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Colin S. Gray, deterrence, and contingency

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Most scholars as well as practitioners in strategic studies recognize that deterrence is contingent upon the opponent choosing to be deterred. This recognition was a contribution made by Colin Gray to deterrence theory, forcefully if not strictly uniquely, on the basis of the theory of strategy. Although relating the nature of strategy to deterrence led to a powerful reinterpretation of the importance of actor agency in deterrence, it is nonetheless still an incomplete, albeit foundational, appreciation of agency and contingency. To understand fully the role of agency in deterrence, one must also relate it to the nature of political relationships, and thereby identify another contingency point in deterrence.

First briefly exploring Gray's thoughts on deterrence, this article focuses on the key recognition that the other party must ultimately choose to be deterred, together with what this means for enunciating deterrence. The second half further develops Gray's thesis by taking another step back from deterrence to identify a second, even more fundamental, contingency point, pertaining to the politics surrounding deterrence. It concludes by considering the significance of this second way deterrence is contingent upon the opponent.

Recognition of the second contingency point ultimately lies in a brief spring 2013 email exchange between Colin and myself, while I was still a PhD student under his supervision and working on grand strategy. The occasion was publication of a recent article on deterrence which we both deplored. Colin encouraged me to publish a rebuttal based on a two paragraph criticism which I had sent him, a task which I accomplished the following year. Nonetheless, the core idea of the second contingency point is sufficiently interesting and potentially important enough that it deserves continued enunciation. I am sure that Colin would approve.

Colin Gray and deterrence

By the time Colin Gray made his professional debut in strategic studies in 1969, deterrence had been among the most prominent and most studied concepts of the field for over twenty years. First generation scholars of academic strategic studies such as Bernard Brodie, Thomas Schelling, Albert Wohlstetter, and Herman Kahn, among many others, had all explored the concept and implications of deterrence, in theory and for practice, in their own more or less idiosyncratic ways. By the end of the 1960s these authors were slowly beginning to withdraw, often moving on to other topics of interest and leaving the field open to fresh thinking. The second generation of deterrence theorists pushed back against the older understandings of deterrence, often viewing them as too narrow and mechanical. An example of first generation thinking is French general André Beaufre's suggestion that deterrence "is a powerful instrument, *at the disposal of policy*: it is a strategy."¹

The second generation sought instead to make deterrence a more nuanced concept by emphasizing new human dimensions. In doing so, Jack Snyder came to develop the notion of strategic

culture and Robert Jervis emphasized the significance of psychology and perceptions. Gray drew upon both culture and perception, but more importantly he contextualized his interpretation of deterrence within a theory of strategy founded upon Clausewitz's theory of war. This led him to assign priority in deterrence theory to the opponent's agency and judgment. As Gray wrote, "[d]eterrence is the condition that obtains when a deterree decides that he is deterred" and further that it "is a relational variable that works at the discretion, though admittedly not wholly at the volition, of the candidate deterree."² This, together with the context provided by Clausewitz, led Gray to a further critical insight:

Though often, perhaps unusually, feasible, deterrence is *inherently* unreliable. Many claims made here are essentially contestable, but this one is not. Quite literally, deterrence can work only if the intended deterree chooses to be deterred. There is no way in which such a choice, for deterrence, can be guaranteed. The strategic world is significantly, though by no means entirely, non-linear. No matter how many missiles I buy, I cannot be absolutely certain that they will deter. The problem by definition, is that strategy (and war) is a dialectic of two independent, albeit other-regarding as well as self-regarding, wills.³

That is, deterrence is inherently unreliable because it is nearly wholly dependent on the opponent allowing himself to be deterred. Deterrence was never an automatically-generated result, even if one had an enormous nuclear arsenal. All one could do is to present an as-yet non-violent demonstration that the opponent would regret his aggression and is therefore better off not attacking. In Gray's appreciation, deterrence has a major contingency point—being beyond the control of the would-be deterrer—due to which deterrence may either fail or succeed.

This realization also led Gray to another theme which he would continue promoting in various forms throughout his career: accurately enunciating deterrence (and strategy in general). Thus he argued that

[n]o kind of weapon is inherently any more *deterrent*, or any more *strategic*, than is any other kind. To repeat, deterrence is a relational, a systemic, variable. It requires the active collaboration of the designated deterree. That intended deterree is not simply the passive object of a deterrent effect which emanates magically from particular weapons or forces (allegedly *the* deterrent).⁴

Simply put, 'the deterrent' makes sense grammatically, but cannot possibly make sense strategically. In such cases, clarity of strategic thought is served by strategically sensible, rather than grammatically efficient, use of language. In strategy, the grammatically efficient option is incorrect—one cannot hope to associate instrument and outcome in such a direct manner—but also redundant, as the very employment of the instrument to achieve a political outcome means that its intended function is strategic, whether ultimately successfully or not, even though its actual use is inherently tactical. Gray never approved, for example, of the habitual British description of their nuclear submarines as 'the deterrent', and would similarly not have approved of Beaufre's depiction of deterrence.

