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## Waiting to Win: From Deterrence to Deference in the War on Terror

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Since the War on Terror began with the attacks of on 9/11, there has been a great amount of speculation about how to approach this war and what sort of strategy to use. The problem has been that Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are so different from conventional enemies that it is difficult to know exactly how to defeat them in the traditional sense of the word. Al Qaeda and its highly dispersed, networked and franchised organization make concepts like unconditional surrender, destruction of command and control and deterrence hard to conceptualize, much less practically carry out.

Deterrence in particular was a strategic approach that the US had grown comfortable with during the Cold War and which some have tried to apply to the War on Terror. Indeed, Al Qaeda has also thought about strategy against the US in terms of deterrence. While there is some value in a deterrent approach to terrorist organizations, ultimately, it appears that it does not provide an effective defense and does not illustrate an effective offense against terrorist groups.

This article suggests an alternative strategic approach to combating Al Qaeda and in general pursuing the War on Terror. The approach might be called deference, as in to defer (not to be confused with deference). The central tenet of deference is Clausewitz's observation that time is on the side of the defender. The idea is to defer attacks by Al Qaeda and the strengthening of the Al Qaeda organization, by keeping up ongoing attacks against the organization, which then becomes forced to spend its time reacting, rather than acting offensively. Since Al Qaeda is an essentially military organization, it must continually be on the offense in order to exist. By keeping the busy trying to survive, at an acceptable level of cost and violence, the US will be provided with the time necessary to implement long-term strategies meant to undermine the group, such as ideological arguments, which will lead to the eventual fading away of the group.

This strategic approach of deferring the enemy is already being carried out to some extent but not in a conscious, systematic or integrated manner. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) attacks against Al Qaeda leadership provide the deferring effect by forcing the group to expend resources on defense rather than offense. An integrated usage of a deferring strategic approach, however, would involve a concurrent ideological, political and economic competition which would eventually undermine and wear out the group over time, as the US did to the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

## **Deterrence**

The classic means of avoiding war is deterrence. Deterrence is a strategy in which one or both sides threaten retaliation if the other side attacks. The idea is to raise the predicted costs of war to such a point that the enemy does not attack in the first place. The concept is best known through its application in the Cold War strategic approach of mutually assured destruction.

The US grew comfortable with deterrence during the Cold War. Mutually assured destruction provided the breathing room that decision-makers needed in order to consider longer-term strategies. Small wars, proxy wars and covert action could be used to weaken the Soviet Union and its allies. Ideological battles, such as through information services like Radio Free Europe could seek to undermine ideologies without the fear of a total war. Other forms of non-war competition, such as the Space Race, also developed. In the end, it could be argued that economic competition, and in particular the Soviet Union's inability to keep up with US technological innovations, made the difference and led to its defeat.

Deterrence is a cheap and effective means of avoiding war and carrying out a state's foreign policy and military strategy. In order to keep the status quo, weapons must only be built and fielded, if all goes well, they never need be used. Building a missile is expensive, but it is cheaper than building one, using it, and then having to build another one and so on. This logic tends to apply to both sides of a deterrent system.

In particular, there is significant value in the deterrence approach against unitary actors, like nation-states. The leadership of a nation-state are concerned with survival, even if only their political and personal survival. A nation-state also has a direct, hierarchical command and control system that can make more or less rational decisions and then carry them out. In this way leadership can make the rational decision that it is a bad idea to attack first, then effectively order its military to not attack and thereby deterrence can work.

## **Deterrence During the War on Terror**

Given US comfort with the approach and its proven track record, there has been some consideration placed on using deterrence as a strategic approach against Al Qaeda. Even before the attacks of 9/11 there were concerns about the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of non-state armed groups and how it would be possible to deter their use. The attacks of 9/11 increased the focus on how to apply strategies of deterrence to the threats of terrorist groups, such as the RAND study, 'Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on Al Qaeda'.

