

Indirect Extended Deterrence: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract: Direct extended deterrence (DED), the threat of direct military intervention to deter attack on an ally, has been a common strategy in the nuclear age for major powers to safeguard their alliance networks abroad. However, the strategy has a significant drawback – if the ally is, in fact, attacked, DED locks the defending power into the unattractive choice between war with the challenging power, or reputational damage if it reneges on its commitments. Indirect Extended deterrence (IED), the commitment to arm rather than defend an ally, presents a possible workaround for the DED “gear up, or give up” dilemma. By arming the ally, the defending power creates a deterrence proxy through which it deters vicariously, avoiding responsibility for direct defense if deterrence fails. But does this theoretically appealing strategy really work in practice? This article critically examines the potential of IED as an extended deterrence strategy. It ultimately concludes that arming others is a defective deterrence strategy. Specifically, it suggests that IED is sub-optimal for deterring proactive, offensive-minded challengers; ill-suited and even counterproductive for deterring reactive, defensive-minded challengers; and inconsequential otherwise. To test this hypothesis empirically, the article examines the high-profile case of US military support for Ukraine between the period from 2014 to 2022.

1. INTRODUCTION

Armed conflict between major military powers appears infeasible today. Despite attempts to conceive of workable conflict management strategies (Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al, 2024), conflict simulation data paint a grim picture. Princeton University’s Nuclear Futures Lab estimates that a US-Russia showdown over Ukraine could result in “more than 90 million people dead and injured within the first few hours of the conflict” (Nuclear Futures Lab 2024), while recent reports from leading US think tanks suggest a US-China clash over Taiwan would be a “bloody mess” with “terrible loss of life” and no clear winner (Cancian et al, 2023; Pettyjohn et al, 2022). Furthermore, such hostilities would “unquestionably cause catastrophic economic damage” through major disruptions to global trade and the collapse of the world’s largest economies (Manning 2024).

This reality complicates the practice of traditional direct extended deterrence (DED), the commitment by major powers to directly intervene militarily on an ally’s behalf and thereby deter attacks against the ally by other powers. Under contemporary conditions, DED has the potential to force powers into a terrible choice between unwinnable conflict if they honor their commitments or grave reputational damage if they renege. One possible path around this “gear up” or “give up” dilemma is to arm allies without granting them a DED guarantee (Beckley, 2017). In this indirect extended deterrence (IED) strategy, the defending power builds up the indigenous deterrence capacity of its protégé, making it a kind of deterrence proxy. The protégé uses the defending power’s weapons to facilitate the defending power’s desired deterrent effect, all the while freeing the power of its defense obligation.

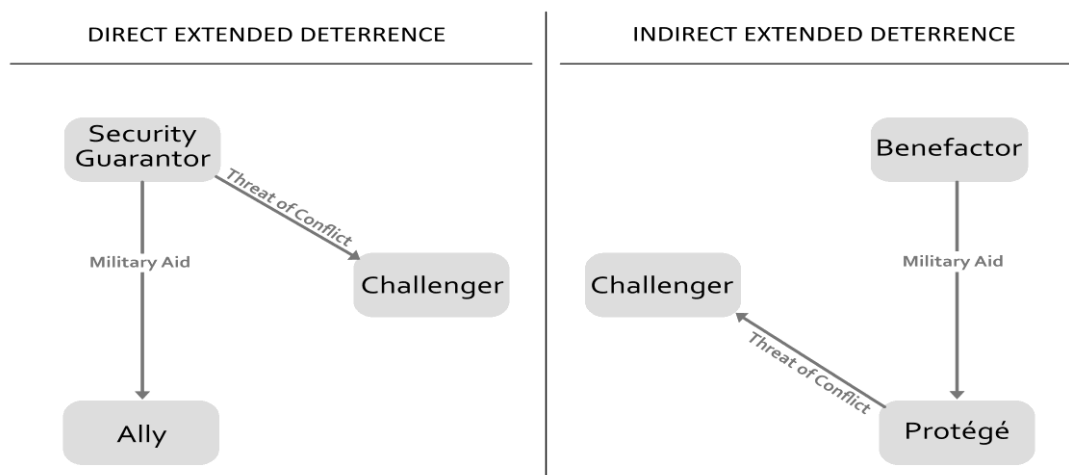
The allure of IED makes it a popular strategy. In the US, the provision of “robust security assistance” to build up the “military and asymmetric capabilities” of “partners,” such as Ukraine and Taiwan, neither of whom have a formal US DED guarantee, is becoming a “centerpiece” of American deterrence strategy toward Russia and China (US Department of Defense, 2022; Lopes, 2023). However, despite its theoretical appeal, a practical question looms large over IED: does the strategy actually work? In other words, can IED serve as a workable substitute for DED? In this article, I hypothesize that the answer is no. I argue that IED is a sub-optimal alternative for DED against offensive challengers, and is inapt or counterproductively provocative against defensive ones. I test this hypothesis empirically by considering the case of US support for Ukraine to deter a Russian attack over the period from 2014 to 2022.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CENTRAL HYPOTHESIS

