

# Letter from America

By Gp Capt Carl Scott



*Photo by Master Sgt. Ken Hammond, U.S. Air Force*

On October 29 2008, the New York Times reported Defence Secretary Robert Gates comments before the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that the United States would hold “fully accountable” any country or group that helped terrorists to acquire or use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. The statement was intended to articulate a reinvigorated vision of deterrence, going beyond the cold war notion that a president could respond with overwhelming force against a country that directly attacked the United States or its allies with unconventional weapons. Gates went on to say:

“Today we also make clear that the United States will hold any state, terrorist group or other non-state actor or individual fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction — whether by facilitating, financing or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts,”

He said it was important to modernise the nation’s nuclear arsenal as a hedge against what he described as “rising and resurgent powers” like Russia or China, as well as “rogue nations” like Iran or North Korea and international terrorists. By declaring that those who facilitated a terrorist attack would be held “fully accountable,” Mr. Gates left the door open to diplomatic and economic responses as well as military ones. And, to be sure, the United States has acted forcefully before against those who sheltered terrorists, with the invasion of Afghanistan to oust Al Qaeda and its Taliban government

supporters after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

In the wake of a series of attacks by US air and ground forces in Pakistan, senior officials also sought to justify an attack against a suspected Iraqi insurgent leader in Syria on 25<sup>th</sup> October by saying that the administration was operating under an expansive new definition of self-defence. The policy, officials said, provided a rationale for conventional strikes on militant targets in a sovereign nation without its consent - if that nation were unable or unwilling to halt the threat on its own.

This could represent a dangerous escalation in US preparedness to use force, potentially outside of the bounds of international law and accepted practice, further destabilising marginal states and isolating the US from its putative allies, or as the basis for a new dialogue with potential adversaries: strategic coercion.

### **Deterrence in the contemporary world**

*‘The best victory is when the opponent surrenders of its own accord before there are any actual hostilities. It is best to win without fighting... ..There has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.’*

Sun Tzu

There can be no doubt, that deterring conflict, as a strategy, is infinitely superior to committing forces to the field. From Sun Tzu to the present, by way of the great clashes of the twentieth century, it has been noted that once committed, no side wins, resources are consumed, moral and

political capital expended. Empires fall at the point of victory, unable to absorb the costs of peace. The map of Europe in 1900, resplendent with Imperial Eagles and preening martial pride, bears little resemblance to that of 2000. The victors and vanquished alike have disappeared from the global stage. A few pale shadows linger; a post-industrial, post-imperial Britain bears the name of its Imperial antecedent, though none of the influence. The Saxe-Coburg-Gothas are mute alongside the Hapsburgs and Romanovs. History is littered with the bones of great Emperors and their loyal Generals. Great bellicose leviathons have consumed decades of cultural growth, the lives of millions of innocents and the product of years of industry, then lapsed into deserved obscurity.

Now, in turn, the modest liberal democracies, founded on sound principles of freedom and empowerment of the common man, are following the parade of ancestors into imperial overstretch, deluded by a neo-conservative fantasy of unbounded power.

*'...alarm bells are ringing throughout the US Defense community as the realization sinks in that the Defense Department is facing the makings of a 'perfect storm'. Runaway operations and maintenance costs due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; soaring personnel obligations; enormous reset, recapitalization and modernization needs; intentional growth in the size of the Army and Marine Corps and the eventual decline of wartime supplemental spending will all combine to require the Pentagon and Congress to make some very difficult choices.'*<sup>1</sup>

The costs are manifold. The direct

financial cost of warfare is staggering, but the lost economic opportunities border on the inconceivable; the diversion of industrial capacity, the focus of the many creative attributes of a developed state on the technology of force; the destruction of lives, besides those merely wasted; the consumption of political capital, both internally with the rise of dissent and fragmentation of society as the vacuum of propaganda replaces intellectual curiosity and diversity, and externally with the loss of trading partners and the cultural enrichment of engagement. The failure of diplomacy that leads to conflict also leads to power balancing behaviours amongst both opponents and uncommitted states. In short: Primacy in the international system is actively consumed by violent action. Strength is respected, by man and state, but aggression, the casual resort to lethal violence, is not. Friends waver and distance themselves, it engenders fear in those that may be considered enemies. And should the war be lost, then the game, the future credibility of the belligerent, is lost. All is gambled, at great expense, on an uncertain outcome.