Indeed, terrorists themselves have also thought in terms of deterrence as a model of the War on Terror. Osama bin Laden promoted such a strategy. In a 2001 interview with Al Jazeera, he noted, "Just as they're killing us, we have to kill them so that there will be a balance of terror. This is the first time the balance of terror has been close between the two parties, between Muslims and Americans, in the modern age. American politicians used to do whatever they wanted with us." Bin Laden knew that deterrence was a useful strategy against a single, large, unitary actor, like the US.

Deterrence, unfortunately, has less value against decentralized terrorist groups. Indeed, terrorist groups are aware of the weakness of deterrence and their own thinking on the matter probably best illustrates the limited value of the strategic approach. For example, the Al Qaeda military theorist, Abu 'Ubeid Al-Qurashi notes in an article published in the internet journal Al Ansar:

“Deterrence: This principle is based on the assumption that there are two sides [fighting] that seek to survive and defend their interests – but it is completely eliminated when dealing with people who don’t care about living but thirst for martyrdom. While the principle of deterrence works well [in warfare] between countries, it does not work at all for an organization with no permanent bases and with no capital in Western banks, that does not rely on aid from particular countries. As a result, it is completely independent in its decisions, and it seeks conflict from the outset. How can such people, who strive for death more than anything else, be deterred?”

Yet, the real failing of deterrence is not necessarily because terrorist groups are suicidal as some like Al Qurashi, and many US strategists, might argue, rather it has to do with the nature of decentralized, cellular organizations. While Al Qaeda individuals might be suicidal, the group itself clearly is not. It has plans and goals and wants to carry them out; the only way to do this is to survive. So it certainly has an incentive to survive. The greater weakness of deterrence against terrorist groups is because there are so many possible enemies. It’s easy enough to threaten reprisal attacks against one large or a few medium sized enemies. But how do you threaten attacks against hundreds of subgroups or thousands of individuals, many of who are unknown? It’s not possible.

It is possible to deter attacks using active defenses. The idea is to make it more difficult to attack particular locations. This has been done through increasing security at airports and other possible targets as well as making it more difficult for terrorists to enter the US and once inside its borders, to effectively carry out attacks. More generally, deterrence by denial involves denying the enemy the ability to acquire the means of attack, such as by limiting their ability to acquire weapons of mass destruction. But, while valuable, in the end it is always possible to find a ‘soft target’ which cannot effectively be protected, like a shopping mall, or to come up with a creative means of destruction that no one has thought to defend, such as crashing planes into buildings.

However, this is not deterrence, so much as defense, pure and simple. Militaries have always defended valuable territory and tried to stop the enemy from making weapons. There is of course continued value in keeping up good defenses. But, wars are always a matter of offense trying to overcome defense. And in today’s day and age of open societies and easy to obtain destructive implements, there will always be a weaknesses that can be exploited.

Moreover, there is no offense to this strategy. The US can defend itself forever but we must eventually have a means for attacking. A lack of an effective offense, gives the advantage to Al Qaeda, which feeds on offense. Every time there is an attack, even if it does not create nearly the level of destruction that was hoped for, the group gets advertised and new recruits and financiers are attracted to it.

This situation leaves the US struggling to find some sort of overarching strategic approach with which to govern the war against Al Qaeda and the War on Terror in general. There must be an integrated means of offense and defense that is adapted to decentralized groups like Al Qaeda.

## **Deference**

The concept of deference is less well-known but no less used in war. In this strategic approach, low level attacks are used to prevent the enemy from gaining in strength and devoting resources to major attacks. This approach may be particularly helpful against groups with no true center of gravity, such as barbarians, bandits, and terrorists. Variations on this approach have been tried by the Roman Empire in what is now Great Britain, European colonial nations throughout Africa, the US during its wars with Native Americans and on into contemporary times in nations containing ungoverned spaces, such as parts of the Sahara desert.

In deferring war, the conventionally more powerful side will attack the conventionally weaker side at a low level. This usually occurs through raids, patrols in 'bandit territory' or the occasional concentrated attack on a permanent or temporary base of operations. In the modern world we might add to this list attacking the enemy's online financial system, recruiting websites or system for developing fake identification. These incursions and attacks are more or less continuous, or at least regularly occurring, and must be kept up indefinitely for the strategic approach to work.

