What Is Deterrence? Core Concepts and Distinctions

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EPIS Basics: What Is Deterrence? Core Concepts and Distinctions

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even more so since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, deterrence – alongside defence – has re-emerged as one of NATO's core purposes. This article unpacks the fundamental concepts and principles about deterrence.

At its most basic level, deterrence refers to the attempt to prevent an actor – usually a state – from taking an unwanted action. In international

politics, this most commonly means discouraging military aggression. Deterrence is distinct from forcing an actor to do something; its logic is preventive rather than coercive. The goal is to shape expectations before a crisis or conflict occurs, so that a potential aggressor concludes that the action in question is not worth pursuing.

Denial Versus Punishment

A central distinction in deterrence theory is between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Deterrence by denial seeks to convince a potential attacker that it would be unable to achieve its objectives. This can be done by making an attack militarily infeasible, slow, or highly uncertain. Forward-deployed forces, defensive capabilities, and resilience measures all serve this purpose by denying the prospect of a quick or decisive success. Deterrence by punishment, by contrast, does not necessarily prevent an initial attack but threatens severe consequences if one occurs. These consequences can include military retaliation, economic sanctions, or political isolation. In practice, most deterrence strategies rely on a combination of denial and punishment rather than choosing between them.

Direct Versus Extended

Another important distinction is between direct and extended deterrence. Direct deterrence refers to efforts by a state to prevent attacks on its own territory. Because a state's survival and sovereignty are directly at stake, such deterrence is generally considered more credible. Extended deterrence, on the other hand, involves discouraging attacks against allies or partners. NATO's collective defence commitment is a prominent example. Extended deterrence is inherently more challenging, as it requires convincing a potential aggressor that a state will act militarily on behalf of others, even at significant cost to itself.

General Versus Immediate

Deterrence can also be understood in terms of timing. General deterrence describes the ongoing, long-term effort to prevent aggression in the absence of an immediate crisis. It is maintained through standing military capabilities, routine deployments, alliances, and consistent signalling. Immediate deterrence, by contrast, occurs during periods of heightened tension when a specific attack appears possible or imminent. In such situations, deterrent measures tend to be more visible, urgent, and targeted, reflecting the increased risk of miscalculation and escalation.

Narrow Versus Broad Concepts of Deterrence

Finally, deterrence can be conceived narrowly or broadly. A narrow understanding focuses exclusively on military means, particularly the threat or use of armed force. A broader conception includes non-military instru-

ments such as economic sanctions, diplomatic measures, and political or institutional pressure. In contemporary security policy, deterrence is rarely limited to a single domain. Instead, states typically combine military and non-military tools in an effort to influence the calculations of potential adversaries across multiple areas.

Further Reading: Mazarr, M. J. (2018). *Understanding Deterrence*. RAND Corporation. https://doi.org/10.7249/PE295

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