

## Naval War College Review

---

Volume 38  
Number 4 *May-Jun*

Article 17

---

1985

### Conventional Deterrence

Jed C. Snyder

John J. Mearsheimer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Snyder, Jed C. and Mearsheimer, John J. (1985) "Conventional Deterrence," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 38 : No. 4 , Article 17.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol38/iss4/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

much less significant than what he did after the war began. The *Scharnhorst* battle includes some 38 pages of text, while duty in the Pacific rates only 17 pages and his final tour as First Sea Lord but 11; altogether not a well-balanced division of emphasis.

In conclusion, this book could very well interest the ardent naval historian or buff, but both the protagonist and the way he is described would very likely not appeal to a wide audience.

THOMAS B. BUELL  
Wayzata, Minnesota

Mearsheimer, John J. *Conventional Deterrence*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983. 296pp. \$29.50

Although scholars and defense policy analysts have been writing about deterrence of conflict for decades, the interest in and attention paid to "conventional" vs. "nuclear" strategies of conflict avoidance is experiencing an analytical renaissance. The reasons for this renewed interest are multiple:

- The realization by the Western allies that political and budgetary constraints will in all likelihood prevent any significant *quantitative* reinforcement of Nato's conventional strength in Europe. Therefore, force enhancement will most probably be limited to qualitative advances and alterations in tactics.

- An emerging consensus that the Western nuclear posture may (a) no longer remain sufficiently credible to deter a Soviet assault (conventional or nuclear) on western Europe, and

(b) if this is the case then the erosion of political credibility which would result from such an admission might serve to unravel what is left of Nato's "strategic partnership."

- The hope among historical scholars that the study of past failures and successes of conventional deterrent strategies may serve as prescriptive guides for future policy.

It is the last factor which has inspired John J. Mearsheimer to produce *Conventional Deterrence*, an intellectually rich analysis which is perhaps the broadest treatment of the issue to date.

Mearsheimer goes beyond the usual static indices to examine lessons of history on both the military and political levels. Although he has a keen interest in the technical issues which have themselves created a debate among specialists—e.g., maneuver vs. firepower—he does not allow his analysis to become stalled in endless tactical dissection which, while important to the battlefield commander, are less critical to uncovering key political and military trends.

In addition, Mearsheimer does not limit his examination to Central Europe—the locus for the classical, and often dated, East-West scenarios. There is a splendid chapter on "Conventional Deterrence and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" which examines major Arab-Israeli wars and the reasons why deterrence failed in each case. The focus here will be on a later chapter in the book, "The Prospects for Conventional Deterrence in Central Europe," where the author seeks "to determine

the prospects for deterring the Soviets from launching a conventional attack in a future crisis."

Mearsheimer's principal conclusion in this chapter is that the Soviets enjoy a relatively large quantitative advantage in key categories of conventional arms and force comparisons; therefore, our conclusions about the prospects for defeat or victory are scenario-dependent. In part, the potential outcomes will be a function of warning, mobilization rates and readiness.

Mearsheimer is correct in suggesting that a battle in Central Europe that erupts from a Soviet "standing start attack" may have a different outcome than one which is initiated only after a Warsaw Pact mobilization. But the author's assumptions are open to question and leave room for debate—that a "limited victory" would hardly be "an attractive option" and that for a "war in Europe to become a realistic possibility, there would have to be a significant deterioration in East-West relations."

One could argue, for example, that if the Soviet Union is primarily interested in the political dissolution of Nato (rather than its military conquest) a limited military action might have a much greater political effect than a potentially lengthy campaign where the Soviets would almost certainly risk nuclear escalation and retaliation with US strategic systems. That risk would be much reduced in a lightning operation designed to present Nato with a political fait accompli. In addition,

for reasons of political timidity and tactical ineptness, there is some question about Nato's ability to respond rapidly to signals of Soviet mobilization. This at least suggests that strategic warning might not be as critical a factor in Nato's response, as Mearsheimer argues.

Finally, I am not persuaded that East-West relations would have to reach a dangerously strained level before a war in Europe becomes a "realistic possibility." I recall similar assurances just prior to the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and Moscow's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. True, these attacks did not take place in Central Europe and therefore the Soviet calculations would be different. Nevertheless, they do suggest that Soviet conceptions of what is "realistic" may differ markedly from our own.

In sum, John Mearsheimer has produced a valuable work of solid scholarship and provocative analysis. His appreciation for the lessons of history provides an edifying perspective for those who insist on ignoring the past.

JED C. SNYDER  
Hudson Institute

Clark, Asa A. IV et al. eds. *The Defense Reform Debate: Issues and Analysis*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984. 370pp. \$30, paper \$12.95

The military reform movement is attempting a newly unprecedented effort to bring about changes in US military doctrine, strategy, weapons and organization. The movement