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ON COLLECTIVE ACTOR DETERRENCE AND SMALL STATES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: RELEVANCE FOR BANGLADESH

Abstract

The marginalisation and neglect of small states vis-à-vis the dominance of great powers in the academic literature on international relations has historical precedent. Deterrence scholarship, both during and after the Cold War, is also no exception. Traditionally centred on nuclear and great powers, this field has overlooked the agency of small states. However, given the increasing geopolitical and economic significance of small states in the 21st century, the article posits that small states' marginalisation in deterrence literature deprives the field of the opportunity to become richer and more comprehensive. Regarding available deterrence strategies, the article argues that relying solely on military measures to practice deterrence will not only narrow the scope for small states but also render it impractical. This is because small states are unlikely to dominate the military escalation ladder for obvious reasons, including their relative military inferiority, geopolitical constraints, and resource limitations. To address this, the article emphasises the concept of collective actor deterrence, wherein small states adopt a broader approach to deterrence that leverages international law, international norms, multilateral agreements, economic interdependence, and intergovernmental organisations to offset their limited military capabilities. Drawing on examples such as Bangladesh's use of international legal mechanisms, multilateral diplomacy, and economic interconnectedness in safeguarding its strategic interests, the article demonstrates how contemporary small states increasingly rely on broader non-military instruments of deterrence.

Keywords: Small States, Deterrence, Collective Actor Deterrence, Collective Security, Asymmetric Deterrence

1. Introduction

Small states have historically been marginalised in deterrence discourse, both during and after the Cold War. The Cold War era saw no dearth of scholarly works on deterrence, with prominent scholars such as Bernard Brodie[1], Glenn Herald

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[1] Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); Bernard Brodie and F. S. Dunn, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).

Snyder[2], Patrick M. Morgan[3], Robert Jervis[4], Herman Kahn[5], Samuel P. Huntington[6], Lawrence Freedman[7], and Thomas Schelling[8] making significant contributions that continue to shape the field today. However, a critical examination of Cold War-era deterrence literature reveals a nuclear state-centric focus, primarily based on the dynamics of great power rivalry and the threat of nuclear war. The vast array of Cold War-era deterrence literature was predominantly centred on two nuclear states, the United States (US) and Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR). This body of literature ignored the interests and concerns of small states as if deterrence were solely the domain of the great powers. The post-Cold War deterrence literature saw a notable expansion, which, according to Jeffrey Knopf, is the 'fourth wave of deterrence research'.[9] This new deterrence literature broadens the traditional deterrence theory by addressing its application in the context of transnational terrorism, rogue states, weapons of mass destruction, and the intersection of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, lethal autonomous weapons, and cyberspace. Although these contemporary studies explore new issues beyond the confines of nuclear deterrence, their primary focus again remains on the strategic dynamics of great powers, specifically emphasising the security of the US, China, and Russia. This is unsurprising, as academic literature on international relations has always been great power-centric, with small states being marginalised.

The increasing geopolitical and economic significance of small states vis-à-vis recent territorial assertions by great powers warrants academic exploration of how small states conceptualise and practice deterrence. On the one hand, the 21st century has witnessed a notable surge in small states' geopolitical and economic relevance beyond Europe. Today, they enjoy more international prestige and visibility than at any other time in history.[10] There have been no previous instances where independent

[2] Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).
[3] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977).
[4] Robert Jervis, *Deterrence Theory Revisited*, vol. 31 (*World Politics*, 1979).
[5] Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).
[6] Samuel P. Huntington, *Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe,* in *Military Strategy in Transition* (London: Routledge, 1985).
[7] Lawrence Freedman, "General Deterrence and the Balance of Power," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 199–210.
[8] Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
[9] Jeffrey W. Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 1 (2010): 1–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523261003640819.
[10] Jeanne A. K. Hey, ed., *Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003); Baldur Thorhallsson, "The Icelandic Crash and Its Consequences: A Small State Without Economic and Political Shelter," in *Small States in Europe*, ed. Christine Ingebritsen and Iver B. Neumann (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 199–214.

small states beyond Europe have wielded such significant economic and political influence on the global stage. On the other hand, a few of the Great Powers' current pursuits of violating the territorial integrity of small states resemble those from the pre-1945 era and are gradually re-emerging.[11] Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine and China's expansive claim over the South China Sea through the Nine-Dash Line and Ten-Dash Line serve as stark reminders that the post-WWII norm of territorial integrity of small states is not sacrosanct. At this juncture, the academic discussion of deterrence, which has traditionally been an exclusive preserve of the great powers, needs to be broadened to encompass the small states. Examining deterrence strategies from the perspectives of small states is important for understanding the current global security environment amid shifting power dynamics.

Any discussion related to small states usually begins with a question: What is a small state? While small states are "an empirically relevant unit of study for the discipline of international relations"[12], defining small states has always been a perennial problem. This is mainly because the distinction between 'small' and 'large' states cannot be characterised by a clear and definitive dichotomy,[13] and it is complex to agree upon a singular and universally recognised definition of small states. The most commonly applied criterion for defining a small state has been an objective, single-variable indicator, such as geographical area or population size. According to Brady, "small states are generally defined as those nations that are small in landmass, population, economy, and military capacity".[14] However, the use of varying and sometimes arbitrary cut-off values for these variables makes defining small states elusive.[15] The classification of countries as 'small states' based solely on single-variable cut-offs, such as geographical area or population size, is a

[11] Eiki Berg and Shpend Kursani, "Back to the Future: Attempts to Buy, Swap, and Annex Territories in Contemporary Sovereignty Practices," *Global Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2023): 22, https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad022.

[12] Matthias Maass, "The Elusive Definition of the Small State," *International Politics* 46, no. 1 (2009): 65, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.37.

[13] P. R. Baehr, "Small States: A Tool for Analysis?" *World Politics* 27, no. 3 (1975): 456–66; Godfrey Baldacchino, "Thucydides or Kissinger? A Critical Review of Smaller State Diplomacy," in *The Diplomacies of Small States*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 21–40; Tom Crowards, "Defining the Category of 'Small' States," *Journal of International Development* 14, no. 2 (2002): 143–79; Naren Prasad, "Small but Smart: Small States in the Global System," in *The Diplomacies of Small States*, ed. Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 41–64; Baldur Thorhallsson, *Small States in the Global System: Analysis and Illustrations from the Case of Iceland* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1998).

[14] Anne-Marie Brady, "Small Can Be Huge: New Zealand Foreign Policy in an Era of Global Uncertainty," in *Small States and the Changing Global Order: New Zealand Faces the Future*, ed. Anne-Marie Brady (Cham: Springer, 2019), 1–10.

