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## Force Posture and Dissuasion

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*"Every step you take, every move you make, I'll be watching you."*  
The Police, "Every Breath You Take"

### Introduction

Because the U.S. is a superpower, the world is watching what we do—the forces we have, the way we posture them, the actions we take. Oftentimes, the decisions we make about these issues will not be driven primarily with an eye to dissuasion. Indeed, they may have more to do with the defense goals of defeat, or deterrence or even assurance. But for better or worse, these decisions will send messages to a lot of audiences—potential foes, fence sitters, today's friends—and there will be some effects related to dissuasion. The hard part is figuring out what the effects will be—will our decision dissuade a potential adversary from going down a particular military path, or spur their journey—or even expedite it?

What is the role of U.S. force posture in dissuasion? First, a few definitions are required. Like the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*,<sup>[1]</sup> this paper uses a narrow definition of dissuasion—discouraging military aspects of competition, or channeling threats in certain directions—rather than the broader interpretation of demotivating threatening ambitions in the first place. As well, this paper uses a working definition of "dissuasion" as discouraging current or potential adversaries from developing, deploying, augmenting (quantitatively), enhancing (qualitatively) or transferring military capabilities that would threaten the United States, its forces or its interests.<sup>[2]</sup> And it uses a broad definition of "force posture," meaning current force capabilities, where the forces are and how they're postured, military actions taken (whether in exercises or in conflict), infrastructure (including the science and technology base that feeds research, development, testing and engineering, civilian and military personnel, industrial base and economic wherewithal to bring capabilities to fruition quickly) and declaratory policy about all of the above.

There are a number of ways the U.S. might use its force posture (broadly conceived) to dissuade. We can attempt to dissuade potential adversaries from going down certain military paths by imposing costs (in the broadest sense), denying gains, increasing risks, maintaining our advantages, exploiting the "dissuadee's" weaknesses, raising the barriers to entry or competition, feigning disinterest in areas where an adversary's pursuit would worry us, or the opposite—feigning interest or concern in areas where an adversary's pursuits don't bother us—or some combination of the above.<sup>[3]</sup>

Dissuasion is the stepchild, the "also ran," the fourth out of the four defense goals when it comes to decisions on our force posture, and understandably so: It is a diffuse concept, and it is difficult to get a handle on how to make force posture decisions in a way that operationalizes dissuasion. Why?

- First, dissuasion is future-oriented: While the defense goals of deter and defeat both address capabilities adversaries have already, dissuasion is aimed at capabilities they do not yet have, or do not have in the number or quality they might otherwise have. It is hard to make force posture decisions based on the distant future.
- Second, since it is aimed at influencing the decisions of potential adversaries, dissuasion (like deterrence) is context specific. It depends on whom we're trying to dissuade, what we're trying to dissuade them from doing, how they see their stakes, how they see our stakes, how they weigh risks and gains, how they filter information, how they make decisions, their regional situation, their internal politics—all the "local conditions" Keith Payne talks about.<sup>[4]</sup> Since there are multiple actors and actions we may want to dissuade—and what is helpful for dissuasion in one case may be counterproductive in another—it is a complex set of interactions.
- Third, even for any one "dissuadee," it is hard to predict whether our dissuasion strategy and force posture decisions will have the effect we are seeking. And even if the "dissuadee" refrains from doing that which we wished them not to do, it is difficult to ascribe cause and effect; they may have refrained for reasons other than our dissuasion strategy.

For example, take the use of force. It is difficult to imagine "dissuasion" being the primary rationale for going to war. Use of force decisions are more likely to be determined by the defend/defeat goal, with perhaps a second-order goal being to deter the next bad guy. But it is doubtful that dissuading a third party far in the future would be the primary driver. Would it be a third-order effect? It could be, but it is very difficult to assess the effect far down the road, or the effect on "dissuadee" X vs. "dissuadee" Y or Z. It may have an opposite effect—prompting them to take the very action we were trying to dissuade. Country X may look at U.S. willingness to go into Iraq (when the U.S. Government *believed* Iraq had chemical weapons, may have had biological weapons, and was working on but did not yet have nuclear weapons) and conclude that the cost of starting down or continuing on the path of WMD acquisition is just too risky and not worth it. Some argue this is what happened in the case of Libya (though there is debate about Qaddafi's motives and we may never know for sure how much the war in Iraq factored into this). On the other hand, country Y or Z may look at the same Iraq situation, and conclude that the only way to protect itself against being "Saddam-ized" is to acquire WMD. Some say this is precisely or partly what is motivating North Korea, which may have been reinforced by Operation Iraqi Freedom in its determination to acquire nuclear weapons for regime survival. Iran is also showing every sign of being determined to go forward, rather than being dissuaded.

