SECURITY PARADIGMS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF CONVENTIONAL DETERRENCE IN THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

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Abstract

Deterrence is both a theoretical branch of the theory of international relations and security studies, and a practical strategy used by states (and sometimes non-state actors) to manage conflicts and crises. Given the special role it plays in regional and international security issues, military, and politics, deterrence has long been an object of interest to scholars as well as the military, politicians, and diplomats.

To analyse deterrence in regional conflicts, one must begin with a brief typology of the elements and mechanism of deterrence in general, and only then see how they can be applied to regional conflicts. Deterrence can rely on conventional weapons or weapons of mass destruction (WMD). In regional conflicts without direct involvement of nuclear superpowers, the most applicable scenario is that of deterrence with conventional weapons, i.e. conventional deterrence.

However, the use of conventional deterrence in regional conflicts has not been covered by political science in great detail. Therefore, from academic and practical perspectives, it is important to clarify the conceptual aspects for a more precise theoretical understanding and subsequent discussions applicable to some regional conflicts, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Keywords: *conventional deterrence, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, South Caucasus, regional security, conflict resolution.*

Introduction

Deterrence remains an effective form of achieving fundamental strategic military and political goals by both states and non-state actors.

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The effectiveness of deterrence is demonstrated by many examples in world history. As noted by one of the military historians, "deterrence is old, like fear" (Overy, 1994, p. 73). Nevertheless, a comprehensive conceptualization of deterrence in political science and military-strategic research – most importantly, in political practice – was absorbed only after the Second World War, when the active bipolar confrontation of the nuclear superpowers began to gain momentum.

There are many definitions of deterrence, from our professional point of view we prefer to define deterrence as *preventing an actor from committing undesirable military or political action by threatening to cause it considerable, preferably inacceptable, damage.* Deterrence can include any combination of military, political, economic, diplomatic, informational, psychological, or other measures that aim to dissuade a potential aggressor from achieving their goals by means of military force.

During the Cold War, the theory and practice of deterrence by both superpowers mostly relied on nuclear weapons. However, in the '70s and '80s, and especially after the end of the Cold War, conventional deterrence began to become increasingly important. It could be said that a renaissance of conventional deterrence took place. At the current stage this so-called "second conventional age" is marked by the development of modern conventional weapons: long-range, precise ballistic and cruise missiles that use advanced intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance systems. In case of great military powers, these modern technologies include not only classic strike platforms – ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery systems, other precision-guided munitions (PGMs) – but also weapons based on new physical principles.

The military competition between small countries involved in a regional conflict after the renaissance of the conventional deterrence is mainly based on the growing destruction capacity of the existing strike platforms with improved surveillance systems and on greater sensitivity and vulnerability of modern states to the possible damage and destruction of their basic military capabilities and civilian infrastructure. With regard to many regional conflicts, conventional deterrence plays a special role. That is why in the Nagorno-Karabakh

conflict, assuming external actors do not become direct involved, conventional deterrence is the only possible strategy.

Naturally, every ethno political or international conflict is different and has some unique parameters. Still, many conflicts share the same logic, so that a set of theoretical concepts and patterns can be used to understand these conflicts' cause-and-effect relationships, algorithms, and mechanisms, and to assess the efficiency of military and political measures used to address them. This article does not study the all complex nature of political, historical and other realities of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that can be found in many sources (Avakian, 2013) and is dedicated solely to the theoretical frameworks of conventional deterrence in the situation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with special focus on the elements and mechanism of implementing deterrence.