[15] For example, the Commonwealth and World Bank define 'small states' as sovereign countries with a population of 1.5 million or less. According to the Commonwealth definition, Gabon is classified as a small state, even though its geographical size (267,667 square kilometres), is twice that of England (130,278 square kilometres).

broad and imprecise categorisation that lacks specificity and depth. Another group of researchers sought to understand the smallness of any state from an interpretive perspective instead of relying on strict objective criteria such as population, land area, military or economic strength. Amstrup posits that the smallness of a state is a psychological or perceptual matter.[16] Rothstein argues that the inability to ensure the security of the state on its own and the need to rely on more powerful states for help are the defining characteristics of small states.[17] Willis maintains that despite small states' increasing ability to engage in vibrant foreign policy endeavours in recent days, they have been traditionally conceptualised as "actors that struggle to make proactive foreign policy choices on their own terms".[18] According to Thorhallsson's 'shelter theory', the economic, military, diplomatic and societal vulnerabilities of small states are the defining characteristics that make them reliant on the shelter provided by great powers and international organisations.[19]

However, despite challenges in defining small states, including arbitrary cut-off values and the elusiveness of the term, the concept of 'small state' remains recognisable. Hearing the word 'small state', one intuitively understands what type of states are being referenced. In this regard, this article posits that the concept of the power of the state, which scholars consider the driving force of world politics[20], can serve as a determinant in defining and describing small states. The power, although often objectively unmeasurable[21], can be a workable determinant of defining small states. The term 'small states' can refer to states that are relatively weak in several instruments of power. Small states can be characterised by their relative lack of power in both hard and soft domains. Thus, in the geopolitical and economic context of the 21st century, it is not the individual population or geographical size, economic or military strength, but rather the effectiveness of the elements of national power that should ultimately determine whether a state is considered 'small' or 'not small'.

[16] Niels Amstrup, "The Perennial Problem of Small States: A Survey of Research Efforts," *Cooperation and Conflict* 11, no. 3 (1976): 163–82.
[17] Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
[18] Jonathan Willis, "Breaking the Paradigm(s): A Review of the Three Waves of International Relations Small State Literature," *Pacific Dynamics: Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 5, no. 1 (2021): 18, http://dx.doi.org/10.26021/10639.
[19] Baldur Thorhallsson, "The Icelandic Crash and Its Consequences: A Small State Without Economic and Political Shelter," in *Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland's External Affairs*, ed. Baldur Thorhallsson (London: Routledge, 2018), 199–214.
[20] Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003).
[21] While scholars, practitioners, and politicians often measure power using objective and quantifiable indicators, including population size, Gross Domestic Product, natural resources, military assets, and defence spending, measuring the power of states has never been straightforward because it is largely unobservable and context-dependent. Measurable power, often equated with hard power, is not always the sole determinant of state power. Joseph S. Nye aptly notes, "power, like love, is easier to experience than to define or measure" (Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Changing Nature of World Power," *Political Science Quarterly* 105, no. 2 (1990): 177–192.

The modern history of the 20th and 21st centuries is replete with examples where strong states failed to deter weak ones from attacking, and conversely, where weak states succeeded in deterring stronger ones from attacking. One scholarly study suggests that in the last century, approximately 30 per cent of conflicts were initiated by the weak with an attack on the strong,[22] indicating that military superiority is not always the determining factor in deterrence success. Again, in the last century, except for a few exceptions, small states have mostly been able to avoid attack by stronger states, indicating that military inferiority is not always a determinant of deterrence failure. Unlike the era before World Wars, today's small states, which are essentially militarily weak, are not frequently attacked or invaded by strong states. While a few European small states enjoy the protection umbrella of NATO, most small states around the world do not enjoy such guarantees of extended deterrence. Yet most of them have not been attacked or invaded, suggesting that factors beyond military strength prevent powerful states from routinely attacking weaker ones. This article argues that the absence of aggression by the strong states represents a broader form of deterrence that extends beyond military capability and encompasses international law, international norms, intergovernmental and multilateral institutions. Within the English School framework, the post-World War II shift from an international system to an international society, and occasionally imperfect but consequential practices of collective security, have constituted structural constraints on aggression against small states. There lies the functional deterrence of small states: a type of deterrence not only based on military capabilities, but also on the constraint-producing mechanisms of international law, institutions, norms, and collective security practices. Small states' deterrence in the 21st century is therefore better understood through this broader sense.

According to the abovementioned national power-based definition, Bangladesh represents an important contemporary example of a small state navigating deterrence in a complex geopolitical environment. Situated between India and Myanmar and within the broader Indo-Pacific strategic competition involving China and the US, Bangladesh lacks the military capability to rely solely on conventional deterrence. While Bangladesh's renowned professional armed forces provide a basic level of conventional deterrence, they are not sufficient to achieve escalation dominance against potential adversaries, which is important for traditional credible deterrence. Given its relative military limitations, Bangladesh therefore relies more heavily on broader forms of deterrence rooted in multilateralism, international law, and economic interdependence. These combined mechanisms form what this article conceptualises as collective actor deterrence.

[22] Lowther, Andrew. *Framing Deterrence in the Twenty-first Century: Conference Summary.* In *Deterrence in the 21st Century: Proceedings of Conference Held on 18-19 May 2009, Sponsored by RUSI, King's College.* London: Royal United Services Institute, 2009.

Following this introductory discussion, the article provides a brief overview of small states' position in the traditional deterrence literature, highlighting how and why they have historically been neglected and marginalised. The article then highlights how classic deterrence theories, rooted in the advent and proliferation of nuclear weapons and shaped by rational actors such as the United States and the Soviet Union, have been increasingly challenged in the twenty-first century. Building on this discussion, the article examines why the classical deterrence framework is unsuitable for small states and outlines its key limitations for them. Subsequently, the article engages with the theoretical frameworks of realism and liberal internationalism. It demonstrates the limitation of political realism in analysing small states' deterrence strategies and advocates that liberal internationalism is a more holistic theoretical lens to understand small-state deterrence. Having discussed the position of small states in relation to classical deterrence theories, the article finally examines why small states require a broader conception of deterrence that prioritises non-military measures—such as economic interdependence, intergovernmental organisations, international law, multilateral agreements, and international norms—alongside traditional military measures. Drawing on examples from Bangladesh's use of maritime legal mechanisms, multilateral diplomacy, participation in United Nations Peacekeeping operations and economic interconnectedness, the article illustrates how contemporary small states increasingly employ broader non-military instruments to safeguard their strategic interests. In this regard, the article introduces the concept of collective actor deterrence and argues that, while it may not replace conventional military deterrence entirely, it represents a pragmatic option for small states by enabling them to deter aggression collectively.