Another example of the uncertainty about the dissuasive effects of U.S. force posture decisions is missile defenses. U.S. missile defenses may help to dissuade nations that don't yet have ballistic missiles from acquiring them. But what about nations that already have some missiles, such as North Korea and Iran? U.S. deployments may dissuade them from building more, from throwing good money after bad. Or, the debate in the U.S. over the limitations and ineffectiveness of missile defenses, and their ability to be overwhelmed by countermeasures or saturation, might convince them that their investment in ballistic missiles remains a good one, and have the opposite effect.

Another example is China. Suppose a U.S. objective were to dissuade China from increasing the numbers and sophistication of its nuclear forces—that is, to discourage the Chinese from augmenting its nuclear missile force, or enhancing it by MIRVing, going to land-based mobiles, or moving to sea-based ballistic missiles. This may or may not be a good dissuasion objective; we'll return to that in a moment. But if it were a U.S.

dissuasion objective, what's the role of U.S. force posture in achieving it?

Several aspects of U.S. force posture may influence Chinese decisions in this area: nuclear forces; non-nuclear strike forces; and missile defenses. The level of U.S. nuclear forces, even under the Moscow Treaty, remains high: 1,700-2,200 deployed strategic nuclear weapons. Some would argue that a primary reason for keeping force levels high—aside from the publicly-proclaimed goal of assuring allies that U.S. nuclear forces are "second to none"—is to dissuade China from thinking it can compete quantitatively with the U.S. as a nuclear power. That would remove one possible motivation for higher numbers of Chinese nuclear forces, since it would be difficult for China to build up to levels equal to those of the U.S. for influence purposes.

On the other hand, both high U.S. nuclear force levels, as well as U.S. non-nuclear strike capabilities—about which China has stated its concerns—could lead China to believe it needs more nuclear forces, and more mobile ones, if it wants to maintain a survivable nuclear force.

U.S. missile defense decisions could either dissuade China, or spur it to increase and improve its nuclear missiles. The U.S., with its open-ended, no-architecture, spiral-development approach to missile defenses, has not decided how much to deploy. The U.S. has maintained that its program is aimed at rogue states' ballistic missiles, and has not consciously geared its program toward China. And China has long been modernizing its nuclear forces in any event, and may be on a steady, predetermined buildup. But there are two other scenarios worth considering.

In the first alternative scenario, if the U.S. deploys only low levels of missile defenses aimed at rogue states' ballistic missiles and not China, missile defense may spur China to go faster and farther in MIRVing or going mobile ("sprinting" ahead of our missile defenses, as described in Brad Roberts' *Strategic Insight*). This might be characterized as "unintended collateral dissuasive effects"—a force posture decision meant to dissuade one party (the rogue state) from acquiring or improving its ballistic missiles may have the collateral effect of spurring or provoking a buildup by China that's larger or more sophisticated than it would be absent missile defenses. (One can wonder, however, if China ends up with about the same number of ballistic missiles that can threaten the United States over and above missile defense capabilities as they have today absent defenses, whether much would have changed.)

In the second alternative scenario, if the U.S. decided at some future date to build missile defenses geared toward China, there could be a level of U.S. missile defense forces high enough to dissuade China from trying to overcome U.S. defenses—but it is unclear whether such a level exists, or what that level might be. Deploying more defenses, at a pretty high level, may dissuade China from going to high levels of missiles, or it may spur them on. Whether they are dissuaded or spurred on depends on how determined they are, what they think their stakes are, and the tradeoffs they are willing to make in order to compete (in this particular area or overall).

