

# Deterrence and Fear: Incorporating Emotions into the Field of Research

Written by Amir Lupovici

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AMIR LUPOVICI, AUG 20 2020

For many years deterrence was seen and has been constructed as a rational strategy, relying on the view that policy makers are making cost-benefit calculations when they are considering challenging their opponents. These theories were based on the assumption that rational actors would avoid challenging their opponents (the deterrer actor) if the costs of such attacks are higher than the gain they can achieve. Indeed, as early as the 1970s, important works showed how psychological factors take part in shaping the practices of deterrence (e.g., Jervis et al., 1985). However, these psychological approaches were mainly auxiliary tools to explain actors' divergence from the rational model. In a nutshell, these approaches provided a more accurate account of how actors respond to threats given various biases they have in acquiring and interpreting information. Nonetheless, these psychological approaches could not provide alternative frameworks to explore deterrence.

Within these theories, emotions, and specifically fear, were left out of the study. Indeed some scholars and practitioners mentioned fear as part of the practices of deterrence. For example, Morgan (2003: 1) argues that deterrence 'is the use of threats to manipulate behavior so that something unwanted does not occur.' He sharpens this view by relying on the definition of the *Department of Defense Dictionary* (1994) according to which deterrence 'is the prevention from action by *fear* of the consequences' (in Morgan, 2003: 1, my emphasis). However, despite the nuanced and detailed discussion of the practices of deterrence Morgan provides in his book, the notion of 'fear' is repeated along the manuscript without elaboration on how exactly it shapes deterrence practices, and how it differs from mere cost-benefit calculations (e.g., Morgan, 2003: 21, 147-8, passim). How Morgan treats fear is not an exception and other scholars who study this strategy (or the security dilemma) while acknowledging the influence of fear on actors' behavior (e.g., Schelling, 1966; Kugler et al., 1980) do not untangle its influence on international security (see also in Crawford, 2000; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 116, 121).

With a few exception, the omission of fear from the study of deterrence, even after the advances in the study of emotions in the last two decades, is not surprising. A number of challenges complicate the research of emotions given that they seem to be difficult to observe (Crawford, 2000: 118-119; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 117). The study of deterrence, which mainly focuses on deterrence success – the manner through which threats affect opponents' use of force – further exacerbates this problem. In these situations, an arguably non-occurrence (lack of violence) is to be explained by an unobservable mechanism (an emotion, i.e., fear). Furthermore, as Booth and Wheeler argue (2008: 63) leaders do not want to show fear. According to them at the political level, showing fear 'is not the way to engender the confidence of one's own community or to deter those who might be threats' (ibid: 63-64).

Nonetheless, fear which is a 'basic emotion directed at a specified object that prompts an adaptive response: fight or flight' (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 241), plays a significant role in the practices of deterrence. As a number of scholars suggest, the study of fear as a collective emotion based on interpretative methods is a promising direction to better understand how deterrence works (Crawford, 2000: 146-149; Bleiker and Hutchison, 2008: 121-2). I suggest that the emerging research on emotions (e.g., Van Ruythoven and Sucharov, 2019)—including, for example, focusing on their representation (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014), their circulation (Ross, 2014), and how they spiral (Lupovici, 2019a)—can be incorporated into the study of deterrence in a way that allows to draw important insights and thus help building alternatives to the rational models of deterrence. It is beyond the scope of this piece to fully discuss the

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various connections between the emotion of fear and deterrence, but I present below a number of more specific directions in this regard. One promising direction to incorporate fear into the study of deterrence may be based on a securitization approach to deterrence (Lupovici, 2019b), as not only deterrence but also securitizing moves themselves are shaped by fear (Van Rythoven, 2015; see also Vuori, 2011: 157). Fear may become an important aspect of securitization because a securitizing move may generate a collective fear, which as Bleiker and Hutchison (2008: 199) argue serves as an important source for justifying collective political and moral foundations. According to Van Rythoven (2015: 467), securitizing moves in part succeed 'because they resonate with preexisting meaning in the local audience's security imaginary which satisfies the structural requirements for a fear appraisal. Audiences fear threats because they represent phenomena they have already learned to fear or imaginably foresee fearing'. Conversely, when securitizing actors fail to generate collective fear, the securitizing move can be more easily contested (Van Rythoven, 2015: 464).