2. Small States in Deterrence Literature

2.1 *Historical Neglect of Small States*

Great powers have dominated most of the discourse surrounding deterrence, as they have with many other aspects of international relations. Since Bernard Brodie's pioneering scholarly work on deterrence[23], the literature on the subject has largely mirrored the dominance of great powers, a trend spanning over the last eight decades. While a limited body of literature is available on the deterrence of small states[24], much of it ultimately describes the extended deterrence of the USA and

[23] Bernard Brodie and F. S. Dunn, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).

[24] Emmanuel N. C. Javier, *Alternative Options to Strengthen Small State Deterrence in the Face of New Great Power Competition* (The Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2023), https://hcss.nl/report/strengthen-small-state-deterrence-new-great-power-competition/; Paul van Hooft, Noëlle Nijboer, and Tim Sweijs, *Raising the Costs of Access: Active Denial Strategies by Small and Middle Powers Against Revisionist Aggression*

NATO instead of critically analysing the nuances of deterrence exclusively from the perspective and context of small states. A few studies explore the unique deterrence challenges faced by weak actors through the lens of asymmetric warfare, but their focus primarily lies on guerrilla tactics employed by least-developed or developing small states.[25] The vast deterrence literature has relegated small states to the sidelines. Since scholars and practitioners of international politics have been preoccupied with great powers, why even bother discussing how small states handle deterrence?

After the Cold War and particularly with the dawn of the 21st century, there was a notable expansion in the debate surrounding deterrence, encompassing new concepts and perspectives. It expanded across three distinct thematic areas: (1) the impact of violent non-state actors and transnational terrorism on deterrence;[26] (2) the influence of rogue states and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) on deterrence;[27] and (3) the effect of the emergence of technological advancements such as cyber warfare and artificial intelligence on deterrence.[28] Yet, a closer examination reveals

(The Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2021), https://hcss.nl/report/deterrence-raising-the-costs-of-access/; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, *Pick Your Poison: Comparing the Deterrence Problem in Asia and Europe*, The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies Paper Series (Springer, 2021), https://hcss.nl/report/strengthen-small-state-deterrence-new-great-power-competition/; Ian Bowers, *Small State Deterrence in the Contemporary World* (Oslo: Forsvarets høgskole Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, 2018).

[25] Mark Rekasius, "Unconventional Deterrence Strategy" (Masters diss., Naval Postgraduate School, 2005); Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "Unconventional Deterrence: How the Weak Deter the Strong," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 204–21; Abul Hasnat Mohammad Mahmud Azam, "Achieving Unorthodox Deterrence Ability by Bangladesh Army," *National Defence College Journal* 18, no. 2 (2019): 186–201; Abul Hasnat Mohammad Mahmud Azam, "Complex Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century: Bangladesh Armed Forces Perspective," *Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies Journal* 4, no. 4 (2020): 371–392.

[26] Doron Almog, "Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 34, no. 4 (2004): 1; Bruno S. Frey and Simon Luechinger, " How to Fight Terrorism: Alternatives to Deterrence," *Defence and Peace Economics* 14, no. 4 (2003): 237–49, Alexander S. Wilner, "Deterring the Undeterrable: Coercion, Denial, and Delegitimization in Counterterrorism," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 3–37; Alexander S. Wilner, "Artificial Intelligence and Deterrence: Science, Theory and Practice," *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 1; Thomas Rid, "Deterrence Beyond the State: The Israeli Experience," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 1 (2012): 124–47; Todd Sandler and Kevin Siqueira, "Global Terrorism: Deterrence Versus Pre-emption," *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique* 39, no. 4 (2006): 1370–87; Uri Fisher, "Deterrence, Terrorism, and American Values," *Homeland Security Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2007).

[27] D. D. Smith, *Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); J. M. McInnis, *Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies* (Statement before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2016), 29; H. Ahmadian and P. Mohseni, "Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 341–64; J. H. Lebovic, *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2007); S. A. Enold, *Rogue States and Deterrence Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College, 2009).

[28] Patrick M. Morgan, "Applicability of Traditional Deterrence Concepts and Theory to the Cyber Realm," in *Proceedings of a Workshop on Deterring Cyberattacks: Informing Strategies and Developing Options for US Policy*, vol. 56 (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2010); A. S. Wilner, "Artificial Intelligence and Deterrence: Science, Theory and Practice," *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 1; Mariarosaria Taddeo,

that the expansion of the body of deterrence literature in the 21st century mostly revolves around great powers (mostly the security of the US and its Western great power allies). Although this inclusion of new ideas and themes has expanded and broadened deterrence discourse, in the end, it remains great power-centric. The significance of theoretical and practical aspects of deterrence of small states has consistently remained eclipsed and underemphasised both during the Cold War era and in the present 21st century.

2.2 *Why Do Small States Remain Marginalised in Deterrence Discourse?*

There are two main reasons why deterrence literature, both during and after the Cold War, focuses on great power-centric nuclear or extended deterrence rather than critically analysing deterrence from the perspective of small states. First, the dominance of great powers within deterrence literature has historical roots. As the theory's development coincided with the rise of the nuclear age, it had an inherent focus on nuclear great powers. Because of this focus, scholars often correlate deterrence with nuclear weapons, so much so that both (nuclear and deterrence) have become almost synonymous with each other.[29] Deterrence received prominence as a new concept in the parlance of international relations because of its intertwined relationship with nuclear weapons during the Cold War era. Quoting Freedman, Morgan asserts, "Without nuclear weapons and the Cold War, deterrence would have remained an "occasional stratagem.""[30] While deterrence theory provided a framework for understanding how nuclear weapons could be used to deter aggression, nuclear doctrine provided a set of specific guidelines for how deterrence should be applied in a crisis. Because of the mutually reinforcing nature of the two concepts, the vast array of Cold War-era deterrence literature was predominantly centred on nuclear states, particularly the USA and USSR. Deterrence thinking became deeply intertwined with the theories of nuclear deterrence to such an extent that there was a perception that the absence of nuclear confrontation among great powers meant the demise of the importance of deterrence in international relations. Thus, the broad scope of deterrence was confined to a narrow domain of nuclear doctrine.

Second, this bias also reflects the broader trend of great power dominance within international relations scholarship. Acharya argues, "The discipline of

"The Limits of Deterrence Theory in Cyberspace," *Philosophy & Technology* 31, no. 3 (2018): 339–55; Amir Lupovici, "Cyber Warfare and Deterrence: Trends and Challenges in Research," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 3, no. 3 (2011): 49–62.

[29] Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 13–28; Michael Codner, "Defining 'Deterrence," in *Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century: Proceedings*, RUSI, King's College, 2009.