The elements of deterrence

Nuclear and conventional deterrence: There is a conceptual difference between nuclear deterrence and conventional deterrence. The logic of nuclear deterrence is that the adversary will refrain from a certain kind of action/inaction in order to avoid 'mutual suicide'. In conventional deterrence, no matter what military potential is possessed by the party engaging in it, the actor that unleashes hostilities always has the hope of achieving political goals by military means even in the event of a retaliatory strike. The application threshold is thus lower for conventional deterrence, and consequently, conventional deterrence has higher *credibility* than nuclear deterrence. The reason is that making the decision to use conventional weapons is fundamentally easier than in the case of nuclear weapons. The credibility of intentions to use nuclear weapons in response to the adversary's action or inaction relies on a perceived suicidal readiness. The existing "nuclear taboo" – moral and political limitations on the use of nuclear weapons, especially against countries that do not possess them – has been enhanced by the fact that nuclear weapons have not been used for a long time. Still, despite the greater credibility of conventional

deterrence, it remains less effective than nuclear deterrence, because of the difference in magnitude of the potential damage.

Not only does conventional deterrence have a more complicated conceptual and existential basis, it is also more complex in its implementation. For example, it is extremely difficult for the potential adversary to estimate the scale of potential losses from retaliatory actions in the event of a violation of the status quo (Harknett, 1994, pp. 88-89). Unlike a nuclear war where the result is clear cut, the estimate of the potential cost resulting from retaliation in a conventional war is a hypothetical or mathematical exercise. Assessing the credibility of conventional deterrence is also difficult. For these reasons, conventional deterrence is less powerful than nuclear deterrence (Stone, 2012, p. 109). However, as political realities always demonstrate, 'the fact that nuclear threats are incontestable does not guarantee that they will be viewed as credible, while the contestable nature of conventional threats does not preclude their credibility' (Wirts, 2018, p. 58).

Narrow and extended deterrence: Depending on the actors involved, deterrence can be categorized as *narrow* or *extended. Narrow deterrence* only involves the deterring country. *Extended deterrence* also involves another country or group of countries. Additionally, *narrow deterrence* only concerns the security and interests of the deterring actor while in the event of *extended deterrence*, other players commit to the deterrence, including by providing military and/or political guarantees.

Since the middle of the Cold War (́60s), the concept of extended deterrence was one of the foundations of the military and political plans of NATO. The deterrence relied primarily on the US nuclear potential. Similar nuclear safeguards were extended to the Asia-Pacific Region (APR), namely, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan (country where US nuclear safeguards remain informal). Within NATO, the arrangement was collective defence (Article 5 of the 1949 Treaty) whereas in the APR, the US made a bilateral agreement with each ally.

Based on this typology, we encounter a mixed type of deterrence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. On the one hand, evidently, Armenia

implements extended deterrence. In its key documents in the sphere of security and defence (National Security Strategy, Military Doctrine, etc.) the Republic of Armenia has stipulated its commitments towards the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic acting as the guarantor of its security and representative of its interests in the international arena. The military and political guarantees provided by Armenia thus deter Azerbaijan from resuming hostilities against Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, Armenia carries out deterrence against Azerbaijan with regard to its own security, since the military and political leadership of Azerbaijan has repeatedly stated its readiness to launch military strikes at the territory of Armenia. In this case, Armenia evidently engages in minimal or narrow deterrence.

Finally, in the regional security framework Armenia is also a beneficiary of extended deterrence given the military security guarantees provided by its external security partners.

General and situational deterrence: In terms of its timeframe, deterrence can be categorized as *general* (strategic) or *situational* (immediate). In *general deterrence*, a country plans and implements a set of military and political measures to prevent threats to its security. Since it is ongoing and part of the country's long-term strategic planning, it is sometimes called *strategic deterrence*.[1]

One example of general deterrence is the long-term implementation by Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh (at least, after the ceasefire in May 1994) of a policy to dissuade Azerbaijan from resuming full-scale hostilities in the zone of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The need for general deterrence affects many aspects of Armenia's military and foreign policy, including its military and political cooperation strategies, its involvement in international organizations and cooperation with the external security partners (including

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[1] It is important not to confuse the meaning of *strategic deterrence* described here with the way this term is used by some nuclear states. E.g. in Russia it denotes deterrence relying on the strategic nuclear potential of land- and sea-based missile systems and strategic bomber aircraft. The term is also used in Russia to avoid confusion with nuclear deterrence using non-strategic (tactical) nuclear weapons.

participation in international peacekeeping), arms procurement, deployment of its armed forces and location of its military facilities, and the goals of its military reforms and development.