But is dissuading China from augmenting or enhancing its nuclear missile force a good dissuasion objective in the first place? The generic question is whether, if we closed off one path, "dissuadees" would pursue other paths that could be of greater concern to us. If the U.S. tried to deploy sufficient missile defenses (when combined with U.S. offenses) to deny China confidence that it can hold the U.S. at risk with its nuclear forces, would China simply redirect its efforts away from these areas, and into other areas which the U.S. may find more worrisome—such as threats to our use of space, or offensive information operations (IO) such as computer network attacks?

If it were a trade off, and the U.S. could choose its area of military competition with China, it might prefer a competition in the well-understood and arguably manageable areas of nuclear missiles and missile defenses rather than in the areas of space or information operations. But that is not necessarily the case; the Chinese could be determined to go down the path of space and IO capability in any event (some would argue that horse is already out of the barn). However, there may be ways to make it

harder for them—to raise the costs, deny the benefits, and maintain our advantages.

## Operationalizing Dissuasion

Let's return to the issue of how to operationalize dissuasion and factor it into our force posture decisions. If "every move we make and every step we take" affects dissuasion (as well as deterrence and assurance), is it too diffuse a concept for the U.S. to have a coherent dissuasion strategy? If dissuasion is influenced by everything, does it drive nothing? If it is inherently difficult to sort what its effects will be, and to disentangle the complex and often contradictory interactions of multiple decisions on multiple actors, should we throw up our hands and see dissuasion as only a byproduct of our force posture decisions—something best seen in the rear-view mirror?

As the 2001 QDR stated, "To have a dissuasive effect, this combination of technical, experimental and operational activity has to have a *clear strategic focus* [emphasis added]." But what is that "clear strategic focus" of U.S. dissuasion strategy? The nature of dissuasion—its diffuseness, complexity and the difficulty of predicting outcomes—would suggest that we should choose a few dissuasion goals and a few of the most pertinent aspects of our force posture, and focus on them. Examples of specific actors we may want to dissuade from doing something specific (which were discussed earlier) could include dissuading China from becoming a threat to U.S. space or information capabilities, or dissuading rogue states from acquiring (or augmenting and enhancing) WMD and/or ballistic missiles.

Most U.S. force posture decisions—such as the use of force, or what systems to acquire—are driven mainly by the defense goals of "deter" and "defeat." However, because of the future-looking nature of dissuasion, one aspect of force posture which lends itself to being driven primarily by dissuasion considerations is our infrastructure for science, technology, research, development, testing and engineering (S&T/RDT&E) short of full-scale production. In the S&T/RDT&E area, having a diversity of technologies and a variety of options for capabilities that we could bring to fruition is a powerful dissuasion tool. Adding dissuasion to the factors to be weighed when budget and programmatic decisions are being made gives the future a seat at the table.

Dissuasion may also drive force decisions about whether to get rid of things we already have, at least where the costs of maintaining what we have are relatively low. This is arguably a rationale for maintaining U.S. advantages in the nuclear, naval, and air power arenas—less because they are needed at today's level and sophistication to deter and defeat current threats, and more because the scale and sheer force levels in these areas provide barriers to entry or barriers to competition for any nation that might want to have forces perceived as approaching ours in these areas.

There are additional questions and issues associated with dissuasion and force posture:

- The 2001 QDR, in addressing the need for "a clear strategic focus" for dissuasion, also states that "New processes and organizations are needed within the defense establishment to provide this focus." Should dissuasion objectives be a U.S. Government decision, and what is the role of the National Security Council and the State Department? Within the Department of Defense, who is the advocate for dissuasion in U.S. force posture decisions? Is it OSD Policy? Or the Joint Staff/J-5? Is it STRATCOM, which was given the role of drafting the Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept—which also addresses dissuasion? Does dissuasion appear as an explicit factor when PA&E and J-8 are framing programmatic and budget decisions? Who is sitting at the table when decisions are being made and insisting that dissuasion be considered? And what is the relationship between transformation and dissuasion?
- How much should we talk openly about what our dissuasion objectives are? As soon as U.S. officials say publicly or declare in official documents that they want

to dissuade a particular state from going down a particular path, does it make it that capability much more attractive to the "dissuadee?"