[30] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, vol. 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

International Relations (IR) does not reflect the voices, experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the world".[31] The marginalisation of the perspectives of small states reflects this broader trend identified by Acharya. As a result of this inherent bias towards great powers, the deterrence literature (particularly during the Cold War) does not provide an adequate framework for understanding and addressing the deterrence needs of small states. These are the main reasons why the literature on small states and deterrence usually ends up being discussions about great power, extended deterrence, or nuclear deterrence.

3. Traditional Deterrence Theories and Small States

3.1 *Basics of Traditional Deterrence*

Like many concepts in social science, deterrence permits no simple, generally applicable definition. Scholars have explained deterrence through various lenses, resulting in a plethora of definitions emanating from diverse perspectives. Snyder argues that deterrence is about discouraging adversaries from taking military action by convincing them that the prospect of cost and risk will outweigh any potential gain.[32] George and Smoke also emphasise the importance of manipulating an opponent's cost-benefit calculations.[33] According to Gray, deterrence is a "relational variable," a shifting value, and a product of a relationship that one cannot generate unilaterally.[34] Gray argues that it is "a condition wherein a deterree (the object of deterrent menaces) chooses not to behave in ways in which he would otherwise have chosen to behave, because he believes that the consequences would be intolerable".[35] Alternatively, Morgan provides a definition highlighting the active decision-making involved: "...in a deterrence situation one party is thinking of attacking, the other knows it and is issuing threats of a punitive response, and the first is deciding what to do while keeping these threats in mind".[36] The US Joint Publication 1-02, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, emphasises achieving a psychological effect in deterrence. It defines deterrence as "the prevention from action by fear of the consequences. Deterrence is a state of mind brought about by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction." These diverse definitions of deterrence demonstrate that the nature of deterrence is multifaceted.

[31] Amitav Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies," *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2014): 647–659.
[32] Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).
[33] Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
[34] Colin S. Gray, "Deterrence in the 21st Century," *Comparative Strategy* 19, no. 3 (2000): 255–261.
[35] *Ibid*, 256.
[36] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, vol. 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

Scholars categorisation of deterrence into many different types has further complicated its definition. Besides the two widely studied forms of deterrence, i.e., conventional and nuclear deterrence, there are other categorisations of deterrence theory. Posture-wise, deterrence is of two types – General and Immediate. As Morgan observes, a key distinction exists between general and immediate deterrence: while "General deterrence relates to opponents who maintain armed forces to regulate their relationship even though neither is anywhere near mounting an attack, Immediate deterrence concerns the relationship between opposing states where at least one side is seriously considering an attack while the other is mounting a threat of retaliation in order to prevent it".[37] Snyder posits two more types: Deterrence by Denial (deny the enemy from gaining battlefield victory) and Deterrence by Punishment (threaten to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy, even if defeated).[38] As the international relations, politics, and security environment evolved, scholars have held diverse and sometimes conflicting views, beliefs, and assumptions regarding deterrence theory. The variations in deterrence frameworks have become more and more pronounced over time and show no signs of cessation. Thus, deterrence now has many variants: Tailored Deterrence[39], Extended Deterrence[40], Internalised Deterrence, Perfect Deterrence, Unconventional Deterrence,[41] etc. However, Collin S. Gray asserts, "Deterrence is deterrence. Nuclear deterrence, conventional deterrence, deterrence for fear of asymmetric action, deterrence for fear of punishment of your society, deterrence for fear of military defeat in war (and its consequences) - it is all deterrence, the same theory and subject".[42] These diverse conceptualisations underscore the complexity of defining deterrence in an evolving security landscape in the 21st century.

Deterrence is also a psychological concept that falls within the cognitive domain of human beings. While the idea of deterrence emerged in the realm of international relations in the early 20th century, its origins lay in criminology, which can be traced back as far as the 18th century. English philosopher Jeremy Bentham suggested that criminals could rationally strike a balance between the costs of punishment and the potential benefits of crime.[43] According to Italian criminologist

[37] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1977), 28.
[38] Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).
[39] Jeffrey S. Lantis, "Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice," *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 3 (2009): 467–85.
[40] Paul K. Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988): 423–43.
[41] Mark Rekasius, "Unconventional Deterrence Strategy" (Masters diss., Naval Postgraduate School, 2005).
[42] Colin S. Gray, "Deterrence in the 21st Century," *Comparative Strategy* 19, no. 3 (2000): 255–261.
[43] Lawrence Freedman, "Introduction—The Evolution of Deterrence Strategy and Research," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 1–10.

and philosopher Cesare Beccaria, humans rationally assess potential gains and losses because they are motivated by self-interest and a 'hedonistic calculus' that seeks to maximise pleasure and minimise pain.[44] It suggests that humans are open to "deterrence" if imposing sanctions makes a behaviour more costly than the potential rewards. The rationality aspect of human beings, as observed in criminology, extends to the behaviour of states when it comes to international relations.

Traditional deterrence theory rests on the assumption that states are rational actors and, therefore, will most likely be deterred from taking aggressive moves against their opponents when a cost-benefit analysis reveals that the costs of conflict outweigh any potential gains.[45] Most of the classical works of deterrence literature by Bernard Brodie[46], Glenn Herald Snyder[47], Robert Jervis[48], Herman Kahn[49], and Thomas Schelling[50], which are frequently referred to as "rational deterrence theory", are based on this assumption of rationality. Traditional deterrence is straightforward because it deals with rational great power actors, such as the USA and the then USSR. These actors (1) have a common understanding of the game's norms and social logic; (2) have engaged in both direct and indirect communication; (3) have the ability to assess the potential risks, costs, and gains of the conflict; and (4) are able to manage their emotions.[51] According to Paul, these actors are "instrumentally rational" and their behaviour based on cost-benefit calculations in pursuit of their self-interest.[52]

3.2 *Traditional Deterrence's Limits for Small States*

Deterrence becomes complex when actors such as small states, rogue states and non-state transnational terrorists come into the picture and issues related to cyber, hybrid, grey zone and asymmetric warfare are factored in. This complexity

[44] David Maimon, "Deterrence in Cyberspace: An Interdisciplinary Review of the Empirical Literature," in *The Palgrave Handbook of International Cybercrime and Cyberdeviance*, ed. Thomas J. Holt and Adam M. Bossler (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 449–467.
[45] T. V. Paul, "Introduction," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
[46] Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); Bernard Brodie and F. S. Dunn, *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt, 1946).
[47] Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).
[48] Robert Jervis, *Deterrence Theory Revisited*, vol. 31 (*World Politics*, 1979).
[49] Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960).
[50] Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
[51] Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (New York: Polity Press, 2004).
[52] T. V. Paul, "Introduction," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

arises partly because some of these actors are driven by 'value rationality,' which involves pursuing goals beyond material gain, such as identity, dignity, or ethnic pride and for which they are willing to make such sacrifices that would otherwise seem nonsensical based on a purely instrumental rational calculation.[53]