In contrast to general deterrence, the need for *situational deterrence* arises right before or during a crisis. As Patrick Morgan, the creator of this typology, pointed out, the situational deterrence mechanisms take effect when the adversary is already contemplating or preparing an attack, or when decisive action is necessary to dispel the adversary's doubts about the determination and capabilities of the deterring actor (Morgan, 2003). Situational deterrence is also needed when the effectiveness of general deterrence on the regional level is reduced, for example, by external factors affecting the military and political situation or the military balance in the conflict zone.

There are various means of situational deterrence at times of crisis: effective communication (this can involve military parades, military exercises in the immediate vicinity of the conflict zone, military and political visits by leaders of friendly and allied states, etc.); demonstrative acquisitions of new types of weapons and military equipment; initiating military and political support from and consultations with allied states and international organizations; full or partial military mobilization; declaring a state of emergency, and so on. In certain circumstances, situational deterrence may involve direct military actions of limited or proportional scale.

Deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial

Based on the type of retaliation threats, Glenn Snyder's classification, developed in the late ' 50s and early ' 60s, distinguishes two types of deterrence: *deterrence by punishment* and *deterrence by denial* (Snyder, 1993, pp. 360-361). The first type – *deterrence by punishment* – was especially relevant for the nuclear bipolar confrontation between superpowers during the Cold War. It involved threats to inflict unacceptable damage (to the adversary's territory, population, industry, infrastructure, etc.) with missile and bomb strikes in the event that the adversary initiates military action, regardless of its outcome. In this logic, the adversary is expected to abandon the idea of

launching (or sometimes also continuing) military action after calculating possible damages from the retaliatory strike.

Deterrence by punishment remains pivotal in the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence. It is also the conceptual basis of the *counter value strategy* that targets major civilian and industrial facilities as well as the military and political leadership of the adversary. In recent decades, deterrence by punishment has increasingly become applicable to conventional deterrence. With the growing accuracy and destructive power of conventional weapons, the technological development of many states has reached such proportions that the destruction of specific elements of infrastructure, economic facilities, and communications can lead to catastrophic consequences.

It is not only superpowers or regional powers but also small countries involved in regional conflicts with their neighbours that acquire high-performance large-calibre Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), tactical and operational-tactical missile systems, and other types of conventional missiles and artillery. This trend was evident by the mid- '70s, especially during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 and other local conflicts in so called "Third World" countries. These types of long-range weapons have also become common in the arsenals of small states because of their relatively low cost, high efficiency and ease of operation, requiring neither a complicated infrastructure nor large numbers of trained personnel (Cohen, 1986, pp. 150-155).

Similarly to American and Soviet nuclear deterrence during the Cold War or "Third World" non-nuclear regional conflicts, conventional deterrence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involves industrial and political as well as military targets, for example, the facilities for producing and transportation of energy. It should be noted that potential retaliatory strikes target economic and communication infrastructure, but not the civilian population.

In the event that deterrence by punishment is ineffective, *deterrence by denial* is used to convince the adversary that they have no chance to achieve their military and political goals, and thereby dissuade them from initiating hostilities. When conventional weapons are used, deterrence by denial has a major advantage over deterrence

by punishment. When deterrence by punishment fails, the forces and assets needed for deterrence by denial (for example, large-calibre MLRS, tactical missile systems and other types of long-range weapon systems) can later be used to engage in a "traditional" conventional armed conflict. Conventional deterrence by denial thus integrates with a traditional military defence strategy, because the weapons and armed forces of the defending party can become "the instruments of defence if deterrence failed" (Snyder, 1993, p. 355). In this regard, conventional deterrence has an advantage over nuclear deterrence, which lacks the flexibility of combining deterrence by punishment with deterrence by denial, or with defensive action, in the event that deterrence fails.