Securitizing moves of deterrence may target different audiences for various purposes such as to acquire domestic justification for the need to adopt a deterrent strategy and to issuing the deterrent threat (Lupovici, 2019b: 180-3). Acknowledging that deterrence is shaped by securitizing moves allows to trace how actors employ this strategy, and how fear is a part of it. In this respect, fear evoked for domestic audiences is part of a securitizing move that attempts to justify a deterrent threat, or aims to enhance its credibility pointing to an existential threat this strategy seeks to prevent. Likewise, the securitizing move may attempt to inflict fear on an opponent as part of issuing the deterrent threat (see also Vuori, 2008: 81-85). In these dynamics, fear as part of a securitizing move plays an important role in the practices of deterrence. Both the established frameworks of securitization and the frameworks for studying collective emotions can be combined to explore these practices.

While fear plays an important role in the practices of deterrence it does not necessarily mean that fear only enhances deterrence success. At times, fear may undermine deterrence. For example, Lebow asserts that for actors who are motivated by fear, the deterrent threat will not be effective. This is because it may 'confirm their worse suspicions and intensify conflict by convincing them that unless they stand firm or even issue counter-challenges, they will be perceived as weak and subject to greater threats and demands' (Lebow, 2007: 188). According to him, fear may cause a cycle of escalation, as was evident in the big crises of the Cold War (see also Crawford, 2000: 148). This is an important observation that the emerging research on emotion may help to clarify. How inflicting fear on an opponent affects deterrence success. For example, how such actions are represented and interpreted by an opponent, and how actors are in fact attempting to inflict fear. Furthermore, following Lebow's assertion, it is also possible to argue that even if a deterrer actor succeeded in intimidating an opponent, it does not mean that the opponent will submit to the deterrer threats. The targets of such threats might be so fearful that they think they have nothing to lose, and that nothing they do will affect the deterrer's behavior, who is expected to anyhow retaliate (e.g., Huth, 1999: 29).

Another direction to incorporate the study of fear into the research of deterrence is to trace the connections among fear and other emotions. As Ross argues, emotions themselves are interwoven, and 'because emotional circulations come in composites, we need to avoid the temptation to isolate single emotions from the others that work with them' (Ross, 2014: 58). Especially interesting are the connections between fear and anxiety. This is because the fear related to deterrence can be understood as a mechanism to address ontological insecurity and anxiety (Lupovici, 2016: 90). While as noted above fear is evoked when physical security is threatened (i.e., survival), anxiety follows threats to the self (Steele, 2008: 51). As Tillich put it, fear concerns a definite object (i.e., "being afraid of something.") Conversely, anxiety is about the uncertainty and the threat of non-being. The difference between fear and anxiety is exemplified with the notion of death. One may fear of dying but be anxious about death (Tillich, 1959: 36-8, 45; see also Lupovici, 2016: 67, 71). Following Tillich, Rumelili (2015: 12) asserts that anxiety leads individuals 'to channel his/her anxieties about death into fears as much as possible because fear can be met by courage and protective measures'. According to Steele, the need for ontological security—the security of the self—is satisfied by 'securitizing the unknown into identifiable threat . . . by turning anxiety into fear' (Steele, 2008: 64; see also Huysmans 1998: 242-3; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020: 244).

Practices of deterrence, especially mutual practices of deterrence, such as MAD, help actors to transform deep uncertainty of interactions with, for example nuclear opponents, into fear, thus creating a more predictable

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environment. Nonetheless, this controlled and certain environment is achieved through the generation of collective fear – experienced by both sides (Lupovici, 2016: 110, 113). This is not to argue that nuclear deterrence is a safe strategy, but rather that we can see how nuclear deterrence was constructed in a way that emphasizes how it helps to control the environment and thus provides an alleged solution to nuclear weapons that helps to mitigate the unease and anxiety they create.

A deterrence theory based on emotions, ontological security and securitization provides not only directions to complement the study of rational theories of deterrence. Rather, these notions provide directions to develop alternative frameworks to study deterrence, and to highlight issues concerning the practices of deterrence that have not received enough scholarly attention. For example, issues such as domestic politics and the public, how actors adopt a strategy of deterrence and how evoking emotional reactions from an opponent affects deterrence success.

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# Deterrence and Fear: Incorporating Emotions into the Field of Research

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