The unpredictability of human psychology is another factor that can influence the traditional deterrence relationship with regard to small states. The promise of severe penalties within criminal law does not guarantee the cessation of unlawful activities because there may be hope that one may escape that punishment.[54] Beccaria suggested that it is not the severity but the certainty of punishment that creates a long-lasting deterring effect on the offenders.[55] Yet human psychology is so complex that neither severity nor certainty can fully stop offenders from committing wrongdoings. Despite stringent traffic regulations, it cannot be expected that drivers will forever stop breaking the rules. It suggests that the potential for punishment can never fully deter rule-breaking behaviour. These examples underscore how human psychology, which does not always follow simple cost-benefit calculations, can complicate deterrence even in the realm of international relations. Even strong states may find themselves unable to deter weaker ones, as the risk of losing a war does not always stop weaker states from initiating conflict. Despite theoretical expectations, history shows that even militarily and economically less powerful states have at times-initiated wars against stronger counterparts, challenging the anticipated outcomes of deterrence strategies. Perceiving a lack of alternatives, desperate aggressors can disregard even severe consequences if they deem an attack to be the only viable option, as happened in Japan in 1941.[56] Just as drivers often continue to break traffic rules despite the existence of potential penalties, the complexities of human nature and international dynamics can render deterrence efforts less successful than envisioned by theorists and strategists. Hence, the failure of deterrence is not the weakness of the theory but rather the inherent characteristics that stem from the complexities ingrained within it.

Weak states, as John J. Mearsheimer posits, find themselves in undesirable situations, where "the asymmetry is so great that the attacker does not have the slightest doubt that he will succeed on the battlefield". As such, the political realist continues, "The concept of deterrence does not really apply" in this situation.[57]

[53] *Ibid.*
[54] Daniel S. Nagin, "Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century," *Crime and Justice* 42, no. 1 (2013): 199–263.
[55] Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, trans. Henry Paolucci (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), originally published in 1764.
[56] Michael J. Mazarr, Stéphanie Pezard, Abigail Cheravitch, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).
[57] John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 59.

However, this black-and-white characterisation oversimplifies the concept of deterrence, as material and quantifiable power are not always the sole determinants of deterrence success. Because material superiority has never been enough to guarantee victory in wars. Even a seemingly lopsided conflict can get bogged down in guerrilla warfare or face unexpected resistance. The Peninsular War, the Algerian War (1954-62), the Vietnam War (1964-73), the Afghanistan War (1979-89), the Lebanon War (1982-83), the Chechnya War (1994-96), the Iraq War (2003-2011), Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (2001-2014), the war in Syria provide stark evidence of this statement.

Glaser et al., argue that "deterrence is not just a matter of weapons in arsenals, boots on the ground, planes in the air, ships at sea, or strategies on the planning table. Signaling a credible military threat is only part of a successful strategy of deterrence".[58] In addition to the military threat, smaller states can leverage non-military factors to create effective deterrents, which include, inter alia, international norms condemning aggression, the potential for diplomatic isolation of the attacking state, domestic repercussions within powerful states, the influence of multilateral institutions, and growing economic interdependence. Small-state deterrence is, thus, a mix of military deterrence and other non-military factors.

4. Collective Actor Deterrence and Small States

4.1 Basics of Collective Actor Deterrence

While traditional deterrence refers to the state's responses to the 'anarchical' characteristics of international politics, "collective actor deterrence these days is an extension of, and a tool in upholding, an emerging version of international law and order and the continuing development of norms – transnational, international and domestic – of proper behaviour."[59] This unique form of deterrence that involves sanctions and interventions under the aegis of international laws, international norms, intergovernmental and multilateral institutions is coined as collective actor deterrence.[60] According to Morgan, "The ultimate goal of collective actor deterrence

[58] Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence: Why America Must Reassure, Not Just Threaten, China," *Foreign Affairs* 103 (2024): 88–100.

[59] Morgan, Patrick M. "The state of deterrence in international politics today." *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 1 (2012): 94.

[60] Patrick M. Morgan, "Collective Actor Deterrence," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 204–21; T. V. Paul, "Introduction," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Keren Manusama, "Conflict Prevention," in *Research Handbook on International Conflict and Security Law*, ed. Nigel D. White and Christian Henderson (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013).

is to make such effective responses to violations of community norms that eventually few violations occur, or infringements quickly cease when community scrutiny and pressure are brought to bear."[61] It deters potential aggressor states with the threat of international condemnation and collective repercussions so that the aggressors do not breach international peace and security by violating international law. For example, Chapters VI and VII of the United Nations Charter include this type of deterrent component.

4.2 *Theoretical Perspectives*

Scholars might find it intriguing to examine which theoretical perspective of International Relations discipline would better explain the small states' collective actor deterrence approach – realism or liberal internationalism. Traditionally, deterrence has been viewed narrowly, referring to military tools of statecraft, particularly nuclear weapons. However, collective actor deterrence expands the scope to include non-military actions, for example, economic sanctions, diplomatic exclusion, pressure from intergovernmental organisations, and information operations.[62] The narrow version of deterrence is grounded in political realism. This narrow version not only aligns well with political realism's core ideas of power, self-interest, and conflict within an anarchic system but also complements realism by providing a more structured and specific framework for understanding state behaviour.[63] Jervis further argues that, in line with realism, the narrow version of deterrence tends to see power as the primary tool for conflict management and ignores the importance of rewards, negotiation and compromise in achieving stability.[64] However, when it comes to the deterrence of small states, a broader conception of deterrence, which expands beyond military actions to include non-military measures, becomes crucial for understanding how they navigate asymmetrical power dynamics.

The lens of political realism is insufficient to see the nuance of small states' use of collective actor deterrence. While realism's emphasis on statism, security, and power dynamics holds some relevance, it offers a narrow perspective, and that is not enough to analyse the broader conception of deterrence. There is a possibility that it could lead to an incomplete understanding of small states' statecraft and its use of deterrence, as the realist lens focuses more on the security competition aspect

[61] Patrick M. Morgan, "Collective Actor Deterrence,"164.
[62] Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (New York: Polity Press, 2004); Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 13–28.
[63] Robert Jervis, *Deterrence Theory Revisited*, vol. 31 (*World Politics*, 1979).
[64] *Ibid, 1979.*

among states and downplays relevant non-military matters. Realism is sceptical of intergovernmental institutions, whereas small states' approach heavily relies on active participation in organisations like the UN and regional bodies. Specifically, realism overlooks the broader aspects of collective security, such as commitment to international law, norms, values, and engagement with intergovernmental organisations like the UN, which small states might leverage as elements of deterrence. Moreover, realist theories prioritise the analysis of large states, based on the study of great power politics[65], a focus that does not align with small states.