Accordingly, the concept of deterrence by denial is more applicable to conventional deterrence, which includes more elements of the classical military strategy. It can even be argued that deterrence by denial is fundamental for conventional deterrence. However, in nuclear deterrence, deterrence by denial was the basis for the *counterforce strikes* strategy, although by the end of the Cold War, both the United States and the USSR already concluded that, because of their enormous destructive power, nuclear weapons became a political deterrent rather than a weapon.

In the post-bipolar period, deterrence by denial entered a new stage, especially in regional conflicts, and in many cases became the prevailing approach, since, in contrast to nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence does not concentrate on the use of missiles and bombs to undermine the economic, demographic, and the political survival of the adversary. In view of the smaller striking force of conventional weapons, conventional deterrence tends to focus on reducing the adversary's military and technical capacity. The goal of the deterring actor is to demonstrate ability to inflict unacceptable damage to the offensive capability of a potential adversary, destroying all hope for quick victory, causing the adversary to lose political motivation for an offensive, and thereby successfully deterring it from unleashing a new war.

We should also note a circumstance that is particularly relevant for the current military-technical balance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: the deterring sides possess a sufficient quantity of PGMs,

including Anti-Tank Guided Missiles (ATGM) and Surface to Air Missiles (SAM), to rule out the option of quick victory; as noted by John Mearsheimer in his classical study, "as a result of developments in precision-guided technologies, it is clearly much more difficult to implement a blitzkrieg" (Mearsheimer, 1983, p. 28). Instruments of deterrence by denial in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict include also multi-layered fortifications along the line of contact, which lower the chances for the success of a rapid offensive.

The mechanism for implementing deterrence

Deterrence capability: Capability is the most obvious and essential element of effective deterrence. At the same time, as Bernard Brodie noted, 'the maximum possible deterrence may require a war-winning capability, but much less force can nevertheless possess considerable deterrent value' (Brodie, 1959, p. viii). This observation was confirmed in the course of many acute regional and global crises and escalations.

The effective implementation of any type of deterrence clearly requires a certain military-technical capability. In the case of conventional deterrence, this capability must primarily include two interrelated components:

1. Availability of large-calibre MLRS, long-range and medium-range tactical missile systems, other types of long-range weapons (for example, multifunctional aircrafts, equipped with long-range air-to-ground missiles) for striking at sensitive targets deep in the territory of the potential adversary (deterrence by punishment);

2. An effective defensive capability to prevent the potential adversary from achieving an immediate complete victory (deterrence by denial). In this case, it is primarily about general-purpose forces that can be used to prevent the adversary from prompt achieving their strategic and operational goals in the course of classical military operations.

Credibility of deterrence: The most important characteristic of any type of deterrence, whether nuclear deterrence or deterrence with conventional types of weapons is also the question of its *credibility*, or, in other words, the potential adversary's awareness of the potential retaliation' scope and the potential costs of unleashing aggression. Deterrence only works when a country's military and political leadership is aware that in the event that it initiates a military campaign, the potential adversary has the political will, determination, and capacity to cause it irreparable losses and/or prevent it from achieving its operational goals. In other words, as former US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, put it, 'weakness is an invitation', i.e. if a player believes that their adversary lacks power and determination for retaliation, deterrence will fail.[2]

The credibility of Armenian deterrence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is affected, amongst other things, by the *asymmetry of motivations*, often playing a more important role than the *asymmetry of capabilities*. As prominent expert on asymmetric conflicts, Ivan Arreguin-Toft, points out: "power asymmetry explains interest asymmetry" (Arreguin-Toft, 2001, pp. 95-96). In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, an important factor of credibility of Armenian deterrence is thus the *asymmetry of motivations*, since Armenians have more motivation than Azerbaijani. Victory or defeat in a likely new war for Armenia, and even more so for Nagorno-Karabakh, is a matter of the very survival of their statehood (Deriglazova and Minasyan, 2011).

Another factor that enhances the credibility of Armenian deterrence is the existence of a successful historical precedent of willingness to resort extreme means to stand in the existing political situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In line with the *theory of reputation-building*, such a precedent enhances the actors' political reputation in the eyes of potential adversaries and allies (Sechser, 2010, p. 646).