2.1. Indirect Extended Deterrence Concept

Classical deterrence theory (CDT) maintains that increasing the cost of challenging decreases the latter’s attractiveness (Achen and Snidal, 1989). The more destructive the defender’s arsenal, the less inclined the challenger will be to undertake a challenge and incur the attendant cost (Harris and McKinney, 2024). This logic drove intense arms racing between the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War and continues to drive arms competition among the major powers today, from nuclear modernization efforts to competitive militarization of emerging technologies (Sayler, 2024). Yet, as suggested above, this course yields a byproduct as other powers build up their own arsenals – the growing difficulty of entering DED relationships with allies. The higher the costs of defending grow, the threat to defend others becomes less credible. As former French President, Charles de Gaulle, famously pondered, would the US really be willing to sacrifice New York to save Paris when push comes to shove (US Office of the Historian, 1961).

IED seems to present a possible path around this problem for powers intent on retaining their spheres of influence abroad by military means. The strategy shares important similarities with DED. In both relationships, it is the potency of the defending power’s weapons with which the challenging power must reckon in contemplating a possible challenge. The key distinguishing feature, however, lies in the allocation of the risk of deterrence failure. In DED settings, the defending power, acting as security guarantor of its ally, shoulders this risk. If the challenging power challenges, the threat of conflict emanates directly from the defending power. By contrast, in IED settings, the defending power serves as benefactor, supplying the protégé with arms and other logistical support. In the event the challenging power attacks, though, the protégé is the one ultimately left to do the fighting.



Graphic 1. Structural comparison of DED and IED relationships.

This simple structural shift has a significant consequence – it in theory enables a major power to skirt the DED credibility problem while still making use of its military might to deter other powers from challenges to its spheres of influence abroad. The defending power may not be able to credibly threaten to defend an ally when doing so implies a major power war that could lead to its own destruction. The potential costs simply outweigh the benefits. That said, the foreign ally can credibly threaten to defend itself against conquest by a challenging power. IED thus enables the defending power to use the credibility of the ally’s threat, while still leveraging the deterrence force of its own military strength, by transferring arms to the protégé.

2.2. Current Thinking

Underlying current thinking on IED strategy is the simple extension of CDT logic. Here, the rationale is that building up the protégé’s military capacity helps it increase the cost potential for challengers and thus produces the desired deterrence effect (Fan and Bursi, 2023; Ford, 2022). If a protégé is equipped with sophisticated weaponry and logistical support from a major military power, it becomes a less attractive target for aggression. As Mitt Romney, a prominent member of the US Senate, succinctly summed up, enhancing protégé “military might... assure[s] that there’s not a temptation on the part of any nation... to take aggressive military action against [the protégé]” (Romney, 2024). While debate

persists on the exact extent of support to provide,¹ the idea that the cost-centric CDT logic provides a solid foundation for IED approaches is widely accepted. Recent IED scholarship has yet to critically probe this assumption (Haynes, 2024; Lupovici, 2023; Beckley 2017).

2.3. Critique

Though superficially coherent, the prevailing IED view, and its underlying CDT logic, suffers from a fundamental shortcoming – it fails to account for the empirical reality that not all challengers are the same. The utility of challenging is computed differently by different challengers. As Lebow and Stein (1989) point out, some challengers may seek to maximize gains while others endeavor to minimize losses. In short, challengers fall into two general types – Type I: gain maximizers; and Type II: loss minimizers. The prevailing IED approach – and CDT-based deterrence views in general – arbitrarily assumes challengers to be of Type I – ambitious seekers of self-aggrandizement at the expense of others, like Nazi Germany in the 1930s. To deter such challengers, hefty threats are needed. CDT accordingly prescribes a cost-centric deterrence strategy, focused on raising the price tag for potential gains to outweigh the challenger’s expected benefit. In the IED context, this implies impactfully bolstering the protégé’s military capability.