Given the use of a broader conception of deterrence by small states, liberal internationalism, as a theoretical perspective of International Relations, is better suited to critically examine the key aspects of small states' statecraft. Morgan argues that collective actors are motivated by liberal internationalist values in establishing or upholding deterrence threats.[66] Liberal internationalism provides a more comprehensive and intellectually independent explanation by taking small states' commitment to international norms, international law, consensus-building and cooperation seriously in addition to their own military capacity and alliance. Theories of liberal internationalism will enable researchers to assess, or critique, the strengths and weaknesses of small states' use of collective actor deterrence in a holistic manner.

4.3 *Small States' Use of Collective Actor Deterrence*

Small states can use collective-actor deterrence, which is built on the existence of a community or society and relies on the principle that any breach of community norms will be punished collectively. Collective actions or threats under this system are not solely for the benefit of any single small state but for all states in the system. Small states can use the potential of collective threats to deter, prevent and correct violations of community values and de-escalate ongoing conflicts. This form of deterrence engages states and international institutions, and is based on a pre-existing sense of community and shared norms and rules among the actors involved.[67] The collective actors can follow through with consequences when the agreed-upon rules are broken. The deterrent threat draws its legitimacy from this shared understanding.

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[65] Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Small States and the Turning Point in Global Politics," in *Small States and the New Security Environment*, ed. Anne-Marie Brady and Baldur Thorhallsson (Cham: Springer, 2021), 1–11.

[66] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, vol. 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[67] T. V. Paul, "Introduction," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, vol. 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Patrick M. Morgan, "Collective Actor Deterrence," in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, ed. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 204–21.

Collective actor deterrence is based on collective security, which does not hold Hobbes's vision of a strong central authority to counter the state of *bellum omnium contra omnes — 'war of all against all'*. Collective security refers to an international society where conflict-prevention arrangements function within the principle of state sovereignty, yet rely on shared norms, rules, and institutions to maintain order and prevent conflict. Hedley Bull and the English School emphasise the existence of this type of international society.[68] All states, regardless of size, that form an international society share a common interest in its well-being. Collective security rests on consensus-building, cooperation, regulations, and a framework where international law is central. According to the United Nations Charter Chapter VI, collective security refers to promoting the peaceful settlement of situations that risk peace, and Chapter VII allows for action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace or acts of aggression.[69] While states combining to create a collective force is an age-old concept,[70] collective security does not necessarily refer to military alliances. In the case of alliances, the primary focus is self-interest and mutual defence of members. Usually, the terms and conditions of a specific treaty lie at the heart of any alliance obligations, which can be used as a deterrent. However, collective security emphasises broader 'general welfare' or the 'collective good' that goes beyond the immediate self-defence of individual member states. As mentioned earlier, the focus of collective security is broader and encompasses collective action to maintain global peace and security.

The concept of collective security is one type of deterrence, but with nuances. It goes beyond traditional extended deterrence. In the case of small states, it is even more evident because the combined might of multiple states that not only rely on military force but also on non-military aspects such as economic pressure, international norms and international laws that will create a more formidable deterrent than any individual small state could achieve. Given their lack of significant military strength, collective actor deterrence is a viable option for small states, as its greater legitimacy on the international stage—representing broader and shared values such as peace and stability—can discourage aggression. One motivation for small states to participate in this form of deterrence is that they not only be protected by bigger powers but also can actively participate in the decision-making processes that affect their security. This motivation helps ensure they fairly contribute to the collective effort. While the security dilemma is inherent in traditional deterrence by individual

[68] Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).
[69] Nigel D. White, "On the Brink of Lawlessness: The State of Collective Security Law," *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review* 13 (2002): 237.
[70] Michael J. Glennon and Allison R. Hayward, "Collective Security and the Constitution: Can the Commander in Chief Power Be Delegated to the United Nations," *Georgetown Law Journal* 82 (1994): 1573, 1576.

states or alliances, self-protection in collective actor deterrence does not make others insecure. Collective protection reduces the potential for arms races and lessens the threats arising from each member's military strength.[71] This dynamic prevents small states from falling into the trap of the arms race driven by security dilemmas.

4.4 *The Role of Assurances in Small States' Collective Actor Deterrence*

Positive deterrence, which refers to the assurance and cooperation aspects of deterrence, deserves a central place within the collective actor deterrence framework. Because collective actor deterrence seeks not only to punish norm violators but also to shape their preferences and behaviour through assurances, incentives, and opportunities for peaceful cooperation. Small states should rely on the assurance and cooperation aspects of deterrence. For small states, credible deterrence demands a fine balance between power and assurance; while power enhances the credibility of threats, it must not undermine the reliability of assurances. Effective deterrence involves broad strategies that make a potential aggressor see no benefit in attacking, for deterring aggression is not just about threats, but also about offering guarantees and assurance.[72] As Mueller posits, "deterrence is not the same thing as simply making war look costly or risky but depends on making war look worse than the alternative".[73] Although it sounds seemingly oxymoronic due to the inherent aggressiveness associated with the word 'deterrence', scholars sometimes refer to these types of promises as 'positive deterrence'.[74]

Glaser et al. maintain, "Although the logic of deterrence through brute strength is intuitively appealing, both theory and history show that the threat of punishment fails to deter if it is not paired with assurances that those same military capabilities will not be used in any way to hurt the other side".[75] By helping reduce fear, 'assurances' (such as guarantees of non-aggression or potential incentives for cooperation) can make potential aggressors believe they have options other than aggression. To emphasise that deterrence is not always only about threats, Freedman argues, "with deterrence the objective is inaction. Inaction can have

[71] Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, vol. 89 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[72] Michael J. Mazarr, "Understanding Deterrence," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 13–28; Arzan Tarapore, *Deterring an Attack on Taiwan* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2024).
[73] Karl Mueller, "The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Deterrence," in *NL ARMS Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies 2020: Deterrence in the 21st Century—Insights from Theory and Practice*, ed. Frans Osinga and Tim Sweijs (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2021), 47–63, 48.
[74] T. W. Milburn, "What Constitutes Effective Deterrence?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 2 (1959): 138–145; David A. Baldwin, "The Power of Positive Sanctions," *World Politics* 24, no. 1 (1971): 19–38.
[75] Bonnie S. Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Thomas J. Christensen, "Taiwan and the True Sources of Deterrence: Why America Must Reassure, Not Just Threaten, China," *Foreign Affairs* 103 (2024): 88–100, 8.

many causes, including a lack of interest in action. So even when inaction is the result of anticipating another's potential responses, this may not be because of any overt threats." [76] Accordingly, small states' collective actor deterrence should be understood as a dual strategy that combines the threat of collective punishment with positive assurances and incentives designed to prevent conflict and encourage compliance with international norms.

