

LIBERAL ARTS

Stalemate as Success: The Importance of Low-Grade Deterrence in Post-World War II Asian International Relations

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States seek to protect their interests and territories in the international system. To achieve their goals, countries engage in what international relations theorists call deterrence: “the act of dissuading a targeted state from taking certain actions.” But states must decide what type of deterrence strategy to use in order to get what they want—either low-grade verbal or physical threats, or high-grade use of force. Using force sends a strong message to another state, but this action could lead to a costly war. In this project I considered deterrence that leads to stalemate to be a successful outcome, because neither country in conflict has lost face but both countries have avoided war.

Using a mixed-method approach, I analyzed all 64 cases of deterrence between China and Japan, India, and the United States from 1945 to 2015 to determine which methods of deterrence led to successful outcomes. The success or failure of deterrence was

the dependent variable, while the independent variable was the type of deterrence employed (low-grade verbal threat, low-grade physical threat, or high-grade use of force). My results showed that in the 64 cases of deterrence between China and Japan, India, and the United States, 57 (89%) resulted in stalemate, or success. The remaining 7 cases were labeled by the COW as losses, victories, or retreats. In 35 of the cases, states used low-grade physical threats; in the remaining 29 cases, states used low-grade verbal threats to successfully deter another state. These results highlight the importance of the use of low-grade forms of deterrence between equally balanced nuclear states. Although employing these forms of deterrence may likely result in stalemate, equally balanced nuclear states will continue to use them to prevent the escalation of disputes while communicating their intent to protect their territory.

Research advisor Meg Rincker writes: “China and Japan’s disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands make some observers fear escalation to war. Zach’s fascinating analysis shows that the use of low-grade threats successfully led to stalemate in 89% of all interactions between China and other key states. Countries repeat verbal threats to signal long-term commitment to not losing territory, rather than escalation toward violent conflict.”