Even if the enemy cannot be easily found, the strategic approach of deferring still works. While patrols, checkpoints or limited attacks may not specifically target individual asymmetric enemies, they limit the effectiveness of each individual or subunit of the enemy by forcing them to take survival actions. Just the act of looking for the enemy, whether bandit or terrorist, forces him to devote his time and resources to hiding rather than devoting these resources to offensive attacks. Indeed, one may never come into contact with the enemy but still cause him harm. Deference may also force the enemy into less ideal terrain, which also weakens him. In mountainous, jungle or urban areas asymmetric foes gain a defensive advantage but nevertheless they must still devote significant resources to taking advantage of the defensive characteristics of these areas. For example, logistics cost more in mountainous areas or terrorist groups must devote time and energy to developing cover jobs and fake identification in urban areas. Moreover, in hiding in distant mountains or segregated ethnic neighborhoods, the armed group distances himself from his preferred targets and this makes attacking that much more costly, complicated and time consuming. An asymmetric armed group's move into difficult mountainous or inner urban areas should not just be seen as an advantage for him but also as a cost.

No concentrated attempt to create victory is made when deferring a conflict. This may be because the conflict is not considered worth the resources for an all out war. An overt, all out conflict with Saddam Hussein's Iraq was deferred for over a decade because another invasion was not deemed worthwhile. There may also be a belief that an outright military victory might not be possible because no reasonable amount of forces would be able to win due to the nature and structure of the enemy, as is often the case with banditry. Similarly, with terrorist groups, outright military victory may not be possible because the groups are so decentralized and

dispersed that no center of gravity can be attacked which will defeat the entire group, as is the case with some terrorist groups.

Deference is most valuable when used against dispersed, non-state armed groups. Deterrence can be very effective against more centralized enemy's like nation-states because the equation between threat and action can be made. This is not the case with many armed groups, where decentralization means that a threat to one section of the group will not have an effect on other sections. Yet, deferring violence against the group in general can have the desired effect of keeping the group too busy to operate effectively. It generally means that the group is forced to direct its resources toward survival, rather than to growing more powerful or to concentrating attacks.

The idea behind deference is that although it may not be possible to defeat decentralized enemies, it is possible to keep them weak enough to not pose an existential threat. Continued raiding decreases the manpower or weapons stocks of the decentralized enemy. If these attacks are calibrated correctly, they can be made to ensure that the enemy cannot build up enough power to truly threaten the state, while not demanding an excessive amount of time effort, money and military force to implement. Thus, deference, like deterrence, is an ongoing activity. Unlike deterrence however, deference demands continued fighting, if only at a low level. And, unfortunately, with continued fighting, there will be continued casualties.

### **Acceptable Level of Violence**

In order to fight a deferring war, it is necessary to decide what is the acceptable level of violence. Unlike deterrence, deferring a war means continuing to engage with the enemy. Some level of hostilities will occur and it is a political matter to decide what level is acceptable. This might constitute small levels of covert actions against terrorist groups combined with minor terrorist attacks or it may mean an entire war fought in a far off country in order to keep the enemy busy somewhere else.

For example, the US deferring of the war with Iraq throughout the 1990s settled into an acceptable level of violence. This level of violence was found to be occasional air strikes on Iraq in the no fly zone. More recently, US forces have been active in the Philippines targeting Al Qaeda linked insurgents and violence has occurred there, including the September death of two US military officers. This is in comparison to wars like Vietnam where tens of thousands of US soldiers died and there were questions about the value of continued fighting at that cost.

An acceptable level of violence will differ based on several factors, including social expectations, political expectations and military expectations. Societies are generally willing to accept some level of ongoing violence just as they are willing to accept some degree of crime. Expectations about the acceptable level of casualties in ongoing conflicts may differ across the platforms of different political parties. Military organizations themselves may differ on their acceptance of casualties. Moreover, all of these factors can change with events or perceptions, as for instance, Donald Rumsfeld noted in saying in reference to weapons of mass destruction that, "I would submit that the hurdle, the bar that one must go over, changes, depending on the potential lethality of the act."

