



USAF DOCTRINE UPDATE on Deterrence: an Effect or an Operation?

Deterrence is becoming a topic of elevated interest. As one example, the National Research Council's Air Force Studies Board recently recommended the creation a program to examine deterrence and develop a cadre of Airmen who understand and can apply deterrence and assurance theories. However, the LeMay Center has noticed a tendency in some venues and products to misapply the term "deterrence." To properly address the issue of deterrence, Airmen should understand the nuances in terminology.

Air Force and joint doctrine has long expressed the position that deterrence is an **effect**, not a distinctly separate **operation**. Key to understanding this is the Air Force's doctrinal construct of the effects-based approach to operations (EBAO), "an approach in which operations are designed, planned, executed, and assessed in order to influence or change system behavior to achieve desired outcomes" (Air Force doctrine [Annex 3-0, Operations and Planning](#)). One facet of EBAO is that "operations are driven by desired ends (objectives and end states), and should be expressed in terms of desired effects, not defined by what available forces or capabilities can do." As an example, deterrence (the desired effect) would support a combatant commander's theater campaign plan's desired objective of maintaining the existing steady state within a region. Thus, in terms of nuclear operations, deterrence is the desired effect.

From Annex 3-0: "Deterrence is a *state of mind*" – a form of behavior created in the mind of a target audience, usually an adversary. This makes it an effect by definition, since "[effect](#)" refers to "the physical or *behavioral state of a system* that results from an action, a set of actions, or another effect."

JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, makes this same point:

- Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction.
- "Deterrence should be based on capability (having the means to influence behavior), credibility (maintaining a level of believability that the proposed actions may actual be employed), and communication (transmitting the intended message to the desired audience) to ensure greater effectiveness." (p. xx, Executive Summary).
 - o Maintaining forces on alert, realistic training, and rigorous evaluations underpin the aspect of capability. (The other two are more related to policy.)
- "Deterrence prevents adversary action through the presentation of a credible threat of counteraction" (p. V-10)

- Again, conventional and nuclear forces on alert (an action) constitute part of that “presentation of a credible threat”
 - A show of force (“an operation designed to demonstrate US resolve that involves increased visibility of US deployed forces in an attempt to defuse a specific situation that, if allowed to continue, may be detrimental to US interests or national objectives”) is an elevated demonstration of capability and intent
- “Ideally, deterrent forces should be able to conduct decisive operations immediately” (p.V-10).
- US military forces exist to fight and win the nation’s wars; thus a credible warfighting capability ultimately underpins deterrence. The mere possession of forces is insufficient for deterrence; an adversary must understand that US forces, when directed, will employ through a combination of coherent, disciplined, well-practiced operational concepts that will impose a specified degree of pain upon that adversary.

Note that the preceding discussion mentions “credible threat” and “credible capability.” An easily-perceived warfighting ability, both conventional and nuclear, is the linchpin behind credibility. For Airmen, warfighting is expressed through high-level employment paradigms such as strategic attack, counterland, counterair, countersea, etc., that provide the rationale for achieving specific effects. These paradigms are further refined through rigorous and realistic training and assessment. Thus, the existence of military force by itself does not deter; forces must be unambiguously capable of effective warfighting.

Doctrinally speaking, there is no such animal as a single “deterrent operation.” Rather, the effect of deterrence supports a combatant commander’s broader theater objectives and end state. A number of things have to add up in order for an opponent to be deterred, not all of which are military. Some must be provided by national leadership, such as unambiguously signaling national commitment.

Finally, the Air Force is dedicated to repairing and re-energizing its commitment to nuclear operations. However, if the Air Force does not correctly articulate why we have nuclear weapons, we cannot claim to be properly addressing the problem. Also, external audiences may note this imprecise intellectual articulation and factor that into their own deterrence calculations.

Bottom Line:

Deterrence is an effect, not an operation.