Response Article

Don't Terminate: Deter to Prevent

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In "On Nuclear War: Deterrence, Escalation, and Control" (*Military and Strategic Affairs*, December 2012), Professor Stephen Cimbala discusses various reasons for the failure of nuclear deterrence and expresses doubts about deterrence for several reasons. These include decisions (by the target of deterrence) that are not based on cost-benefit analysis; irrationality; and misunderstandings. (In another section, he mentions the heightened nuclear alert in 1995 in Russia under Boris Yeltsin after the launch of a Norwegian research missile that had been planned and reported to the Russians in advance, but was believed to be an American missile because of a communications failure within Russia.)

In his discussion of failed nuclear deterrence, Professor Cimbala asks how to end a nuclear conflict that has started, i.e., how to nip a nuclear conflict in the bud. He recognizes the difficulties inherent in the discussion and admits that there is "intellectual resistance... based on the assumption that deterrence is undermined by a willingness to plan seriously for its possible failure." He illustrates what he sees as the need to terminate a nuclear war with the example of an Iranian strike on Israel or a Pakistani attack on India. On the one hand, he discusses the considerations of the state with a limited supply of nuclear weapons ("a nuclear armed Iran or Egypt"), and on the other, he notes that a state that has long had nuclear capability could initiate a nuclear strike no less than small states, whether they are rogue states or new members of the nuclear club. He questions the ability of leaders in states such as North Korea and Israel to maintain control over decisions on force employment, including on nuclear weapons.

Deterrence involves preventing incidents and developments, and therefore it is inherently full of paradoxes. In deterrence between two sides, there is a deterring party and a deterred party. There can also be mutual

deterrence between the two parties, with each of them playing the role of the deterring party and the deterred party. Deterrence is expressed in a declaration of intentions, be they threats or warnings. Party B declares to party A (and sometimes, to the entire world), "If you do such and such, I, party B, will repay you sevenfold. It is not worth it." Party B announces and demonstrates to party A and implicitly, to the entire world, its ability to strike back hard, even after it is struck or in the case of a surprise attack. In nuclear deterrence, the strikes are nuclear. The resolve of the deterring party and the value of the actions from which party A is deterred are the main parameters.

We saw an example of deterrence among three players (type II according to Herman Kahn) when then-US Secretary of State James Baker III warned Saddam Hussein not to use chemical weapons against Israel lest the United States turn Baghdad into a place that would not be inhabitable for 100 years. Iraq was deterred.

A party that is in fact deterred will not rush to declare this publicly. How, then, will we know? And in particular, how will the deterring party know? Even if the deterred party did indeed refrain from carrying out an action, perhaps it did not do so because it was deterred. Perhaps it had not intended to carry out the action in the first place. An example from criminal law is that the prohibition on pilfering exists even when we have no intention or plan at all to pilfer (for instance, an orange from an orchard).

Deterrence literature discusses in detail the differences and the relationship between the act and the retribution. There is a detailed discussion of the value of the act for the potentially deterred party. This value may be very high (such as, for example, for Iran—destroying Israel or turning it into a shadow of its former self). The scope of the retribution is also discussed. There is discussion of retribution (nuclear) so awful that the chances of its occurrence are ostensibly negatively affected. The expression "termination of a nuclear war" seems to me to belong to this category.

When deterrence has failed, things are clear. If there was deterrence—that is, before it failed, there was a warning in effect by the deterring party to the potentially deterred party that it should not carry out the act; there was a rule or law or threat in effect that if the potentially deterred party did not heed the warning, the deterring party would take retaliatory steps against it—and if the potentially deterred party did the deed in spite of the warning, then deterrence has failed, and anything that happens, whether retribution or not, belongs to another theory.

Herein lies the basic paradox of deterrence. Any party that wishes to deter must prepare very well for the possibility of "failure." The better prepared it is, the more it ensures that the deterrence will not fail. But when it has failed, this is another chapter that is not part of the doctrine. This is not only semantics: when we discuss a complicated hypothetical subject and exercises abaut what the other party thinks, it is very important to be precise and to impose a framework or at least a rigid title for each sub-section.

When there are several parties, as in the article by Professor Cimbala, the picture becomes much more complicated, and we must be even more careful. He begins with the possibilities between India and Pakistan, but my impression from his article is that he is talking mainly about other areas of the world, and that there is to steer clear of superficial discusssion.

I view Professor Cimbala's suggestion to terminate a nuclear conflict in its early stages as worrisome. Termination means giving a prize to the first attacker, the surprise attacker. If everyone knew that party C (the world) would terminate a nuclear conflict and not allow it to develop after a nuclear attack, the party attacked would not be allowed to retaliate against the attacker (whether the party attacked explicitly threatened to retaliate or the threat of retaliation was vague). To an attacker with intentions and plans, such a world is more convenient than a world in which each side is entitled to deter its adversary from aggression.

A world in which only one nuclear strike is "permitted" or is possible is a more dangerous world than a multi-nuclear world. In a nuclear conflict between two parties that differ significantly in size and power, this distinction is even more valid: the party that sees itself as stronger has a much more powerful incentive to be the aggressor, to launch a surprise attack feeling confident that the world will prevent the party attacked from launching a retaliatory nuclear strike against the aggressor (or will make it difficult to do so).

I believe that Cimbala's idea is extremely dangerous and should be kept in the field in which it was planted—the field of theoretical articles. Even from a purely theoretical point of view, it is better to prevent nuclear war in the world than to "terminate" it, and since in fact, as Cimbala himself writes, a discussion of "termination" could weaken deterrence, the discussion should be terminated and deterrence strengthened à la Baker: proven, reliable, determined, clear, and explicit, and many times stronger than the strength of the threat.