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this phenomenon was clearly demonstrated by the ability of Armenia to bear the costs of the conflict in the conditions of 1991-1994 war, subsequent decades of persisting status quo and communication blockade as well as after April 2016

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[2] Author's interview with Donald Rumsfeld in Washington D.C., April 2013.

Azerbaijani initiated military escalation along the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh. As deterrence theory experts point out, while the ability to inflict damage on the adversary is an important factor in a conflict, it is not decisive, and "the ability to absorb suffering also confers bargaining advantage and can offset an adversary's superior economic or military capability" (Lebow, 2007, p. 246).

Sustainability of deterrence: An essential element of deterrence is the sustainability of its implementation. Deterrence can succeed if the deterring actor can ensure the sustainability of its deterrence capability, i.e. the forces and means needed to inflict heavy damage on the potential aggressor in any conditions, regardless the scope of the aggression. The sustainability of deterrence is of particular importance if the potential aggressor is likely to resort a surprise attack. Therefore, a country's deterrence potential must include forces and means for ensuring the sustainability of its deterrence.

In contemporary local conflicts, the sustainability of conventional deterrence increasingly depends on protection against attacks by Special Forces, whereas warning and protection against air strikes should cover combat UAVs as well as combat aviation and long-range missiles and artillery.

In terms of sustainability of conventional deterrence, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict displays a significant peculiarity. In the current political and geographical conditions, the deterrence capability of Armenia has greater survivability, especially in the event of a first strike by Azerbaijan. In peacetime, the most powerful and sufficient Armenian forces, in particular, long-range missile-artillery systems and means of ensuring their sustainability (command posts, communication centres, and air defence systems) are not deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh but in Armenia. Accordingly, Armenia's cooperation with its external security partners will work as serious political constraints for a decision by Azerbaijan to make a first *disarming* strike against territory of the Republic of Armenia.

Communication as a component of deterrence: The credibility and resulting success of deterrence largely depend on effective communication, i.e. the ability to inform and convince the potential adversary of the true extent of the deterring party's determination and military capability. As noted by Bernard Brody, displays of military power, especially of new types of weapons or military equipment, allow countries to achieve two goals: 1) to inform the adversary of their intentions and determination, and 2) to convince the adversary of their military capability (Brodie, 1953, p. 281).

In the course of deterrence, communication between parties in conflict involves formal and informal exchange of specific information about each other. This implies informing the other party of one's approaches and positions and, simultaneously, assessing the capabilities and intentions of the other party with regard to the conflict that requires deterrence. Each party needs to understand and predict the other party's:

- National interests and tasks;
- Obligations with regard to the conflict issue;
- Military, political, economic, and other resources that it can use to achieve its national interests and tasks and its obligations with regard to the conflict issue (Harknett, 1994, pp. 93-94).

During implementation of deterrence, communication can happen in a variety of forms, from large-scale military exercises, displays of new military equipment and military parades, to parliament sessions and public discussions in which a party can express its political approaches to the conflict. Communication, especially in the form of a display of military capabilities and intentions, is one of the most sensitive elements of deterrence. An effective and credible display of capability and determination by the deterring actor undermines the argumentation of one of the most important resources of the potential aggressor: their often exaggerated belief in their ability to change the status quo. Respectively, the potential adversary's reaction to effective communication can sometimes be emotional and inadequate.

At the same time, it should be noted that ingenious communication can be purposefully misleading, serving as an efficient albeit provocative tool of deterrence and military and political relations

in a broader sense. In particular, displaying quantitative and qualitative improvement of military-technical capability so as to exert political and psychological pressure on potential adversaries and earn the respect of one's allies is a widely practiced policy, particularly useful in times of crisis. As noted by the former US Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, "(…) in a crisis, it matters what the other side believes – not what is objectively true" (McNamara, 1986, pp. 51-52). However, while misleading communication can sometimes have a positive effect, deterring the aggressive intentions of a potential adversary can also lead to unjustified expectations and exaggerated self-confidence, for which the deterring actor will eventually pay a high price.

