

PROBLEMS OF CREDIBLE STRATEGIC CONDITIONALITY IN DETERRENCE

by Roger B. Myerson

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We can influence others' behavior by threatening to punish them if they behave badly and by promising to reward them if they behave well. But a threat of punishment by itself would not induce others to modify their behavior if they thought that they would be punished no matter what they did. A threat can be part of an effective deterrent against bad behavior only when it is combined with a promise to respond more favorably to better behavior. We achieve influence over others' behavior by committing ourselves to a strategy in which our future responses will be conditionally dependent on their behavior.

A deterrent strategy cannot be effective, however, unless our potential adversaries understand it and believe that we will do what it stipulates in each condition. People might doubt that we would actually implement some promise or threat that would be very costly for us, or they might suspect that we could make false claims about conditions in the future so as to justify a response that would be more convenient for us. To translate our capability to punish and reward others into effective influence over their behavior, our commitment to different strategic responses in different conditions must be credible. This note examines the basic problems of maintaining credible strategic conditionality in international relations.¹

Conditionality is not unpredictability

The deterrent value of a punitive threat against a possible provocation is proportional to the probability that we would carry out the threat against an adversary who provoked us minus the probability that we would carry out the threat even if the adversary did not provoke us. It is the difference between our expected responses to good behavior and bad behavior that provides the incentive for our potential adversaries to behave better (according to our standards). Any given punitive threat would have the greatest deterrent value against provocations if our potential adversaries were sure that we would implement the threat if they provoked us and also sure that

¹ Fundamental questions about the credibility of strategies for deterrence were explored by Thomas Schelling *Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard U Press, 1960). All ideas in this note are based on Schelling's seminal exploration of these issues; see also Roger Myerson, "Learning from Schelling's Strategy of Conflict," *Journal of Economic Literature* 47(4):1109-1125 (2009). Another classic reference on deterrence is Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense* (Princeton U Press, 1961).

we will not implement the threat if they do not provoke us. Conversely, if our potential adversaries think that the probability of our implementing this threat against them would be the same regardless of whether they provoke us or not, then our threat does nothing to deter the provocation.

Thus, for effective deterrence, we should want our adversaries to be as sure as possible about the way that our punishments or rewards will depend on their behavior that we are trying to affect. That is, we should want our strategic conditionality to be as predictable as possible. However, people have sometimes confused strategic conditionality with unpredictability, and it may be helpful to examine the sources of this confusion.

Certainly, if our threatened response to some serious provocation involves punitive military action, then the precise time and location of the military action should be a surprise, so that our adversaries should not be able to parry the attack by concentrating defensive forces against it. But when our goal is deterrence, the magnitude of our threatened response to a provocation should not be a secret; indeed we should want the punitive magnitude of our response to be as clear and certain as possible.²

If we indicated a serious possibility of our initiating a destructive conflict without specifying any clear conditions under which this war would or would not be launched, a primary result of our unpredictable bellicosity could be to frighten allies who have looked to us for protection. Their fears of our dragging them into a war could stimulate new diplomatic initiatives, as they reorient themselves to rely less on our perilous protection, but the ultimate result would include a substantial weakening of our regional influence.

To make sure that potential adversaries believe our threats to undertake costly military actions in retaliation against attacks and other provocations, we might want to be seen as insensitive to the costs of such actions. Such willingness to bear the human and economic costs of conflict could be described as a kind of rational craziness, but it is not unpredictability.

Credible resolve and credible restraint are both necessary for deterrence

It is widely recognized that strong statements of forceful resolve may help to convince potential adversaries that we are truly willing to carry out our threats. But too much bluster

² This argument for the value of predictability would not apply to military actions that have goals other than punitive deterrence. Military leaders or bandits who plan attacks with the goal of seizing others' land or resources would obviously prefer that their victims be completely surprised and unprepared.

about our willingness to fight can be counterproductive if it raises doubts about whether we would fight even if our adversaries try to accommodate us.

It is sometimes said that "appeasement only encourages further demands," but we do not want our adversaries to believe this about us. In modifying their behavior to avoid our threats, they would indeed be appeasing us. When our goal is to deter potential adversaries from crossing some line that is vital to our interests, we do not want them to believe that their acceptance of this line would simply cause us to move the line forward and demand further constraints on their freedom. If they do not believe that we would respond with restraint to their acquiescence, then they might rationally believe that it is better to fight us now than to be driven into further concessions. Thus, effective deterrence requires that our adversaries should believe both our resolve when provoked and our restraint when accommodated or appeased.