However, extensive empirical analysis indicates that gain maximizing challengers are the exception, while loss minimizers are the norm (Mazarr, 2018; Morgan, 2003; Lebow and Stein, 1987; Jervis, 1976). This Type II challenger is motivated by the fear of losing something of value, not acquiring gratuitous gain. Here, the historical record suggests that cost-centric deterrence strategies are “at best ineffective” in deterring Type II challengers and can prove “counterproductive” by provoking aggression (Lebow and Stein, 1987). The cases of Imperial Japan in 1941 and the Allied Arab States in 1973 serve as commonly cited examples. Both faced a strong deterrent force in the US and Israel, respectively, capable of imposing enormous cost on them, but nonetheless proceeded with attacks, “immune” to CDT strategy, in an effort to ward off perceived existential threats (Mazarr, 2018).

2.4. Hypothesis

Proponents of IED face several difficult questions. First, does arming others outside the scope of a DED relationship go far enough to deter aggressive Type I challengers? And, second, is it helpful in the more common scenario of fearful Type II challengers? I hypothesize that the answer to both questions is generally no – at least in cases where the challenger is a major military power.

In the case of Type I challengers, endowing the protégé with arms augments the punch it can credibly threaten to pack. If, however, the challenger is a major military power, it may well be able to absorb this punch. Furthermore, the absence of a DED relationship can signal a lack of resolve on the part of the defending power – that defense of the protégé is ultimately not worth the risk of conflict for the defending power. This combination of the challenging power’s military superiority over the protégé, together with the perception that the defending power will shy away from direct intervention, leaves the door open for the challenging power to conclude that its desired gains can still be achieved at acceptable cost.

In the case of Type II challengers, a stronger protégé is more likely to create a perceived threat than is a weaker one. The stronger the protégé, the more capable it is of threatening challenger interests. If these interests are perceived by the challenger to be vital to its national security, economic prosperity or governmental stability, then further increasing protégé strength is liable to intensify challenger incentives to quell the threat, jeopardizing instead of strengthening deterrence.

I accordingly posit that IED is a generally suspect deterrence strategy – apt to prove insufficient against aggressive Type I challengers, counterproductive against fearful Type II challengers, and unnecessary in all other cases. If a challenger is dead set on gain maximization, the maximum threat of a DED strategy is more likely to achieve deterrent effect than is an IED approach. If a challenger fears the loss or impairment of its vital interests, an assurance strategy is more likely to be productive than is an IED

¹ Some argue that the provision of sufficient capability for deterrence by denial – namely, sufficient capability so that the protégé can essentially defeat the challenger’s attack – is needed (Grady, 2023), while others maintain that the provision of sufficient capability for deterrence by punishment – namely, sufficient capability so that the protégé can impose a painful punishment on the challenger – is more realistic (Timbie and Ellis, Jr., 2021).

approach. If there is no acute deterrence threat, then an IED approach is excessive and can needlessly stir up tensions.

3. CASE STUDY

This article tests my hypothesis against the high-profile case of Ukraine from 2014 to 2022. The case is particularly suitable for analysis for several reasons. First, it presents an archetypal case of IED with the US as benefactor, Ukraine as protégé and Russia as challenger. As explained below, the US armed Ukraine over this period, without granting it any formal security guarantee, to deter Russia from further incursions after its annexation of Crimea. Second, the US employed a CDT-based IED approach, centered around increasing Ukraine's ability to impose cost on Russia in the event of a challenge. Finally, fierce debate persists as to Russia's type as a challenger. Some argue it is a Type I, bent on territorial conquest (Hodge, 2022), while others maintain it is a Type II, seeking to prevent the loss of Ukraine as a critical buffer zone amid North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion (Mearsheimer, 2024). These differing interpretations enable the derivation of two scenarios – one where Russia is construed as a Type I and a second where it is construed as a Type II – to test both parts of the hypothesis with a single case.

3.1. Case Overview

While the US cultivated supportive relations with Ukraine since its independence in 1991,² a nascent IED relationship first took shape in 2014. In February of that year, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed Crimea following a pro-West uprising in Ukraine. Fighting then broke out in Eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces, marking the beginning of what would become an extended war in Ukraine's Donbas region. While the US refrained from any formal commitment to defend Ukraine directly, the US Congress called for indirect measures to “deter” Russia from further military action against Ukraine by building up the latter's “defensive posture” (US Congress, 2014; Belkin et al, 2014). The Obama administration responded by characterizing Russian actions, “including its purported annexation of Crimea and its use of force in Ukraine”, as a threat to Ukrainian “peace, security, stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity” and authorized the provision of defense-relevant aid, including “counter-mortar radar, radios, vehicles, patrol boats, body armor, helmets, and night-vision goggles” (The White House, 2014; Shishkin and Sparshott, 2014).