These acceptable levels of violence can stand indefinitely without leading to war. Banditry may become a matter of accepted routine without any real discussion of ending it. The Roman and Byzantium empires kept its borders for hundreds of years. Indeed, it is time itself which is the most powerful advantage to a deferring strategy.

### **Time and an Integrated Strategy**

Deference's value lies in the fact that time is on the side of the defender. Clausewitz rightfully argues that, "...time which is allowed to pass unused accumulates to the credit of the defender." (Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pg 357). He goes on, "The idea implies... that... if improvement cannot be effected from within – that is, by sheer resistance – it can only come from without; and an improvement from without implies a change in the political situation. Either additional allies come to the defender's help or allies begin to desert his enemy." (ibid. pg 613). In other words, the idea is that if one cannot defeat the enemy outright, one may gain an advantage by waiting, since the defender may take advantage of detrimental changes to the attacker. Allies may be lost, the offensive side may lose morale, they may exhaust supplies and so on. Eventually the attacker may give up or the tides will change and the defender will gain the advantage.

If we take the route of deference, does that mean that we can only look forward to endless war? This is a legitimate question. Deterrence demands an endless preparation for war, as the actors in the system deter each other from attacking by continually demonstrating an ability to win in war or at least cause harm. For deference to be effective, an acceptable level of violence must be maintained indefinitely. This means in essence continual fighting. Eventually, the hope is, the enemy will be worn down and stop attacking. However, the process can be sped up, there is no need to await chance weakening of the offensive side, rather, the defender can also go on the offense in ways other than through battle.

In order to keep deference from turning into an endless war, deference must be incorporated into an integrated strategy that includes an offense. Deferred wars will not end on their own and often it is the case that an all out war may not be possible or desired. In order to end the deference without all out war, an integrated strategy would involve ongoing deference, while actively undermining the enemy in other ways. This is just as deterrence during Cold War was a long game in which US actively tried to make the Soviet Union collapse.

An integrated strategy for deference looks much like an integrated strategy for deterrence. The idea is to break and build alliances, weaken the economy of the enemy, fight an ideological battle and otherwise lay the groundwork for the enemy's collapse. It is an active process, rather than the passive waiting process that Clausewitz noticed. It might involve promoting religious and ideological tolerance, diverting finances to other, less radical groups, or sabotaging weapons or the enemy's offensive planning cycle.

## Deference and Asymmetric War

A deference strategy turns on its head the advantage gained by asymmetric opponents. Asymmetric opponents will 'trade' space for time, by giving up territory, they hope that they can outlast their opponent and wait for the more powerful state to lose support and bleed power until it is weak enough to be conventionally attacked. As the Taliban saying goes, "NATO has all the watches, but we have all the time."

But, the offense and defense are subjective experiences, the more powerful side in an asymmetric war can also take advantage of time. Unlike purely military organizations like terrorist groups or bandits and warlord organizations, nation-states have a reason for existence outside of war – they structure and protect the lives of citizens. Without war, a nation-state could exist indefinitely. In fact, this is the preferred state of affairs because nation-states exist to protect and support the activities of individuals inside the nation-state.

Purely military organizations, like Al Qaeda, justify their existence by arguing that they can overthrow a nation-state or otherwise bring about some sort of military/political goal. They do not provide individuals a reason for continued loyalty outside of that goal; they do not structure or protect the lives of citizens. Therefore, these groups can only exist as parasites on nation-states or other political communities. In order to continue to extract resources from the larger political community and to attract new recruits, these groups must continually be moving forward. They must stay on the offensive and continue to attack the state. If not, the group's value will not be obvious and so they will not be able to attract new recruits or find sources of financing.

For this reason it is imperative to not allow asymmetric forces to establish their own pseudostate, for when they do, the advantage is lost. Creating a pseudostate in which civilians are governed and essentially finance the armed group, provides the armed group with a basis for continued existence and eventually fighting the war on a more equal, even conventional footing. This is exactly what Mao Tse Tung called for in his approach to guerilla warfare. This approach of developing a pseudostate has been carried out more recently by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and Hezbollah, amongst other armed groups.