A credible promise of restraint may become particularly important when the adversarial action that we are trying to deter is perceived by our adversaries as a retaliatory punishment for something that we previously did against them. That is, in some situations, adversaries may be motivated to act against our interests, not by any expectation of direct gains from such actions, but by the imperative to maintain the credibility of their own strategy for deterring us from aggression. In such situations, our credible promise of future restraint could be sufficient (even without a threatened alternative) for removing their incentive to act against us.

In general, the credibility of a nation's deterrent strategies can be limited by the credibility of its threats (resolve) or by the credibility of its promises (restraint), and which of these is more problematic may depend on the size and power of the nation. Other things being equal, conflict is more dangerous for weaker nations, which may be naturally afraid to fight except in defense of their most vital interests, and so the problem of credible resolve may be relatively more important when a country is weak. But military strength can increase a country's confidence in its ability to control the damage in more kinds of conflict, and so the problem of credible restraint tends to become more important for more powerful nations. When we live in the world's most powerful country, we may have the most difficulty in convincing potential adversaries that we would not use our great military strength opportunistically, but only against internationally recognized provocations. Thus, a reputation for compliance with international laws and norms that regulate the use of force may be most valuable for the world's most powerful nation.

The central point here is that strategic conditionality requires that our future actions depend on the behavior of others, and such conditionality requires a fine balancing of different kinds of incentives. If we are too averse to fighting then adversaries may doubt our resolve to carry out our threats; but if we are not averse to fighting then adversaries may doubt our promises of restraint when they accommodate us. For both sides of our deterrent strategy to be credible, the benefits of keeping our word must be greater than the intrinsic costs of both our threats and our promises.

A reputation for maintaining strategic commitments depends on international opinions

A reputation for keeping our word can be the primary force for maintaining the credibility of our strategic commitments. If we do not respond to our adversaries' behavior in the manner that we promised or threatened, then others will be less likely to believe our promises and threats in the future; and then, as a result, we may suffer more attacks and provocations that we cannot deter.

But anyone's reputation exists in the opinion of others, and they are the audience who must judge whether we are acting appropriately to maintain our reputation. Having a reputation for reliably keeping our word means that there are groups of people who perceive that we have acted according to our promises and threats in the past, and they trust that we will continue doing so in the future. We want to maintain their perception of our reliability because we can benefit from their trust; and so the potential fragility of our reputation generates a motivation to keep our word, both in threats and in promises. If people perceived that the conditions for a threat or promise were satisfied but we did not respond appropriately, then our reputation in their eyes could be lost.

Thus, those whose belief in our reliability is valuable to us form a vital audience by whom we want to be seen as consistently fulfilling our strategic commitments with appropriate responses to the given conditions. This group with whom we want to maintain a reputation for reliability includes, most importantly, the potential adversaries whom we want to deter, because we do not want them to doubt the reliability of our threats and promises.

The power of a reputation to motivate appropriate strategic behavior becomes greatest when a deviation from the prescribed behavior could cause a widespread loss of reputation in the eyes of everyone who matters, and this requires that judgments should be expressed publicly.

But although the opinions of our adversaries are absolutely essential to our effectiveness in strategic deterrence, our adversaries cannot be expected to publicly express their honest opinions about our strategic reliability. So we certainly do not want to concede power over our global reputation to the expressed opinions of a hostile jury of potential adversaries.

However, other more sympathetic observers can generally be found. Allies who look to us for protection may also be an essential part of the audience judging our reputation for reliability in strategic deterrence, as they would become less willing to defer to our leadership if they lost confidence in our promises.

The most effective voices for publicly judging the appropriateness of our actions to the current strategic conditions can generally be found among the broad range of independent or neutral actors in the international community. These independent observers should not be controlled by us (so that they can be expected to criticize our response if it is inappropriate), and they should also not be fundamentally hostile to us (so that they can be expected to confirm the correctness of our appropriate strategic responses). To be effective, however, the expressed judgments of such international observers should be generally consistent with the true understanding of our potential adversaries. After all, the essential goal is that our adversaries should expect that our threats and promises will be credible as long as we act in conformity with the expressed judgments of these international observers.

The conditions of our deterrent strategy may need sympathetic interpretation because there is a danger that any attempt to specify the conditions in some "objective" manner could be manipulated against our intent. In any attempt to formulate an objective formal description of strategic conditions, policy-makers must recognize the inadequacy of any finite number of words to describe the precise boundaries of what they are really asking for. If we set the conditions of our promise too starkly, there is a risk that others may find some unanticipated way to meet our conditions that is actually as adverse to our interests as the behavior that we were trying to deter. We may try to reduce this problem by offering a continuous range of responses to a finely graded range of conditions, so that an improvement of the potential adversary's behavior should elicit a proportional improvement in our response. But in general, it is best to express the conditions of our deterrent strategy in terms of general principles, and then rely on a sympathetic audience to interpret them.