By 2016, calls for the supply of lethal weaponry to meaningfully increase the cost of Russian aggression grew louder (Radio Free Europe, 2015). The incoming Trump administration was ready to act on them, green lighting the transfer of heavy weaponry, including infrared-guided anti-tank FGM-148 Javelin missiles, M107A1 Sniper systems, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, naval mine and counter-mine capabilities, and coastal defense vehicles (Gould, 2018). Enhanced “training, equipment and advisory efforts to build the capacity of Ukraine's armed forces” complemented these newly provided capabilities (Gould and Altman, 2019). The Biden administration further built on this qualitative and quantitative leap in US support, approving more rounds of heavy weapon supplies and concluding the Strategic Defense Framework to create a foundation for the ‘enhancement’ of US-Ukraine strategic defense, security cooperation, and intelligence sharing (US Department of State, 2021).

By 2022, the US had poured over \$2.5 billion into augmenting Ukraine's capacity to “defend itself” as a frontline state in the US-proclaimed “struggle between democracy and autocracy” (MacKinnon and Detsch, 2021; US Department of State, 2021). This investment had an effect. The Ukrainian army, “inexperienced, hollowed out by decades of corruption, and lacking the most basic supplies” in 2014, had been transformed with a “powerful increase” in capability (Gould and Altman, 2019). Ukraine now presided over sophisticated US weaponry, intelligence and training, and its forces were even taking part in select NATO exercises (Menegay, 2021).

4. ANALYSIS

History shows that, in spite of these efforts, Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and has, at the time of this writing, annexed four oblasts in the eastern part of the country. In this section, I apply my hypothesis to the developments leading up to the invasion and argue it helps explain deterrence

² The Clinton administration assisted Ukraine in becoming the first former Soviet republic to become a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in 1995, while the Bush administration invested heavily in Ukrainian democracy promotion.

failure in both possible scenarios – where Russia is interpreted as a proactive Type I challenger and where it is interpreted as a reactive Type II.

4.1. Scenario 1: Russia as a Type I Challenger

Many characterize Russia as a Type I challenger. This view reduces to the proposition that Russia was motivated, in the first instance, by territorial and political gain. Members of this camp contend that Russian leaders lay “historic claim” to Ukraine toward the aim of “recreating a new empire” to restore Russian “superpower status” and tighten the leadership’s grip on power (Hodge, 2022; Wilkinson, 2022). They compare Russia’s 2022 actions in Ukraine with Italy’s 1935 invasion of Abyssinia and Germany’s 1940 invasion of Norway (LaGattuta, 2024; Martynyuk, 2023). A now famous 2021 essay in which Russian President, Vladimir Putin, stated Russia and Ukraine are “essentially the same historical and spiritual place” and that its populations are “one people, a single whole” is often cited as evidence (Putin, 2021).

If these contentions are accurate, did the US IED approach in Ukraine make sense from a deterrence perspective? Did it create the prospect of sufficient expected cost to dissuade a challenger, “hell-bent” on imperial grandeur (Wilkinson, 2022), as Russia was cast? Transforming Ukraine’s military capacity from a “hollowed out” army “lacking the most basic supplies” to an enhanced fighting force, presiding over heavy US weaponry, clearly raised the price tag of a Russian attack. As the former US Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Ben Hodges, noted in 2021, the receipt of US Javelin missiles, along with high-level training, constituted a notable “step up” for the Ukrainian forces, placing them in a position to deny Russia the ability to move “tanks and armored personnel carriers” with “impunity” (Gould and Altman, 2019).

That said, was this enhanced Ukrainian ability sufficient to outweigh the perceived benefits of aggression for Russia? According to proponents of the Type I interpretation, the enticements of challenging were great for Russia. It was claimed that the restoration of Russian greatness was impossible without the conquest of Ukraine (Hodge, 2022), that Russia would additionally acquire “extraordinary riches in energy, minerals and agriculture” by seizing Ukrainian territory (Muggah, 2022), and that “crushing” Ukrainian democracy was important for enhancing President Putin’s continued grip on power (Williams, 2023). Even with US IED assistance, Russia’s military outnumbered Ukraine’s by more than four to one in active service personnel, more than ten to one in military spending, more than ten to one in fighter aircraft, and almost five to one in fighter vehicles at the start of 2022 (European Parliament, 2022). Furthermore, as NATO reports suggest, Russia was in a position to bank on “nuclear coercion” to limit US and NATO involvement on Ukraine’s behalf (de Dreuzy and Gilli, 2022).

