

Making the unthinkable possible: Selective options, tailored deterrence and nuclear deterrence failures (1974-1994)

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Abstract

The article is aimed at studying the selective options, a nuclear weapons employment doctrine launched by the United States in 1974 to reinforce its deterrent position by enabling a limited nuclear war. However, by widening the military gap with the Soviet Union and exploiting its worst fears, the implementation of this doctrine almost caused a nuclear crisis in 1983. Since this constitutes one of the few known nuclear deterrence failures, the study of this historical case may contribute to explaining the working of this process which is regaining its central role in the field of Strategic Studies. The article is divided into two parts: the first theoretical part delves into the literature on deterrence up to the fourth wave of studies on the phenomenon and the consolidation of tailored deterrence models. The second one, as a historical case study, analyzes the selective options. It is argued that this doctrine, in force during the last stage of the Cold War, does not only constitute a proto-model of tailor-made deterrence, but its realization also caused a failure of deterrence that fortunately did not culminate in catastrophe. Even if the few cases of nuclear deterrence failures prevent drawing general conclusions, the article concludes by warning about the contextuality, credibility and relativism of deterrence.

Author keywords

Able Archer
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competitive strategy
crisis nuclear
cultura estratégica
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deterrence failure
disuasión
estrategia competitiva
fallo de disuasión
nuclear crisis
opciones selectivas
selective options
strategic culture
ventana de vulnerabilidad
window of vulnerability