5. Bangladesh as a Case of Collective Actor Deterrence

Bangladesh serves as a textbook case study to ground the theoretical concepts of collective actor deterrence in 21st-century realities. Despite its population and growing economic size, it faces material and military asymmetry relative to neighbouring regional giants such as India and China. While Bangladesh's renowned professional military force provides a baseline layer of conventional deterrence, it cannot dominate the military escalation ladder relative to its potential adversaries, a capability essential for achieving credible deterrence. Therefore, its security behaviour reflects broader forms of deterrence based on diplomacy, multilateralism, strategic balancing, and economic interdependence.

5.1 *Bangladesh and the Limits of Conventional and Asymmetric Deterrence*

Achieving credible deterrence through purely conventional military means remains a complex challenge for Bangladesh. One of the key requirements of credible deterrence is the ability to maintain escalation dominance over a potential adversary, which often necessitates the acquisition of superior military hardware and advanced weapon systems. Such dynamics can gradually lead to a costly arms race. Given Bangladesh's development-oriented economic priorities, constitutional commitment to peace[77], longstanding support for global disarmament initiatives—including its continuous commitment to the causes of the Conference on Disarmament at the Palais des Nations in Geneva[78]—and broader economic realities, engaging in an unnecessary arms race is neither strategically desirable nor economically viable.

[76] Lawrence Freedman, "Deterrence: A Reply," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 5 (2005): 789–801.

[77] Article 25 of the Bangladesh Constitution on 'Promotion of international peace, security and solidarity' states that the state shall 'Strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament'.

[78] Bangladesh assumes presidency of Conference on Disarmament, available at http://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/bangladesh-assumes-presidency-of-conference-on-disarmament/55967, accessed on 27 August 2020.

Despite the growing relevance of asymmetric and unconventional strategies in contemporary conflicts, their ability to provide credible deterrence for small states remains inherently limited. Scholars such as Ivan Arreguín-Toft argue that asymmetric power relations can, under certain conditions, enable weaker actors to deter stronger powers from intervention, even when the disparity in material power is very large.[79] For example, asymmetric conflicts in the post–World War II period saw several seemingly paradoxical outcomes in which materially weaker actors have successfully resisted coercion by stronger adversaries. These developments challenge the conventional assumption that material superiority necessarily translates into credible deterrence.[80] In contemporary security environments, it has been observed that weaker actors are no longer merely passive underdogs; in many cases, they have demonstrated the ability to frustrate or even defeat stronger opponents by employing unconventional and indirect strategies. In this context, Bangladesh, given its limited capacity to dominate the escalation ladder, may also benefit from incorporating elements of asymmetric and non-conventional deterrence strategies. Although they may impose significant military, political, and economic costs on stronger adversaries and complicate the achievement of their objectives, these costs often materialise only after a conflict has begun. As a result, asymmetric strategies may be effective in resisting or prolonging conflict, but they do not necessarily prevent a stronger actor from initiating coercion or aggression in the first place. While asymmetric strategies can increase the costs of aggression, they are often more effective as instruments of resistance than as mechanisms of deterrence. This limitation highlights the need for complementary deterrence mechanisms that influence an adversary's calculations before coercion is initiated. Consequently, Bangladesh's security approach requires a broader conception of deterrence that combines military preparedness with diplomacy, economic interdependence, multilateral engagement, international law, and other non-military instruments of statecraft.

5.2 *Bangladesh and the Practice of Collective Actor Deterrence*

Bangladesh offers a real-world success story for this argument that functional deterrence for small states relies heavily on the constraint-producing mechanisms of international law. For example, Bangladesh's long-standing contribution to UN peacekeeping has earned it substantial goodwill within the international community. As one of the world's leading troop-contributing countries to UN peacekeeping missions, Bangladesh has cultivated extensive diplomatic networks, institutional

[79] Toft Ivanarreguín, *Complex Deterrence Strategy in the Global Age*, *Unconventional Deterrence, (*Chicago, The University of Chicago Press: 2009), 204.

[80] Abul Hasnat Mohammad Mahmud Azam, "Complex Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century: Bangladesh Armed Forces Perspective," *Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies Journal* 4, no. 4 (2020): 371–392.

relationships, and a reputation as a responsible stakeholder in international peace and security. This diplomatic capital enhances its ability to mobilise international support in times of crisis, thereby strengthening the collective dimensions of its deterrence posture. Through its sustained commitment to UN peacekeeping, Bangladesh has earned considerable normative legitimacy and international goodwill through its active contribution to the maintenance of global peace and security. Within the English School framework, such participation reflects Bangladesh's commitment to the principles and institutions of international society, where states share a common interest in preserving international order and stability. This reputation as a responsible stakeholder enhances Bangladesh's diplomatic standing and international visibility, thereby increasing the reputational, political, and diplomatic costs associated with any potential coercive action against it. Active participation in UN peacekeeping helps Bangladesh embed itself deeply within the normative and institutional structures of international society. This strengthens Bangladesh's ability to mobilise international support and reinforces the broader logic of collective actor deterrence, whereby security is derived not solely from military capabilities but also from legitimacy, multilateral engagement, and international cooperation. Also, it deepens Bangladesh's integration into the institutional fabric of international society, thereby enhancing its ability to benefit from collective diplomatic and normative responses to potential threats.

Beyond its diplomatic and normative benefits, Bangladesh's extensive participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations contributes to national security by enhancing the professionalism and operational effectiveness of the Bangladesh Armed Forces. Peacekeeping deployments provide valuable experience in complex and multinational operational environments, exposing Bangladeshi military personnel to diverse doctrines, command structures, and emerging security challenges. Such participation strengthens interoperability with foreign armed forces, facilitates the exchange of professional knowledge and best practices, and fosters enduring relationships with military institutions worldwide. These experiences contribute to the development of a highly professional and internationally connected military force without necessitating costly military competition or an arms race. In the context of collective actor deterrence, these intangible yet significant benefits enhance Bangladesh's strategic resilience and defence preparedness while reinforcing its integration into the broader security architecture of international society.