From this perspective, we should recognize that we can also help our allies to strengthen

the credibility of their deterrent strategies by expressing reasonable diplomatic judgments about the conditions for our allies' strategic responses to their adversaries. Our allies may be better able to credibly promise to reward an adversary who accommodates them when it is expected that we would publicly condemn our allies if they failed to fulfill such a promise.

Demonstrations and linkage can be used to strengthen credibility

The credibility of a nation's deterrent strategy may be limited by doubts about the nation's ability or willingness to implement the stipulated actions. Doubts about the effective ability of a military force can be reduced by demonstrating some of its capabilities in actual conflict. Accepting the costs of military action in such a demonstration could also reduce doubts about the nation's willingness to use its military forces. These considerations could increase the likelihood of a nation using military force against even a minor provocation, if the nation's leaders believed that such a demonstration could strengthen the credibility of their military deterrent against other attacks.

Credibility of promises can also be increased by small demonstrations of the promised behavior. Thus, a sequence of small reciprocating rewards for the first steps toward a better relationship can help to build confidence in promises of greater rewards for further accommodation.

Doubts about the willingness of a nation's leaders to implement a stipulated threat or promise can be reduced by linking it with a reputation for reliability in other valuable relationships. For example, a nation's commitment to one strategic promise could be strengthened by strong diplomatic statements that explicitly link this promise with the nation's commitments in other international relationships, so that a failure to fulfill this promise could jeopardize all these other valued relationships. Furthermore, when a national leader personally makes a strong public statement in support of a strategic promise or threat, the result may be to increase confidence in this strategic commitment on which the national leader has effectively staked his personal political reputation. People should understand that, if a nation failed to fulfill an important strategic commitment, then the first step towards redeeming the nation's global reputation could be the political removal of the responsible leader from high office.

A credible foreign policy must be supported in domestic politics

A nation's international reputation for keeping its commitments is an asset which must be maintained by appropriate decisions of the nation's leaders. But national leaders are accountable to a domestic political electorate, which in a democracy includes all the enfranchised voters of the nation. National leaders cannot be expected to act in a way that would cost them the domestic political support that they need to keep their positions of power.

So while international actors of various sorts may act as the primary jury for evaluating the appropriate correspondence of a nation's actions to the conditions of its deterrent strategy, the final court of appeals for judging a nation's international policies is its domestic electorate. Voters must be the ultimate judges of whether their elected leaders have acted appropriately to maintain their nation's reputation in international relations.

As we have seen, strategic deterrence requires a nation to be ready for different responses depending on the behavior of its potential adversaries. The responses in at least one condition (the promises and or the threats) will generally involve costly actions which do not benefit people in the nation, except through the indirect channel of influencing the behavior of potential adversaries. So if leaders base their foreign policy on the principle of acting only in the interests of their domestic voters, then the credibility of their deterrent strategies will be severely limited unless voters understand how their long-term security and welfare will depend on their nation's global reputation for resolve and restraint in strategic deterrence.

Unfortunately, domestic voters' perceptions of international conditions may differ in many ways from the perceptions of people in other countries. Furthermore, there is a common tendency for domestic voters to focus more on the need to maintain the credibility of their nation's threats (resolve) than on the need to maintain the credibility of their nation's promises (restraint). Voters often appreciate that, for a strong strategic deterrence, their national leaders must show resolve to undertake costly punitive actions in response to adversarial provocations and attacks. But leaders are sometimes regarded as weaker when they try also to assure adversaries that their restraint will be matched and rewarded, even though credibility of threats and promises are equally vital for an effective deterrent strategy. This domestic political bias toward valuing resolve more than restraint may derive from a natural inclination to trust our own elected leaders, which could cause us to disregard adversaries' manifest distrust of our government.

One may ask whether the prospect of electoral changes of leadership could reduce the long-term credibility of international commitments by democratic nations, compared to autocratic nations. Of course, changes of leadership also occur in nations with autocratic governments, but in a democracy the change of governing party does not change the government's ultimate accountability to the voters. If voters understand the benefits that their nation derives from its global reputation for reliably fulfilling its international commitments, then they may demand that their leaders should maintain a predictable consistency in foreign policy that transcends partisan differences. So with a well-informed electorate, long-term commitments can have more credibility under democracy than under a regime that is based only on a small autocratic elite. But elected leaders who undertake new foreign-policy commitments must explain to voters how they will benefit from these commitments.

In general, the power and influence of a democratic nation is greatest when its citizens understand and respect the importance of international opinions in judging their nation's foreign policy. Thus, public education that helps citizens to better understand the perspectives of others throughout the world may contribute more to the effective power of a great democratic nation than many investments in military hardware.

References

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<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/research/conditionality.pdf>