It is central to our future, therefore, in the United Kingdom and in the United States, that we find a means of deterring conflict, of coercing opponents and assuring friends. The alternative is that we continue to grind away our own societies and our credibility on the global stage in sustaining fielded armies in remote desert provinces, the ground of our enemies choosing, in conflicts that are discretionary, but once begun, increasingly demanding of blood and treasure.

*'We need a new model for deterrence theory, and we need it now. Time is not on our side. This model must possess three particular attributes. First, it should espouse the highest standards of nuclear preparedness... Secondly the model must be credible... Lastly any model of deterrence needs to address the challenges posed by extremists and ideologues...How do we deter an idea or a movement?'*

Adm Michael Mullen, US Navy,  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

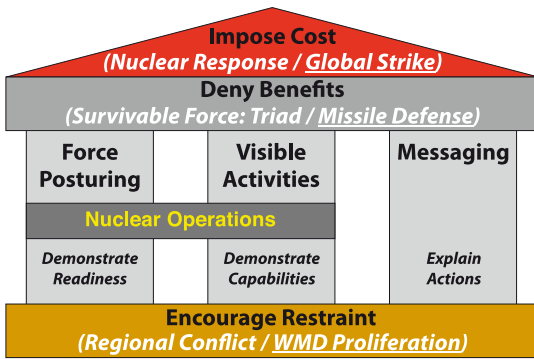
A decade or more ago we moved away from the strategy of deterrence that had served us well in containing the conflict between those favouring capitalism and those who held greater faith in human nature. It was a flawed kind of deterrence, that gradually fell into disuse. It was a simple thing. You threatened your opponent with catastrophic force if he acted against you. If he started something, you 'cleaned his clock' as one Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff so succinctly put it<sup>2</sup>. This glorious simplicity was, of course, far from a complete solution to the pressures in the international system. It offered little, in isolation, of reconciliation or recognition of cause. Maintaining credibility of the threat was challenging. At times it demanded studied 'irrationality' on the part of leaders to add credibility to the threat of nuclear war<sup>3</sup>. It forced opponents into alternate strategies, proxy wars in South East Asia, Africa and the Middle-East and the exercise of 'soft power', diplomatic and economic manoeuvring, and the sponsoring of deniable actions by sub-state groups. It spawned decapitation strategies, assassinations and the sponsorship of corrupt and brutal regimes. All of these

alternates, flawed as they were, offered less damaging alternatives to open confrontation between heavily armed nation states. But in the current environment we have lost our appetite for deterrence. The damage caused by terrorist attacks, frequently insignificant compared to the carnage ensuing the clash of armies, have been deemed sufficiently important to warrant the deployment of armies to foreign soil and, ultimately, far greater cost and loss of life to all the protagonists.

The banal enthusiasm with which neoconservative politicians in the United States over-estimated the ability of armed force to resolve complex issues, has paled as they were driven from office. In their wake, the Nation faces a greater challenge. If operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are curtailed, without conspicuous success, then the deterrent effect of their power is weakened further. If the struggle is continued indefinitely, the costs in blood and treasure grossly outweigh any potential benefit. Therefore, the need now is to develop a theory of deterrence that meets the challenge of the current environment.

There is a residue of deterrence theory available, though much may need to be refreshed and much discarded. Dealing with existential threats posed by accountable, identifiable nation states remains a relatively simple transaction. Nuclear weapons deter such threats. It may be the only utility they hold, but it should not be undervalued. The work undertaken by Gen Elder and the US 8th Air Force, is addressing many of the challenges. The model he offers for nuclear deterrence is familiar:

## Deterrence Operations

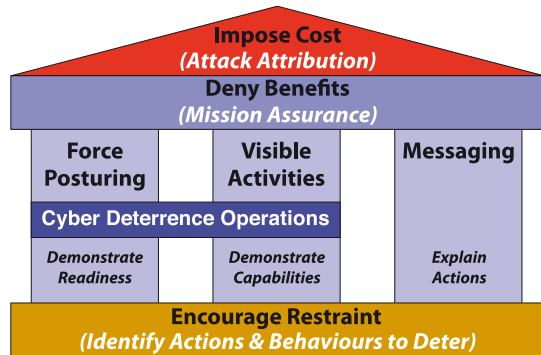


The fundamental challenge is to provide a credible threat that deters a course of action by making the costs outweigh the benefits. That is dependent on displaying capability and the will to employ it, a capability which is sufficiently nuanced that its use would be legitimate, deliverable and damaging to the opponent. The messaging element is a dialogue to define the bounds of tolerable behaviour, with a clear understanding of the ramifications of crossing that line. A defensive element of the strategy is to ensure the benefits of hostile action are largely denied to the opponent, whilst our offensive action would impose unacceptable costs. The difficulties of messaging and interpreting the decision-making personalities and processes of the target state are managed by a cadre of culturally aware intelligence specialists, trained in language, history and politics of the target state. The same model is used by the nascent USAF 24<sup>th</sup> Air Force to provide a basis for cyber deterrence.

The defensive and aggressive elements of the deterrent process are direct equivalents of the nuclear

scenario, mission assurance to deny the access required by the cyber attacker, and the identification and response to attacks to impose costs. A useful beginning, but only a beginning. The underlying assumption is that the dialogue occurs between single, hierarchical entities, which have managed exchange of red lines and signalling. But how do you deter unilateral, unsponsored 'proxy' action, or non-state actors without identifiable sponsor states, disrupting through cyber attack?

## Cyber Deterrence



The same questions are compounded when considering kinetic action by non state actors. How do you deter an opponent, one who feels his core values are sufficiently challenged that he is prepared to seek martyrdom as a desirable outcome? How indeed, do you deter an idea? These are the challenges of the next few years: To understand the nature of the challengers, to identify the decision-making processes that inform their actions, to understand the demographic they represent, their aspirations and values, and address the cost and benefit calculus that will encourage, or inhibit their behaviours.

It is not that it is difficult, therefore cannot be done. The alternate is unacceptable because it is unsustainable and is reducing our own power and the quality of life in our own societies. It is difficult, but it is essential. Issues of identity, accountability, anonymity, deniability need to be addressed. The decision making processes of our challengers can be understood. They are rational. A dialogue with such entities can be achieved. It may not require the traditional channels of diplomacy to reach them, but then these channels themselves are a transient product of a particular European system for exchange between monarchs. They are neither timeless nor immutable.

#### **How do we begin to construct a doctrine for 'non state' deterrence?**

One might suggest that it has always existed. It exists within states, where recourse to lethal force is reserved for the state, where laws exist and are enforced. When the Khans built pyramids of skulls, city states fell into compliance. In Hama in Syria, when an assassination attempt on a minister signalled the beginning of Islamic unrest, a great tract of the city was levelled. In the wake of the troops, the buildings were bulldozed and the population driven into exile. There was no further internal dissent.

Whilst superficially effective, such actions are not sustainable on the global stage, or by liberal democracies, accountable to the aspirations of their populations, allies and international law. It may, therefore, be necessary to consider some guidelines for the emergent doctrine.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, again, have identified a number of 'lost arts' of

deterrence. Aspects of the calculus that have been neglected, which offer an immediate path to ensure state to state 'peer' deterrence, but also offer road signs, pointing toward the demands of more complex dialogue.

- Adversary analysis. It is necessary to understand, in intimate detail, the culture, psychology and history of an opponent. To predict the outcomes of our signals and to anticipate the calculus, the values, he will employ. To understand the processes by which decisions are made and enacted.
- Mission Assurance. The ability to safeguard a capability and deliver, with confidence, the required effect.
- Escalation control. The dialogue is central to ensuring that both antagonists are able to understand the level of force their behaviours will precipitate, without automatic recourse to mutually ensured destruction.
- Managing ambiguity ('redlines'). Actors, be they states, organisations or individuals, behave with a least two levels of policy. Declaratory policy and operational policy. The dialogue may be wildly threatening, seemingly unpredictable, to give credence to a threat or comfort to the constituency. This ambiguity is central to the negotiation, but must be understood as such.
- Conventional and non-alert deterrence forces. The level

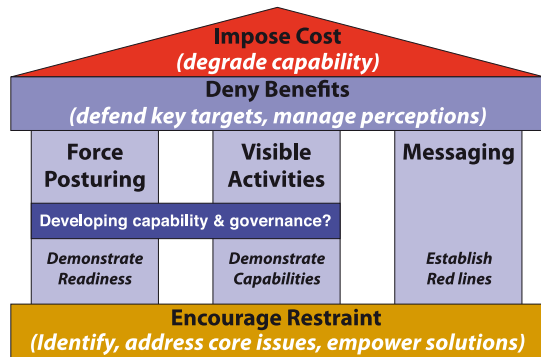
and nature of forces deployable in the event of a crisis are many, all of which contribute to a spectrum of potential responses and serve to signal will and intent.