Another example is the maritime boundary dispute with India and Myanmar, where Bangladesh relied not on military coercion but on international law, which helped channel competing claims into internationally recognised legal processes

rather than unilateral action.[81] Through the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS)[82] and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), Bangladesh resolved these disputes in 2012 and 2014. The peaceful settlement of Bangladesh's maritime disputes with India and Myanmar may be interpreted primarily as an instance of conflict resolution rather than deterrence in the classical sense, as these cases do not conclusively demonstrate that either state was deterred from initiating aggression. Nevertheless, they illustrate how international legal institutions can generate significant political and normative constraints on unilateral behaviour by embedding disputes within rule-based processes and increasing the legitimacy costs of coercive action. They demonstrate the enabling conditions of collective actor deterrence, where small states can use international legal frameworks and derive legitimacy from international law to offset their limited conventional military capabilities.

Within the broader framework of collective actor deterrence, the logic of positive deterrence highlights that credible deterrence also depends on aligning incentives such that potential adversaries perceive greater benefits in maintaining peace than in pursuing conflict. It involves offering guarantees of non-aggression or incentives for cooperation. As Mueller posits, deterrence depends on 'making war look worse than the alternative'.[83] While the traditional deterrence says: 'If you attack me, I will impose unacceptable costs on you', positive deterrence adds another dimension: 'You should not attack me because you gain more from peace than from conflict'. In other words, deterrence is achieved not only by threatening punishment but also by making cooperation more attractive than confrontation. Bangladesh operationalises this dynamic by leveraging deep economic interdependence and regional trade infrastructure to ensure that other countries have a vested financial interest in its stability.[84] Bangladesh's growing integration into regional and global economic networks provides an important non-military dimension of deterrence that aligns with the concept of collective actor deterrence.

As one of the world's largest exporters of ready-made garments and an increasingly important participant in global supply chains, Bangladesh has developed substantial economic interdependence with major powers and regional

[81] *The Bay of Bengal Maritime Boundary Arbitration between the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Republic of India*, Reports of International Arbitral Awards (RIAA), vol. 32 (2014): 1–182.

[82] *Dispute Concerning Delimitation of the Maritime Boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar in the Bay of Bengal (Bangladesh/Myanmar),* Judgment of March 14, 2012, International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), Case No. 16, accessed May 31, 2026, ITLOS Case No. 16.

[83] Mueller, "The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Deterrence," 48.

[84] This argument does not assume that interdependence is inherently stabilising. A key tension in liberal institutionalist literature is that interdependence can also generate vulnerability. States embedded in asymmetric networks may face coercive leverage rather than protection. Collective actor deterrence, therefore, depends on the distributional structure of interdependence, in which disruption costs are widely shared among multiple powerful actors.

actors. Bangladesh is connected to many regional and global economic networks. Its economy plays an important role in international trade, global supply chains, maritime connectivity, and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). Because of these links, any major disruption in Bangladesh would affect not only Bangladesh itself but also many other countries, businesses, investors, and trading partners that depend on these networks and investments. This creates a form of deterrence. Any country considering coercive action against Bangladesh must think about more than just its direct relationship with Bangladesh. It must also consider the wider consequences, such as disruption to trade, supply chains, foreign investments, business operations, and regional stability. These broader economic and political costs can make aggression less attractive. As a result, deterrence is strengthened not only by the possibility of retaliation but also by the shared interest of governments, investors, multinational corporations, and trading partners in maintaining Bangladesh's stability and prosperity.

Moreover, Bangladesh's strategic location in the Bay of Bengal further enhances its geopolitical importance in the broader Indo-Pacific region, particularly regarding maritime trade routes and connectivity initiatives. In this context, instability or coercion against Bangladesh would not only affect its own national interests but also disrupt wider regional economic and strategic interests. Consequently, Bangladesh's economic relevance and interconnectedness create indirect deterrent effects by raising the political, economic, and diplomatic costs of overt coercion or destabilisation by stronger actors. By embedding itself in dense economic and strategic networks, Bangladesh generates a form of indirect deterrence in which the preservation of stability becomes a shared interest among multiple external actors, thereby reinforcing the logic of collective actor deterrence.

6. Conclusion

The article argues that the historical dominance of great power-centric narratives vis-à-vis the neglect of small states in deterrence literature needs to be addressed to make the literature more holistic, well-rounded and inclusive. Given the increasing geopolitical and economic significance of small states in the 21st century, their marginalisation in deterrence literature deprives the field of the opportunity to become richer and more comprehensive. If maintaining the status quo by discouraging aggression is a primary goal of deterrence, it is logical for small states to master all possible ways and means to achieve this outcome. Relying solely on military measures to practice deterrence will not only narrow the scope for small states but also render it impractical. Small states are unlikely to dominate the military escalation ladder for obvious reasons, including relative military inferiority, geopolitical constraints, and resource limitations. To address this issue, this article

emphasises the concept of collective actor deterrence, wherein small states adopt a broader approach to deterrence that leverages international laws, international norms, multilateral agreements, economic interdependence, and intergovernmental organisations to offset their limited military capabilities.

Traditional deterrence theory is grounded in a dyadic logic of coercion, where stability emerges from the credible threat of punishment. In classical formulations, states deter adversaries by convincing them that the costs of aggression—typically military retaliation—will outweigh any potential gains. This logic assumes that deterrence operates primarily through force projection and adversarial balance. However, positive deterrence approaches extend this framework by incorporating the role of incentives alongside punishment. Rather than relying exclusively on the threat of retaliation, deterrence may also arise when peace itself becomes materially more valuable than conflict. In this sense, deterrence is sustained not only by fear of costs imposed by the defender, but by the opportunity costs embedded in peaceful engagement. Building on this insight, this article advances the concept of collective actor deterrence, in which deterrence emerges not at the level of bilateral military interaction but through the structural embeddedness of a state within wider regional and global networks. Collective security, as understood within the English School framework, serves as a foundation of collective actor deterrence for small states. This development expanded the range of deterrence options available to small states, enabling them to rely not only on military capabilities but also on the constraint-producing mechanisms of international society. This article also posits that, contrary to popular belief, liberal internationalism, rather than political realism, offers a more appropriate theoretical framework for analysing small states' deterrence strategies within the context of collective actor deterrence.

Bangladesh exemplifies how contemporary small states increasingly combine military capabilities with diplomacy, international law, economic interdependence, and multilateral engagement to enhance deterrence. Its strategic behaviour demonstrates that deterrence for small states in the 21st century is not confined to military retaliation alone but increasingly relies on collective actor mechanisms embedded within international society. Although this article focuses exclusively on Bangladesh, its experience suggests that the use of collective actor deterrence is not unique but reflects broader patterns of behaviour among several contemporary small states. A systematic comparative analysis, however, lies beyond the scope of this article and remains an avenue for future research.