Deterrence attempts to prevent war by discouraging a potential aggressor from attacking. The primary goal for the defender is to convince the challenger that the probable cost of attacking will far exceed any anticipated gain. This is usually accomplished by threatening to militarily retaliate or punish the initiator if it commits the undesired action. More precisely, the defender must signal its commitment to punish or retaliate and its capability to do so in order to demonstrate the credibility of the deterrent threat. If the defender succeeds, the challenger will back down without a shot being fired; if it fails, the challenger will attack.

The concept of deterrence is commonly associated with nuclear weapons, but its application extends to any situation where one side seeks to prevent another from taking some action that has not already been taken.

Deterrence can also be used by the strong to prevent the weak from trying to overthrow the established order. Its use dates back thousands of years. In 70 A.D., for example, a Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Palestine was crushed, but a few managed to escape to the mountain fortress of Masada. Although it could easily have chosen to ignore the remaining rebels, Rome painstakingly and expensively assaulted Masada to demonstrate that it "would pursue rebellion even to mountain tops in remote deserts to destroy its last vestiges, regardless of the cost." Rome's purpose was to deter any other groups in the empire from rebelling. In more recent times, the same argument could be made about the Soviet Union's strong-arm tactics in putting down the 1956 Hungarian revolt; Moscow's harsh action was intended to send a strong and clear message to neighboring Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe.

Deterrence can be a difficult strategy to successfully implement. It was mentioned previously that three conditions must be met in order for it to work. First, the defending state must define behavior that is unacceptable and communicate its commitment to punish the challenger. Second, the defender must possess the capability to punish an attacker. Finally, the defending state must demonstrate that it is willing to carry out its commitment to retaliate against the attacker; that is, the deterrent threat must have credibility.

Before we discuss these "three Cs" of successful deterrence, it must be made clear that the concept of deterrence assumes that decision makers are essentially rational. Rational decision making means choosing to act in a way that best enables you to maximize your own position, based on calculations of potential gains and losses, and of probabilities of enemy actions. It does not mean that decisions are made without emotion; obviously, human beings are often influenced by their emotions. But it does assume that the leader of the challenging nation is capable of weighing the potential benefits of attacking against the costs of the defending nation's probable response, and that the decision to attack or not will be made on the basis of this calculation.

Commitment

As the first step in successful deterrence, the defending state must make a commitment to punish the challenger if the challenger takes a specified action. In other words, the defender must "draw a line in the sand" and warn the challenger that it will suffer if it crosses it. This commitment must be stated...
clearly, unambiguously, and before the challenger commits the act of aggression. For example, Israel repeatedly stated that a blockade of the Strait of Tiran, the only waterway passage to its southern port of Eilat, would be regarded as an act of war, and Egyptian attempts to blockade the strait in 1955 and 1967 were contributing factors in both the 1956 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars.

7 It is important that deterrence commitments be definite and specific, as ambiguity may elicit probes by challengers interested in testing a defender's resolve. Prior to the outbreak of World War I, Britain wavered on its commitment to support the Entente (France and Russia) in the event of war against the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy). Had Britain clearly voiced its position, Germany might have been dissuaded from attacking France in 1914.

8 …….. Prior to Argentina's invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982, for example, Britain failed to issue any verbal warning or to start any military preparations as a deterrent signal. As a result, the ruling Argentine junta probably doubted Britain's interest in defending a small colony left over from its imperial past, and thus was not deterred from seizing the islands......

**Capability**

9 The clearest commitment useless if a state does not have the means to carry it out. Since deterrence revolves around convincing a challenger that the cost of a certain action is not worth the benefit, the challenger must be convinced (or at least strongly suspect) that the defender has the capability to retaliate. Even if a state's deterrent capability is weak, it may try to convince a challenger that its power to punish is greater than it actually is, just as a homeowner might hope to dissuade trespassers by posting a "Beware of Dog" sign even though she doesn't own a dog. This is one reason why some countries refuse to reveal their suspected nuclear capabilities; the very possibility that a defender might respond to an attack with nuclear weapons may be sufficient to deter an aggressor.

10 Deterrence with conventional weapons is considerably more difficult, because aggressors can better estimate their capability to inflict punishment. Even though Britain and France had more thanks than Germany in 1940, because Hitler knew he could compensate with a lightning campaign against France, he was not deterred from attacking and decisively defeated Allied forces there. Similarly, America's naval strength in the Pacific in 1941 did not deter the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the combined armed forces of Egypt and Syria did not deter the Israeli attack in 1967, because Israel and Japan gambled that they could score a knockout blow with preemptive strikes. (Israel's gamble paid off; Japan's didn't.)

**Credibility**

11 Third, a state must convince the aggressor of its resolve and willingness to carry out its commitment to punish. Even if a defender has clearly stated its commitment to punish and has the capability to do so, deterrence can still fail if the challenger doubts the willingness of the defender to risk war. As a result, this commitment to punish must be persuasive to keep from sounding like a bluff. In part, the defender's success will depend upon its reputation, past behavior, and image.

12 Ironically, the fearsome destructive power of nuclear weapons that makes their retaliatory capability unquestioned also leads to a credibility problem. Would the defender really be willing to sacrifice millions of people in a nuclear war? For example, in June 1948, one year before the Soviet Union exploded its first nuclear bomb, the American nuclear monopoly was still not able to prevent the Soviets from blockading Berlin. Similarly, in both the 1973 Arab-Israeli and the 1982 Falklands wars nonnuclear challengers (Egypt and Syria, and Argentina) doubted the defenders' resolve to retaliate with their nuclear weapons. (As it turned out, neither Britain nor Israel had to resort to nuclear arms to turn back the aggressors.)

13 In many ways, crises where nuclear weapons are involved often resemble the game of "chicken". In the classic film *Rebel without a Cause*, James Dean and a rival play this game by racing their cars towards the edge of a cliff; the first to "chick out" and swerve is the loser, but if neither swerves, both will go over the cliff. In this game, each player wants the other to swerve before he does, but both players prefer swerving away from the edge and letting the other side win to going over the cliff. The object of the game, like the object of deterrence in a confrontation between two nuclear powers, is to prevail by convincing the opposing player of your willingness to risk destruction.

14 The Cuban missile crisis is often presented as a game of chicken, where the Soviet were the first to blink. If neither side was willing to retreat or "swerve," the outcome would have been war between the nuclear-armed superpowers. This might have occurred if the Soviets had attempted to proceed with their plan of placing more missiles on Cuba and the United States had launched an air strike on Cuba or invaded the island.......