Terrorist groups like Al Qaeda by their very nature cannot develop pseudostates. They do not control territory and indeed not only do not try to enlist the direct support of individuals, they make it quite difficult to join their ranks. These groups must truly be parasitic on nation-states or on large-scale insurgencies, like the Taliban. For them there is no recourse to self-support, they must continue to attract loyal fighters and financiers and the only means to do this is through taking the offense and showing their value to the cause, whatever that cause may be. This makes deference an ideal strategy against terrorist groups.

However, since non-state armed groups can exist with such little support, it is generally necessary to add non-violent forms of warfare to the fight. Al Qaeda was able to carry out the 9/11 attacks with less than one hundred men and less money than a single cruise missile costs. This means that cutting off some of their funds and recruits won't do much, rather, effectively all or almost all of their funds and recruits must be cut off. That means taking a long-term approach

which undermines the entire organization, such as through using propaganda, economic development, political arguments and other aspects of creating, sustaining and building civil society. Luckily, the conventional nation-state also has an advantage here because the nation-state can offer a positive reason for existence to potential recruits and, importantly, the nation-state can devote huge sums of money and other resources to the effort.

## **Deference and Al Qaeda**

Al Qaeda wins by taking the offense, yet conversely it also loses by not being able to take the offense. Since Al Qaeda is only a military organization, without any true social aspect, like for instance Hezbollah has developed, the group offers no positive reason for survival. If Al Qaeda is not actively fighting its enemies, there is no reason for new members to provide their loyal services nor for allowing themselves to be hunted down and killed. While current members of Al Qaeda already may be loyal and invested in Al Qaeda to the point that they are willing to die for the group and maybe even see it as a political community, new members and new financiers are not so invested. At some level, Al Qaeda likely realizes this and therefore continues to attempt to perform spectacular terrorist attacks. Deference neutralizes these attacks by forcing the group to devote resources to its continued survival.

Deference is in some ways already being carried out de facto against Al Qaeda. US UAV attacks on Al Qaeda members in Pakistan are the most visible aspect. These UAV attacks regularly target high level Al Qaeda leaders as well as the leadership of groups like the Taliban, who are allied with Al Qaeda. This approach accepts what is central to all deference strategies, which is that an all out war for victory with the group is not possible or desirable. In the case of Al Qaeda this is because a ground offensive in Pakistan, where many believe the Al Qaeda leadership resides, would not be politically acceptable and, more importantly, the dispersed and decentralized nature of Al Qaeda means that it would never be possible to capture or kill all relevant members of the group. The level of violence has also proven acceptable, with Al Qaeda only able to make smaller attacks since 9/11 and the use of UAVs protecting the lives of US forces.

In this sense, deference against Al Qaeda provides what it promises. By continuing to attack the group, it has been forced into survival mode. Deferring attacks against Al Qaeda makes it lose momentum. While Al Qaeda's resources are directed toward defense, it cannot go on the offense, i.e. through setting off large scale, spectacular terrorist attacks. Its leadership must contend with not being killed every time they walk out the door. The group must institute strict operational security directives which make acting that much more slow and inefficient. Centralized command becomes that much more difficult, if not impossible.

Yet, deference will never lead to victory unless it becomes an integrated strategy and this means accepting that the kinetic attacks against Al Qaeda are actually the defensive part of the strategy. Kinetic attacks such as missiles launched from UAVs or Special Operations Forces raids only keep the group busy and force it to expend resources on survival. But these attacks will not lead to the destruction of the group. An offensive action involves undermining Al Qaeda.



Accepting that kinetic attacks are only a means of deferring, rather than terminating a group like Al Qaeda, means accepting a new approach to victory. On a practical level, it means spending less time trying to 'lop off the head' of the group and more time on weakening the group's recruitment, finance and planning operations. The offensive actions will be those which ultimately cause the group to fail, such as losing an ideological battle, which will lead to less new recruits, running out of finances with which to fund new attacks and ensuring that the group does not create the sort of positive political community that might give it a reason to exist. These offensive operations can be carried out by psychological operations and civil affairs portions of the US military, however, other departments of the US government, such as the state, Treasury and Agriculture also must be heavily involved with targeting the group. Indeed, USAID development projects or Treasury Department financial tracking should be seen as offensive weapons in the literal sense of the words.