- Assure allies. The ramifications of action, or even threatened action, can resonate through friendly and neutral entities.
- Credibility as function of capability and will. The will to commit force is central to its credibility. The capability and the will must be evident to an opponent. Our own democratic decision making constrain and shape the nature of activity governments can undertake. Illegal, immoral or irrational actions generally result in a change of government, not in a change of behaviour in an opponent.
- Military to military engagement as an element of deterrence. A keen understanding of capability and shared understanding of objectives shapes thinking and advice offered in crisis.

In the cold war, our opponents were very easy to find and understand, but difficult to destroy. The reverse is true in the current operating environment. Our opponents, or challengers, are dispersed and frequently anonymous. They may act in support of the interests of a nation state or theology, but are not under control of any central authority. They are frequently post-modern syndicated entities, virtual, but with a logic, comparable to a franchise, branded but largely self-employed. This suggests that

the most immediate challenge is not to destroy the opponent, we have more than enough strike capability to reach out globally and destroy, but to find, to analyse and understand his motivation, his decision-making process and values. Each challenger, economic, theological or cultural entity, trans or sub-state, has a rationale, an identity, and a demographic on which they draw and a constituency on whose behalf they act. For each these must be clearly understood and articulated to inform the levers which might influence behaviour. Pressure may then be applied, through potential or actual actions, which will coerce in a predictable and measurable manner.

### Unconventional Deterrence



At the core of that challenge is the need to identify an opponent. The identity, the self-image, that motivates him to act, not the shorthand language of outrage we employ in the press and in politics which serves no purpose other to fuel righteous indignation. No-one is a terrorist, or an extremist. People act for a reason. They have a putative cause, declaratory and operational policy. Understand the nature of that identity and that reasoning, determine what he holds dear, that

we might hold at risk. It is very rarely his life. Determine who holds him to account. Who can restrain him, and how might we influence them to encourage that restraint. Most people act on behalf of a constituency, it may be a physical, ideological or elective community, but they act in accord with the logic and values of that constituency.

The next challenge is to ensure credibility of the threatened action. We know significant force will only be employable, in democratic or rational states, against an existential threat. The pin-prick of small scale disruption, designed to cultivate fear and pressure social or legal changes, to draw resources or draw recognition to causes and communities may be most effectively addressed through dialogue. It may require the application of pressure to shape that dialogue. That pressure may be drawn from any or all aspects of state power, but must be acceptable to the constituency of democratic governments and the international community, or it will not be deliverable, sustainable or effective. A state that assumes it may act beyond the law, outside the accepted practices of the international system, is likely to find unanticipated consequences, diminution of power and power-balancing behaviours amongst those that feel threatened. The lesson of Guantanamo Bay is that action taken outside of the law diminishes us and serves the interest of our opponents. It was as true when Grotius formulated legal guidance for the conduct of War<sup>4</sup> as it was when President George W Bush assumed the helm of the global superpower.

A further problem arises in considering this coercive dialogue. How do you define victory and disengage from a conflict, when the outcomes, successes and failures, are largely unseen and perceptions shaped by media? There are no parades through Paris, no flags on the Reichstag. It is not in our collective nature to draw back from a challenge, lest we be considered weak, and other opponents are encouraged to act.

