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A Good Starting Point for Deterrence

Dean Cheng

CNA

A central focus for much of the Cold War was determining what would deter the Soviet Union; this was a topic upon which many of the West's best and brightest labored to determine. In order to deter the former Soviet Union, a huge intellectual edifice was erected, which helped guide a variety of military programs, including not only the American strategic triad of land-based and sea-based missiles and manned bombers, but tactical nuclear weapons, hardened command and control, and space-based early warning systems. It also incorporated concepts, such as "extended deterrence," "escalation dominance," and "mutual assured destruction."

Unfortunately, much of this effort turned out to be problematic. Although the Soviets accepted the concept of deterrence, they did not develop a counterpart to the intricate Western theories associated with deterrence, including such elements as selective targeting or deliberate escalation. Nor did they accept the idea that vulnerability was desirable for reasons of strategic stability – a cornerstone of "mutual assured destruction."³⁹

In discussing the prospects for space deterrence, the authors exhibit the strengths and weaknesses of this legacy. The paper as

presented builds atop the long tradition of deterrence theory and writings, and provides an excellent overview of potential approaches and policy responses. But it also exhibits certain key limitations.

One limitation is the decision to restrict the discussion of deterrence to a focus on space-based systems. While the need to bound the problem is understandable, it raises the fundamental question of whether those who would be deterred will necessarily function within the same boundaries and constraints. While perhaps beyond the scope of this specific commentary, the matter of space deterrence needs to incorporate the ability to deter attacks against the entire space infrastructure, including systems in orbit, terrestrial launch and mission support facilities, as well as the communications and data channels that link all these elements together.

The other limitation echoes the problems of Cold War deterrence; namely, whether all the relevant states upon which space deterrence is expected to apply actually share a common set of beliefs and values. Upon this rests such key assumptions as whether both sides are likely to pursue "prudent" courses of action in peacetime or in crisis, whether the status quo is considered acceptable (and therefore is the preferred state of affairs) or whether there exist "red lines" and how identifiable they may be.

Specifically in the case of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is worth considering whether their concepts of deterrence and those of the United States are

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³⁹See John Battilega, "Soviet Views of Nuclear Warfare: The Post-Cold War Interviews," in Henry Sokolski, ed., *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practices* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2004), 159-160.

compatible. For example, People's Liberation Army (PLA) authors discuss in their textbooks the utility of undertaking anti-satellite (ASAT) tests as a means of establishing the credibility of deterrence. They also note that the costs of replacing space systems may help coerce an opponent, as coercion is an integral part of Chinese conceptions of deterrence.⁴⁰ This is a very different perspective from that of the authors of the deterrence study. Similarly, despite being a member of the Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordinating Committee (IADC), the PRC was not "deterred by entanglement" from engaging in the January 2007 ASAT test in the first place.

Such issues, however, serve to highlight the importance of a careful study of the issue of space deterrence, and to do so from more than just an American perspective. The study by the Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies serves as an excellent starting point for such an effort.

⁴⁰Xianqi Chang, *Military Astronautics* (Defense Industries Press, People's Republic of China, 2005), 209-304.