

# DECISIVE POINT

The USAWC Press Podcast Companion Series

## Podcast Transcript

### Jeffrey H. Michaels “Rethinking the Relevance of Self-Deterrence”

Self-deterrence is critically understudied in deterrence theory. Similarly, deterrence practitioners prefer to focus on adversaries' threats rather than seeking to account for the full scope of fears influencing the decision calculus of policymakers. Through historical case studies, this article identifies where self-deterrence has occurred, highlights the benefits of incorporating the concept in future strategic planning and intelligence assessments, and recommends that policymakers, strategists, and analysts acknowledge self-deterrence as an important factor when preparing for future wars.

Read the article here: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss1/9/>

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Keywords: deterrence, self-deterrence, chemical weapons, nuclear weapons, decision making

#### Episode Transcript

##### Stephanie Crider (Host)

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Dr. Jeffrey H. Michaels is joining me virtually today from Barcelona, Spain, to discuss his article, [“Rethinking the Relevance of Self-Deterrence.”](#) which you can find in the Spring 2024 issue of *Parameters*. Michaels is the IEN Senior Fellow in American Foreign Policy and International Security at the Barcelona Institute for International Studies. He's the co-author with Sir Lawrence Freedman of *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy: New, Updated, and Completely Revised*, published in 2019.

Thank you for joining me today, Jeffrey.

##### Jeffrey H. Michaels

Thank you so much for the invitation.

##### Host

You note, in your article that deterrence is most discussed in terms of deterring others. What is self-deterrence?

##### Michaels

We often think about deterrence as “actor A” deterring “actor B.” Self-deterrence is basically “actor B” deterring “actor B.” So, when we think about a common definition of deterrence, it's the persuasion of one's opponent that the costs and/or risks of taking a certain course of action will outweigh the benefits. Now, in self-deterrence is basically one actor actually saying, “You know what, the cost of taking this action far outweighs the benefits.” When an adversary is threatening, there are a number of other reasons and a number of other consequences that are in the minds of decisionmakers of that state. So, for example, the common definition of self-deterrence stresses reputational concerns—so, things like moral and ethical reasons why a state wouldn't want to take a certain course of action.

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So, there's one school of thought that focuses on reputational concerns—and this is things like moral and ethical reasons [as to] why not to take certain courses of action. There's another school that talks about exaggerated beliefs about an adversary's capabilities or intentions. So, in other words, you can have certain fantasies in your own head about what an adversary is able or capable [of] or planning to do, but then there are the other whole set of other concerns. For example, if you're invading another country, you might not be concerned about actually taking over the country—as in defeating the enemy army—but you could have a very significant concern about having to occupy the country afterwards.

Then there are also a whole bunch of other things, for example, that the adversary has no control over whatsoever. So, you might think about various international audiences or domestic audiences, neutral countries that you don't want to alienate, and so forth. And then there are other things as well, like you might be concerned about being deterred in the short term, or not being deterred in the short term but being deterred because of the longer-term implications. So, for instance, there might be catastrophic success, you achieve your short-term goal, but actually you know that that's going to cause all sorts of problems in the long term. So, again, this is a bit different from traditional notions of deterrence.

### Host

Many scholars associate self-deterrence with nuclear weapons. You claim self-deterrence predates 1945. Tell me more.

### Michaels

Yes, for a very simple reason, which is that deterrence precedes 1945, as well. If deterrence precedes it, then self-deterrence effectively, automatically precedes it as well.

When we think about deterrence as an academic subject, we tend to associate it, as you said, with nuclear weapons. However, deterrence as a fact of life has preceded it going back to the very beginning of time, one could say. We often talk about deterrence as starting in the garden of Eden, and the first deterrence failure was God not successfully deterring Adam from eating the apple, and so forth.

But self-deterrence, like deterrence, goes back a very long way, and you can see evidence of this in history—so, when we look at things like how decisionmakers actually think about going to war, for example, or using certain weapons. In the article, I don't go that far back, but I go to the debates about chemical weapons use during the First World War and the aftermath of the First World War—and especially in the lead up to the Second World War and during the course of the Second World War.

