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Words and Actions: The Referent as a Problem in the Deterrence of Nuclear Weapons Employment

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Abstract. This article describes difficulties in identifying action referents of the word deterrence. These difficulties pose a significant problem for developing and implementing security policies against adversaries' employment of weapons of mass destruction.

Anti-missile defenses. Covert action, espionage, and counterintelligence operations and analysis. Public and covert diplomacy. Sanctions. Webs of cooperative and mutually interdependent networks. Arms (offensive and/or defensive) limitations and reductions negotiations. Strategic arms build-ups. These are some of the main approaches to deterring adversaries' employment of weapons of mass destruction--e.g., intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads.

Some of these approaches may seem paradoxical. Various combinations may seem contradictory. Yet a problem in assessing what is paradoxical and/or contradictory is that it may be quite improbable to identify action referents of the word deterrence within common standards of validity.

For example, how to causally analyze why an adversary has not attacked with weapons of mass destruction? Does one causally attribute to the adversary's ability and/or motivation? More importantly, how does one establish a causal linkage from no adversary attack backwards in time to one's security policy?

At any specific moment, there are an infinite number of actions and nonactions intentionally and consciously attributed to one's self and political entity--and other actions and nonactions that are unintentionally and unconsciously attributed. Moreover, there are an infinite number of actions and nonactions--intentional, unintentional, conscious, and unconscious--concurrently ascribed to others. Even with high indices of association--e.g., a positive correlation between a definitional aspect of deterrence and an action or nonaction referent--relevance to causality between that definitional aspect and action or nonaction referent may be nonexistent. Moreover, the positive correlation of association between a definitional aspect and an action or a nonaction referent may mask a negative causal relationship between the same two variables. And finally, many postmodern and existentialist theorists might emphatically point out that any struggle for objective truth and predictive validity amounts to hubris.

Further, one's categories and conceptual processes that describe and infer actions--especially social actions--are inevitably contextualized and historized. And yet again--following Wittgenstein--the limits of one's categories and conceptual processes are the limits of one's world. Unfortunately, contextualization and historization may have little to do with, or mitigate against, functional relationships.

So, one should not be surprised that equally sincere defenders of a nation-state exhibit very divergent views on the approaches to deterrence. And that internecine policy struggles among that nation-state's defenders occur. In fact--following precepts of the Chinese politico-military theorist Sun Tzu that the best attack to achieve political objectives may be no attack at all--an adversary may best cause

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irrevocable harm by sowing dissension through exploiting disparities and confusion among words and acts in an ever-expanding spiral of doom. (See Edwards, J.A. (1998). Effects of causal uncertainty on the dispositional attribution process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 34, 109-135; Hilton, D.J. (1998). Causal judgment and explanation. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 15, 22-34; Rudolph, U. (1997). Implicit verb causality: Verbal schemas and covariation information. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16, 132-158; Shields up. (August 17/24, 1998). *The New Republic*, pp. 7-8; Sun Tzu. (1998). *The art of strategy: A new translation of Sun Tzu's classic, The Art of War*. Doubleday. (Original work published c. 350 B.C.E.); Wittgenstein, L. (1968). *Philosophical investigations* 3rd ed. (G.E.M. Anscombe, Trans.) Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell; Young, M.E. (1995). On the origin of personal causal theories. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 2, 83-104.) (Keywords: Causal Attribution, Deterrence, Nuclear Weapons, Weapons of Mass Destruction.)