can alter the bargaining space.

Gartzke and Lindsay’s approach notably rejects the sharp distinction that has typically been drawn between deterrence and coercion. Although this breadth allows for a more comprehensive examination of how states use threats of punishment to influence their adversary’s behavior, it may also obfuscate important debates that highlight the ways in which deterrent threats are meaningfully distinct from other types of potentially threatening actions.

*Elements of Deterrence* weighs in on both the strategies of deterrence and its tools. Gartzke and Lindsay explain that different capabilities are more expedient for different strategies, thus accounting for functional specialization in military policy. Usefully, the authors identify a trade-off between “winning” and “warning,” noting that what states need to win a war is not necessarily the same as what is needed to deter one. This is expressed as a commitment problem, where “an actor cannot credibly commit to a threat that will be sufficiently degraded by the very act of communicating it” (p. 69). This conundrum is especially sharp in the cyber domain, although this does not obviate its role. Instead, Gartzke and Lindsay discuss how deception strategies can benefit significantly from strengthened power in the cyber domain. Chapters 5-7, which delve into cyber deterrence, are a highlight of the book.

*Elements of Deterrence* focuses primarily on emerging debates about the applications of deterrence to modern types of conflict. In doing so, it focuses especially on the challenges of deterrence in cyberspace, but thoughtful chapters also explore the requirements of deterrence in the contemporary land, sea, air, and space domains. Commentary on deterrence in the perspective of trade policy, as well as in the highly ambiguous “gray zone” round out the collection. The applied chapters benefit from the insights of a diverse palette of excellent contributors. Koji Kagotani, James Walsh, Bryan Early, Oliver Westerwinter, Nadiya Kostyuk, J. Andrés Gannon, and Peter Schram all add to the volume. Scholars and students hoping to better understand the foundations of multi-domain deterrence will benefit from this wide-reaching and considered collection of writings.

*Elements of Deterrence* not only treats the domains separately but also discusses their integration. This is best showcased in Chapter 7, which explores overlaps between the cyber and nuclear domains. Here, Gartzke and Lindsay argue that cyber capabilities’ potential for deception can undermine nuclear deterrence. The need to keep cyber capabilities secret competes with nuclear deterrence’s need for political transparency. If states believe they can effectively neutralize their adversary’s nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3), they will be incentivized to strike first. This is because the critical element of mutually assured destruction—the knowledge that one’s adversary, like oneself, can inflict

prohibitive damage—is undermined through NC3 vulnerabilities. This work speaks to a growing literature about the weaknesses of nuclear forces in the cyber age.

Although Gartzke and Lindsay eloquently progress beyond what they call the “special case” of nuclear war in deterrence theory, this scholarship has important and timely implications for nuclear deterrence. As the United States and its allies adopt an “integrated deterrence” approach—which contextualizes nuclear weapons in a much broader suite of policy tools through which states can influence nuclear adversaries and aspirants—much more attention is needed on the problems of multi-domain deterrence. In a world of (re)emerging nuclear challenges, the United States and its allies require the use of a non-nuclear toolkit to stabilize the nuclear order. To this end, *Elements of Deterrence* provides a considered blueprint.