So, one can find any number of examples throughout history, but I think one of the key problems is that with so much of the discourse on deterrence, people automatically associate it with nuclear weapons, but actually, it can be associated with any subject under the sun effectively. But that's certainly the case with conventional wars and so on.

### Host

How can policymakers be deterred from taking military action not by fear but by considering other consequences that don't fit into the traditional understanding of deterrence?

### Michaels

If you think, for example about, say, the Cuban missile crisis, which is a very commonly referred to case, and you ask the question: “Well, why didn't Kennedy order a military invasion of Cuba—or even to attack it militarily with airstrikes?” And one of the common reasons given for why he did not do this, and one that he gave himself, effectively, was that he was concerned that if the US attacks Cuba, then the Soviets will attack and capture West Berlin.

What's interesting about that case, specifically, is that the Soviets never threatened to attack West Berlin. This was an assumption on his part. This is what he thinks that they might do, but it wasn't necessarily something that the Soviets

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actually threatened to do. So that just gives you one example of how a policymaker can actually think of something and project his own ideas about what an adversary will do and then have the self-detering effect.

### Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts you'd like to share about this topic?

### Michaels

One of the key things that has interested me a great deal and one reason why I wrote this article—actually two reasons. One was that I've noticed that in the literature there's very little about self-deterrence to the extent that if there's been any discussion of the topic amongst deterrence theorists, they rarely ever go beyond a few pages in discussing it, and they don't really examine it in any meaningful way. To the extent that they do, it's usually only limited to this one example of reputational concerns. They don't really go into the issues of exaggerated beliefs, much less the whole issue of catastrophic success and so on and so forth. So I think that there's a great need to actually go into this topic in much greater depth, and what I was hoping to do with the article was at least to tempt some other analyst to pay a bit more attention to it and get a debate started.

The second reason is that I think that when it comes to things like strategy, how we think about adversaries, as well as how adversaries think about us, this issue of how we limit our own actions is actually quite important as well as how adversaries limit their own actions. What actually leads the other side's decisionmakers not to take certain types of actions? How can you exaggerate those fears?

I've noticed over the years that one typical way of discussing deterrence, especially from the military perspective, is always thinking about “well we have ‘capability X’ and if we have enough of ‘capability X,’ whatever that is, that will be enough to deter the adversary.” But that's really more about our capabilities, hoping that that actually is what they fear. And so, it's a lot less about what it is that they actually fear. It might have nothing to do with our capabilities whatsoever—maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. But maybe there are also fears you can actually exaggerate through psychological means and other means to manipulate their behavior.

### Host

I'm curious—is there something going on internationally, or even locally, that makes this especially relevant right now?

### Michaels

Yes, there are quite a few cases, actually. When we think about why Russia has not used nuclear weapons in Ukraine, for example, or even chemical weapons or something like this, one could make the argument that they have been deterred by Western threats. Now, I don't personally believe this because I don't think that the threats have been terribly convincing. To some extent, for example, they've talked about conventional retaliation or something like this. You could also see it in terms of well could it be that they're worried about what the Chinese might do because the Chinese oppose their using nuclear weapons. Or maybe they're worried about opening Pandora's box. This was the problem that Colin Powell famously talked about, letting the genie loose from the bottle back in back at the time of the first Gulf War. If you use nuclear weapons in that war, then you know somebody else is going to use them, you know, a month later or a year later or something like this.

So, there are all sorts of fears like that that I think are quite relevant to the present time, and likewise, for example, when we talk about scenarios of, say, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. What is it that's actually holding them back? Is it the United States? Is it the Taiwanese? Is it something else? So, trying to get a sense of what is in the full scope of those fears is quite essential, but I tend to find that in the policy discourse we only tend to focus on a very narrow set of fears—those sort of things that we can directly inflict upon an adversary, potentially, not examining this full range of fears.

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### Host

It was a pleasure talking with you today, Jeffrey. Thank you so much for making time for this.

### Michaels

No, my pleasure. Thank you so much.

### Host

Listeners, you can read the article at [press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters). Look for volume 54, issue 1.

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