*'The British nation can be counted upon to carry through to victory any struggle that it once enters upon no matter how long such a struggle may last or however great the sacrifices that may be necessary or whatever the means that have to be employed; and all this even though the actual military equipment at hand may be utterly inadequate when compared with that of other nations.'*

Adolf Hitler in Mein Kampf

It may be unwise to exercise the national characteristics identified by Adolf Hitler, in expressing his wish to avoid conflict with Great Britain from his Bavarian prison cell. It is a recipe for 'imperial overstretch' when exercised by powerful nations and a recipe for disaster when conducted by a declining economic power with finite resources and significant legacy opponents from its age of greatness. Fortunately the United Kingdom has an alternate history of managing perceptions to its advantage. It would be difficult, for example, to find cause for celebration in the British handling of affairs, military and political, in Palestine, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, Mesopotamia, Kenya, India, Southern Africa and the Americas. And yet we pride ourselves on a reputation for the conduct of counter insurgency



operations. Clearly it can be done. Success is a matter of perception.

We might summarise these considerations for coercion and deterrence in the contemporary environment as: Analyse, identify, understand, influence.

- Understand the nature of Identity, address real actors, not ghosts, pre-conceptions or clichés. The military cannot afford the luxury of indolence afforded politicians and the media.
- Legality and international norms of behaviour are non discretionary.
- Understand the nature of power and the limits of military force. Attraction is greater than repulsion in shaping behaviour.
- Acknowledging legitimacy in cause. The roots of conflict resolution lie in the cause and conduct of the operation. Address root causes, not symptoms.
- Manage Perceptions. A critical element, speaking to your own constituency, your allies and that of your opponent. Defining and communicating success.

These are a few faltering steps toward the challenges we must address. When politicians speak without wit or wisdom, when international relations are governed by sound-bites masquerading as policy, it is for the military to understand what might be achieved, what might be delivered and that which cannot. To draw our Nations into unwinnable,

unsustainable conflicts is, at best, negligent, and at worst vainglorious and self-destructive.

The final words in this piece are drawn from Grotius, writing in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, quoting in turn from Tacitus in the first. There are constants in our historical tradition, which we ignore at our peril.

*'One cannot but admire the character, which Tacitus has drawn of the Chauci, a noble and high-spirited people of Germany, who, he says, "were desirous of maintaining their greatness by justice, rather than by acts of ungovernable rapacity and ambition — provoking no wars, invading no countries, spoiling no neighbours to aggrandize themselves, — yet, when necessity prompted, able to raise men with arms in their hands at a moment's warning — a great population with a numerous breed of horses to form a well mounted cavalry-and, with all these advantages, upholding their reputation in the midst of peace."*

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645)

'On the Law of War and Peace'

Chapter 22: On the Unjust Causes of War.

'Upholding their reputation in the midst of peace' ... the very essence of deterrence.

#### **The author is grateful to:**

Gen Schwartz, COSAF, for his address at the AFA Conference in Washington DC and the RAF US conference in the same city.

Lt Gen Elder (Commander USAF 8<sup>th</sup> Air force) for his addresses at the 'Cyber Awareness Conference' Shreveport Louisiana, and the RAF US Conference in Washington DC, both in October 08.

Maj Gen Lord (AF Cyber transition) USAF for his address at the same conference in Shreveport Louisiana.

Gen (ret'd) Hayden (Director CIA) for his address at the AFA Conference in Washington DC.

Professor Yezid Sayigh, KCL.

Joint Force Quarterly, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, 2008.  
 'It's Time For a New Deterrence Model'  
 Michael Mullen, Admiral US Navy,  
 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Boston Globe, September 30, 2008.  
 'Avoiding the Choices of 1914 and 1938'.  
 HDS Greenaway, reporting the views of  
 Secretary Gates.

New York Times, October 29, 2008  
 'Gates Gives Rationale For Expanded  
 Deterrence' Thom Shanker.

For an engaging perspective on the nature and role of identity, see Amin Maalouf, 'In the name of identity: Violence and the Need to Belong' (2003).

Dated, but valuable studies of coercion in diplomacy:

'The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy' by Alexander L., David K. Hall, and William E. Simons George (1971)

'Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases' by Lawrence Freedman (1998)

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Michele A Flourney and Shawn Brimley, Centre for New American Security, September 2008.

<sup>2</sup> General John Vessey, CJCS 1982-5

<sup>3</sup> President JFK was keenly aware, during the Cuban Missile Crisis that he had to appear unreasonable, less the Soviet Union call his bluff on nuclear options.

<sup>4</sup> Hugo Grotius, On the Law of War and Peace 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' Translated by A. C. Campbell London, 1814

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