One of the reasons Gray was able to develop such insights into deterrence was not simply because he was one of a new wave of deterrence theorists, but rather because he was able to take a step back from deterrence theory to recognize that it was merely part of the more general theory of strategy. This vital context enabled him to recognize the contingency point inherent in deterrence.

A second contingency point

It is possible to elaborate further on Gray's insight regarding the contingent nature of deterrence. Doing so requires one to take another Colin-esque step away, not just from deterrence, but even from strategy. Just as the theory of strategy is the context for deterrence theory, so too does strategy have its own larger context, which emerges out of the great stream of time as described by Richard Neustadt and Ernest May.⁵ Yet neither the need for strategy, nor the necessity to establish a deterrent relationship with an opponent, emerges simply out of this great stream as such.

Instead they become priorities due to the vagaries of politics, among politicians and polities, which occur as the great stream of time burbles along its course; if the political climate becomes too dire, political leaders' thoughts turn to violence and the threat of violence to achieve their goals, however defined.⁶

In considering this even wider context to deterrence and to strategy, one first might recognize two essential types of deterrence, as enunciated by Patrick Morgan.

Immediate deterrence concerns the relationship between opposing states where at least one side is seriously considering an attack while the other is mounting a threat of retaliation in order to prevent it. *General deterrence* relates to opponents who maintain armed forces to regulate their relationship even though neither is anywhere near mounting an attack.⁷

Whether immediate or general, deterrent relationships are only relevant in the context of opposing polities. In international politics there are many other relationships for which deterrence theory and force in general have little or no relevance. Yet in an oppositional relationship, mutual suspicion of each other's intentions is already affecting the relationship through the respective participants' perceptions of that relationship. In non-crisis conditions, this means that general deterrence may instead be perceived as general endangerment—this relates to Gray's point that weapons do not possess inherently strategic qualities. In a presumed crisis or when one party seeks and is acting specifically to engender an immediate deterrent relationship, the other actor may not believe the former's actions to be defensive or for deterrent purposes. In other words, one must recognize that deterrence has a second, earlier, and even more fundamental contingency point. This preceding contingency point for deterrence is simple: *the other party must be willing to recognize that one is trying to establish a deterrent relationship in the first place!* The alternative causes the opposing party to perceive deployments intended to engender deterrence instead as threatening or aggressive, and public statements meant to convey deterring intention instead as lies to cover or justify that aggression. This earlier contingency point has rarely been recognized, often due to sloppy mainstream thinking which infers inherent strategic qualities in armaments.

This basic uncertainty is encapsulated in the concept of the security dilemma, which posits that as polities improve their armaments they make others more insecure, who are then obliged to respond in kind, particularly if it seems that the armaments procured are offensive or if the offensive has the overall advantage, as is generally the case with nuclear weapons. This logic cannot be mechanistically applied given significant cases where it fails, even beyond alliance contexts: for example, European countries spent much of the post-Cold War-era largely ignoring rather than responding to improving Russian military capabilities and even Russian military adventurism abroad. Therefore, political agency still matters. Key to political agency, to the logic of the security dilemma, and to the second contingency point of deterrence is judging the other party's political intentions.

An example which demonstrates the importance of this second, earlier, contingency point is the 1983 Soviet nuclear war scare. The Soviets habitually described Western actions not in terms of deterrence, but rather in terms of intimidation.⁸ This reflected Soviet understanding of Cold War politics, which was only exacerbated by the early 1980s as a confluence of factors—the new American nuclear strategy PD-59, Reaganite foreign policy and rhetoric toward and about the Soviet Union, and the backlash toward the Soviet Union over downing Korean Airlines Flight 007, among numerous others—led them seriously to believe that intimidation was going to turn into aggression. The moment for this transformation was taken to be NATO's Able Archer exercise, in which for the first time Western politicians happened to be participating, simply to expose them to procedures and ways of thinking surrounding a contingency escalating to potential nuclear release. Portions of Soviet high command even fled to their nuclear bunkers. Nuclear war nearly resulted, but eventually the Soviets calmed down, with Lt. Col. Stanislav Petrov of the Soviet Air Defense Forces playing a pivotal role in precluding a gratuitous Soviet nuclear launch. The key point is not that deterrence nearly failed, but that the Soviets never believed NATO to

be practicing deterrence. When a regular NATO exercise to strengthen deterrence coincided with Soviet hysteria, tragedy nearly occurred.⁹