This said, in conventional deterrence, when a party communicates its intentions to a potential adversary, it is often advisable to maintain some degree of *uncertainty*. Compared to nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence has more dependence on constant demonstration of military-technical capability. This complicates the situation of the deterring actor. On the one hand, displays of new armaments and military equipment increase the credibility of deterrence in the perception of the likely aggressor. On the other hand, the displays convey information on the military capabilities of the deterring actor and enable the potential adversary to better prepare for military operations should they decide to unleash them (Freedman, 2004, p. 39).

That is why, for example, the Armenian parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict constantly strive to preserve some uncertainty during demonstrations of military capability and newly acquired weapons and military equipment, in order to complicate the potential adversary's strategic planning in the conditions of the ongoing regional arms race. In strategic planning and military and political calculations, it is efficient to proceed from the worst and most challenging option when assessing the capability and intentions of the adversary. In this sense, the strategic uncertainty resulting from incomplete information on the capability and intentions of the adversary is a critically important and integral part of deterrence, as world politics has shown many times (Kilgour and Zagare, 1991, pp. 306-312).

Conclusions

Currently, deterrence theory is one of the most developed scientific concepts in modern international political science, in scientific and analytical studies in the field of security and in military-strategic analysis. Deterrence continues to improve and develop, and numerous scientists and political experts continue to search for new concepts and approaches that contribute to modernizing and adapting the theory and practice of deterrence to new political realities.

In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, to achieve the maximum practical effect, conventional deterrence can be realized in close connection and synthesis with various types of political and diplomatic deterrence. This stems from both the conceptual features of political and diplomatic deterrence and certain parameters of this conflict. The preservation of a fragile truce in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone is also largely conditioned by the format of international involvement and the position of influential external actors (for example, the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship), which allows for the use of these factors as part of the implementation of political and diplomatic deterrence. Apparently, deterrence will remain a key form of military and political behaviour of the Armenia for a very long time.

Deterrence, as a theory and a practical policy, has advantages as well as shortcomings and vulnerabilities. The policy of deterrence cannot be static and must develop constantly in order to remain relevant, containing the potential adversary, making it fears potential losses and abandons its intentions. In particular, the effectiveness of deterrence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be affected by changes of a variety of parameters, including the military-technical balance, the military and political factors, the rationality vs. emotionality of decision-makers, the geopolitical context, domestic politics, and societal attitudes and so on.

Deterrence as a strategy and a policy implementation also has conceptual limitations. In particular, a problem with assessing the effectiveness of deterrence is that the only sign of its success is often that "nothing happened" (Freedman, 2009, pp. 47-48). It is difficult to find out whether the deterred party gave up its intentions as a result of realizing the potential costs, or whether other factors played a role.

One of the most significant problems for conventional deterrence is the credibility and adequate perception of the threat of retaliation. A related problem is the rationality of decision-making by the actor being deterred. In particular, according to the *prospect theory* that describes decision-making in risky situation, the parties in conflict can be prepared to take risks and incur losses in order to prevent losses in more valuable and important spheres. It is also important that in the course of decision-making in a conflict involving deterrence, the deterred side takes into account the potential risks of inaction as well as those of action (Gerson, 2009, p. 41).

Finally, the most important conceptual flaw in any type of deterrence is that it cannot solve the problem of conflict resolution. All effective deterrence can do is help the parties win time by freezing the conflict. While far from a final solution, this is also a significant achievement that should not be underestimated. In the long term, deterrence can reduce tensions sufficiently to create the basis for a mutual compromise as the conflict loses its topicality in the public attitudes of the conflicting societies. As emphasized in a classic study on this topic, deterrence gives opposing parties' time to reconcile their conflicting interests, thereby reducing the tension and potential of an open conflict in their relationship (George and Smoke, 1974, p. 5).

Accordingly, in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, deterrence cannot lead to conflict settlement but can prevent the resumption of large-scale military operations. Conventional deterrence can thus create conditions for rethinking of the conflict situation and elaboration of compromise-based approaches by the political elites and societies of the parties in conflict.

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