- What should the U.S. say about force capabilities? Should the U.S. take dissuasion into account in its decisions on what to release on the technical aspects of programs and tests, to magnify the perception of our capabilities in order to increase the perception by "dissuadees" of gains denied and of costs that would be incurred, of barriers that would have to be overcome to have an effective capability against the U.S.?
- Since our S&T/RDT&E reputation will be important for dissuasion, what can the U.S. do to foster or reinforce the perception that U.S. scientists are innovative, creative and can tackle any problem and solve it—that U.S. scientists (whether in academia, industry or government) can invent anything and can make it work, and that we have the economic wherewithal to bring it to fruition?
- When should the U.S. make clear the capabilities it is pursuing, and when should it "spring" something new and impressive on the world (à la the B-2 bomber rollout) to reinforce the perception of potential adversaries that the U.S. may have a potential they don't know about?
- Whatever dissuasion goals and strategy the U.S. adopts, it must be consistent with U.S. values and the U.S. national character. For instance, the U.S. Government couldn't sustain a massive deception campaign (certainly not if it is known to be a deception) as part of a dissuasion effort, given the way our system works and our open society—and efforts to do so would be counterproductive. Having a consistent message to which everyone adheres is not the American way. Confusing adversaries so they don't know exactly what we're pursuing seriously (since every program is someone's pet rock) or how good we are at it would likely be a much more feasible form of dissuasion for the United States.

## Conclusion

For most aspects of force posture—force sizing, basing, use of force—dissuasion is not the main driver, but a byproduct of decisions taken for other reasons. There may be only a handful of decisions driven primarily by dissuasion: our decisions on the science and technology base, RDT&E, and other infrastructure aspects of our posture—the "seed corn" that affects perceptions about what the U.S. can do in the future; and decisions about when to hold on to forces we already have to raise the barriers to competition or equality in a particular area. The idea of "future risk"—usually sacrificed to immediate, operational, "defend and defeat" risks—is the reason dissuasion is an important concept. But dissuasion is a prism through which we should consciously run all our force posture decisions, so that we are conscious of the fact that what we have, say and do has an effect on decisions of potential adversaries and fence sitters and the military paths they choose to take or not take.

For cases where dissuasion will be a primary driver, the United States should:

- Choose a few dissuasion goals, and focus its efforts on closing off paths that are most worrisome;
- Identify the "dissuasion advocates" for the internal decision-making process;
- Not talk publicly about its dissuasion objectives; and
- Ensure that U.S. dissuasion strategy is consistent with the U.S. national character—since any dissuasion strategy that includes a cacophony of voices saying diverse and contradictory things plays to America's strengths.

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## References

1. [Quadrennial Defense Review Report](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, September 30, 2001): "Dissuading Future Military Competition. Through its strategy and actions, the United States influences the nature of future military competitions, channels threats in certain directions, and complicates military planning for potential adversaries in the future. Well targeted strategy and policy can therefore dissuade other countries from initiating future military competitions. The United States can exert such influence through the conduct of its research, development, test and demonstration programs. It can do so by maintaining or enhancing advantages in key areas of military capability. Given the availability of advanced technology and systems to potential adversaries, dissuasion will also require the United States to experiment with revolutionary operational concepts, capabilities and organizational arrangements and to encourage the development of a culture within the military that embraces innovation and risk-taking. To have a dissuasive effect, this combination of technical, experimental and operational activity has to have a clear strategic focus. New processes and organizations are needed within the defense establishment to provide this focus."
2. The author acknowledges Andrew Krepenovich's work on dissuasion at the Center for Security and Budgetary Affairs in influencing this definition.
3. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and many overlap; however, since the thinking on dissuasion is still at an early stage, it is preferable not to eliminate categories too early, but look at each to see if it tells us something useful about dissuasion.
4. See Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky Press, 2001), Chapter 5.

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