Conclusion

Well before the opponent asks himself whether or not he will be deterred by the force he is facing, he has already asked himself whether or not his opponent is trying to deter him—or to intimidate and coerce, or even prepare to invade. This is the second contingency point of deterrence, with the crucial policy implication that one cannot simply assume that the opponent will understand the relationship the way you do. To reiterate Gray's point, armaments do not have inherent strategic properties. Moreover, the set of responses a polity produces when facing what its leadership believes to be aggression differs from the responses it produces when facing a threat or posture it believes to be deterrent in purpose.

This is not to suggest that the other party determines one's own policy, but merely that in any relationship, the other party is an inherent (and in some ways the most important) source of feedback about said policy or strategy. When embarking upon a strategy for deterrence or a policy which relies on deterrence, one must be prepared for potential failure at more than a single point. Indeed, it is perfectly plausible that failure is guaranteed even before an attempt at creating a deterrent relationship is made. Given that no one outside the Russian leadership knows its true beliefs, this has posed NATO a grave policy dilemma vis-à-vis Russia since 2014: should NATO attempt to deter Russia, since Russia *apparently* believes (or purposely pretends to believe) NATO to be purely aggressive and gives no credence that NATO might be posturing defensively, or should NATO not attempt to deter Russia, in the hope that Russia instead simply bears no ill intention toward the Baltic States or other parts of NATO's eastern flank?¹⁰

When enunciating deterrence, the second contingency point merely reinforces Gray's original point not to conflate instrument and effect. Conflating precludes identification of deterrence's second contingency point. Successfully recognizing this contingency point requires one not to conflate intention with understanding, as well as with effect. Just because one intends to deter does not mean that the other party understands one's actions or intentions in the same way, which in turn decreases the chance of achieving the desired effect. "To deter" is grammatically correct, but strategically and politically incorrect because it implies a level of linearity which deterrence cannot possess. "The deterrent" conflates means and effect, "to deter" conflates ways and effects.

A key feature of Colin's work has always been his emphasis on agency in strategy, which led him to recognition of the contingency of deterrence and the importance of appropriately enunciating strategy and deterrence. This important foundation, recognition of *strategic* agency, enables a further acknowledgement of *political* agency and of how it impinges upon strategy and strategic agency.¹¹ The second contingency point of deterrence is an exemplar of that latter political appreciation not just of agency, but of the interaction of various forms of agency.

Notes

1. André Beaufre. *Deterrence and Strategy*. R. H. Barry trans. (London: Faber & Faber 1965), 171.
2. Colin S. Gray. "The Definitions and Assumptions of Deterrence: Questions of Theory and Practice," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 13, no. 4 (1990): 12, 13.
3. Colin S. Gray. "Deterrence and the nature of strategy," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 11, no. 2 (2000), 20.
4. Gray, "The Definitions and Assumptions of Deterrence," 5.
5. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May. *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press 1986), 251.
6. Lukas Milevski. "Choosing Strategy: Meaning, Significance, Context," *Infinity Journal* 6, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 12–16.
7. Patrick M. Morgan. *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications 1977), 28.

8. Geoffrey Jukes. "The Military Approach to Deterrence and Defense," in *Soviet Naval Policy: Objectives and Constraints*, ed. Michael McGwire, Ken Booth, and John McDonnell (New York: Praeger 1975), 484.
9. Lukas Milevski. "Deterring Able Archer: Comments Arising from Adamsky's Lessons for Deterrence Theory and Practice", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 6-7 (December 2014): 1050–65.
10. For more on this theme see Lukas Milevski. "NATO's Defence Policy Dilemma in the Baltic States," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2017): 51–68.
11. In one of his final books, Gray deliberately turned to consider this theme, see Colin S. Gray. *Strategy and Politics* (London: Routledge 2016).

Notes on contributor

Lukas Milevski is an assistant professor at the Institute of History at Leiden University, where he teaches strategy in the BA International Studies and MA International Relations programs. He has published two books with Oxford University Press: *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (2016) and *The West's East: Contemporary Baltic Defense in Strategic Perspective* (2018). He studied with Colin Gray as a PhD student 2011–14.