In this battle, perception matters as much as reality. The long-term strategy against a group like Al Qaeda is to undermine its recruitment and financing which will come from individuals deciding on their own that the group is not fighting for or donating to. This means illustrating that Al Qaeda is not on the offense and is, indeed, not even an existing threat. Even successful kinetic attacks against the group only serve to advertise its continued existence and relevancy. All publicity is good publicity for the terrorist group, as even an attack that kills Al Qaeda members only serves to remind the public - and prospective recruits - that the groups is still fighting the global superpower and surviving. Hiding successful attacks as well as unsuccessful ones might do more to weaken the group in the long run. In fact, the best offense would be to pretend that Al Qaeda didn't exist or at least was not a relevant foreign policy concern.

Al Qaeda will not be destroyed spectacularly, rather, an integrated strategy of deference will lead to its fading away. Deferring the conflict through constant low level attacks will weaken the group's ability to recruit new members and find new resources. At the same time, ideological and financial offense will keep the group from expending. These factors will compound each other and make Al Qaeda look even weaker. Eventually the group will lose more and more of its ability to attack, until it can no longer mount an effective attack at all. Sooner or later, the memory of its ability to lead an attack like 9/11 will fade and it so will the threat. In the end, the US wins by simply not letting anything happen.

## **Conclusions**

In a sense, deference is an Alice in Wonderland approach to war. Going out, tracking down and killing the enemy is the defensive maneuver. These attacks are meant to keep the enemy busy and weak. Building schools, handing out pamphlets and sorting through bank records are the offensive maneuvers. These maneuvers are the ones that will lead to the enemy collapsing from within.

The strategic approach may not seem so new and revolutionary because the actions themselves are not new, what is new is the attitude toward strategy. Aspects of a deference strategy are already being carried out to a degree in a de facto way by the US. The problem is that the strategic approach is not being carried out consciously, systematically and in an integrated fashion. As with other strategic approaches like containment and deterrence, systematizing the

approach demands an all-important change in attitude and expectations. Changes in attitude create a new perception of the enemy and how to defeat him. These changes in perception can lead to new, more effective tactics and strategies, as soldiers, diplomats and policy makers divine and carry out new means of warfighting.

Deference is an approach that provides the US with a great advantage in war, time. Going back to the Taliban saying about NATO and time, while it's true, the Taliban can wait indefinitely for NATO to leave and NATO is in a rush to leave; it's just as true that the US can wait indefinitely to defeat enemies that try to attack it too. The US is more than just a military organization, it is a nation-state, society and political community which provides protection and structure to the lives of individuals who value it innately. Not only can the US survive and wait indefinitely, that is exactly what the US wants to happen. There would be nothing better than for nothing to happen. Al Qaeda on the other hand is not a society, it has no reason to exist beyond fighting a war. If it is not on the offense, then there is no reason for it to exist.

In the end, Al Qaeda will fade away, like the Soviet Union before it. Deterrence on its own did not defeat the Soviet Union. Rather, deterrence only gave the breathing room necessary for other strategies and other forms of competition to occur. These approaches to defeating the Soviet Union did not involve an all out, explosive war, instead they led to a long-term weakening of the state and finally to its inability to prop itself up any longer. Similarly, deference on its own will not win the war against Al Qaeda but it does provide the breathing room to undermine the group in the long run using an integrated strategy, until it is no longer able to prop itself up and attract new recruits or finances.

This approach admits that the War on Terror is not going to be a short war and that Al Qaeda is a true enemy that can put the US on the defensive. But it also proposes that the US has the advantage and that inevitably the US will achieve victory. If there is anything that fighting unconventional wars over the last two decades has taught the US it is that they take time but that those who can outlast the enemy will win. Luckily, time is on our side in this case.

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