As such, it is difficult to make the case that the IED strategy in Ukraine was an impactful deterrent. Indeed, as Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, noted, a DED strategy – specifically, the subsumption of Ukraine under the US/NATO nuclear umbrella – was needed to alter the Russian calculus and dissuade it from aggression (Dorman, 2022). Absent this, IED ultimately left Ukraine vulnerable to attack by a much larger, nuclear-armed challenger, “hell-bent” on conquest, that felt confident the US/NATO would not intervene directly with military force to stop it.

4.2. Scenario 2: Russia as a Type II Challenger

Others characterize Russia as a Type II challenger. This perspective holds that Russia was primarily motivated by a fear of losing Ukraine as a critical buffer zone against NATO expansion. In a notable 2014 article, John Mearsheimer argued that the loss of Ukraine to the “Western” security sphere was categorically unacceptable to Russia from a geostrategic perspective (Mearsheimer, 2014). This view was buttressed by assessments of US officials, as well as overt statements by the Russian government. Writing in his capacity as US ambassador to Russia in 2008, William Burns explained in a memorandum to the US Secretary of State that a NATO move into Ukraine would constitute “the brightest of all red lines” for Russia (Shiffrin, 2023). Russian leaders, for their part, have consistently communicated that Ukrainian neutrality is a matter of “existential” concern, as Ukraine’s military cooperation with the US and NATO could limit crucial Russian access to the Black Sea, enable placement of advanced land-based weapon systems in ever closer proximity to Moscow, reduce Russia’s strategic depth, and limit its strategic maneuverability (Russian Security Council, 2014).

If this account is correct, was the US IED approach a sound strategy for deterring Russian action toward Ukraine? Following the Trump administration’s decision to step up the IED relationship with the

transfer of lethal weaponry, President Putin publicly warned that a closing of ranks between Ukraine and the US/NATO constituted a “direct threat” to Russia and, the following year, unveiled a suite of avant-garde weapon systems with the remark that Russia’s willingness to take action to defend its core interests, if necessary, was “not a bluff” (Osborn, 2018; BBC, 2018). The Biden administration responded by ramping up the IED relationship with further military assistance to Ukraine to “bring its military up to the [NATO] standard,” inviting it to participate in NATO exercises and enhancing its interoperability with the alliance (MacKinnon and Detsch, 2021).

If Russia was primarily concerned with keeping its border region free of US/NATO influence, equipment and activity, then providing Ukraine with US weapons, logistical assistance and increased cooperation with NATO seems directly counterproductive, aggravating Russian concerns surrounding an interest it deemed to be of “existential” importance (Russian Security Council, 2014). Minus the US willingness to grant Ukraine a DED guarantee in the near term, an assurance strategy would appear to have been the more promising path toward avoiding a Russian invasion. The IED approach that “poked the Russian bear” (Cohen, 2022), while leaving Ukraine exposed without a security guarantee, appears a patently unsound deterrence strategy.

5. CONCLUSION

While, on the surface, IED appears to present a possible alternative to DED, closer inspection reveals a different picture – IED is a sub-optimal deterrence strategy for Type I challengers, an ill-suited and potentially counterproductive deterrence strategy for Type II challengers, and an effectively inconsequential deterrence strategy otherwise. Bottom line: as DED relationships become more difficult to consummate, IED does not serve as a promising workaround.

The case of Ukraine provides a real-world illustration of IED’s shortcomings. Construed as a Type I, Russia did not have to reckon with triggering a direct intervention by the US if it pursued its desired gains and attacked Ukraine, a non-nuclear state with a decidedly smaller military. In this case, a DED strategy would have been preferable to drive up the risk of aggression and alter the Russian calculus. Alternatively, in the Type II Russia scenario, IED strategy was actually harmful. The more Ukraine’s military was built up and the closer its ties with the US/NATO became, the bigger the threat it presented for vital Russian interests, driving up Russia’s motivation for preemptive force employment. In this case, an assurance strategy would have been preferable. In sum, regardless of whether Russia is understood as a Type I or a Type II, IED was a sub-optimal deterrence approach.

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