

The Six Functions of a Threshold - An Attempt at Conceptual Analysis

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This briefing explores the possible meaning or meanings of the term “threshold” in the context of the conventional (non-nuclear) military defence of a small state, or a state with small armed forces, against an aggressive power with numerically superior forces. The briefing has been produced in the context of the NATO/STO Study SAS-131, Threshold concepts for and by small forces, and does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the subject. It draws on analysis conducted under a national Swedish research project on threshold defence and threshold capabilities.¹

WHAT IS A THRESHOLD?

The term “threshold” is often used with different meanings or connotations, which can be a source of misunderstanding and confusion. The most common meaning in the policy-oriented and scholarly literature is in relation to nuclear weapons and deterrence, or to escalation, as in “crossing the threshold to armed conflict/war” or “crossing the nuclear threshold”. These are meanings of the term threshold that pertain mostly to an objective reality that exists separately from the parties involved, e.g. either a nuclear explosion has taken place or not, or a war is going on or not.²

Recently, one can also find references to the “article 5 threshold”, most often in relation to Russia’s use of hybrid tactics in Ukraine. Then the term is used to signify a combination of the physical actions of the aggressor (how much violence is being used?) and the cognitive acts of the victim and his allies (does this aggressive act constitute an article 5 case?). There have also been references to the fact that Russia’s threshold for resorting to violence has proved lower than expected, e.g. in Georgia and Crimea. In these cases the term is used to conote mainly cognitive factors inside the Russian political system as well as the lack, or weakness, of safeguards against using force for political ends.

However, it is not one of these well-established interpretations that is explored here, but a different interpretation of the term threshold that has appeared on and off in Norway and Sweden during the Cold War, and that has again come to the fore in both official and scholarly writings during the 2010s.

1 Some findings have been published as Robert Dalsjö, *Fem dimensioner av tröskelförsvar* FOI-R--4458--SE (Stockholm: FOI, 2017).

2 Disregarding any possible ambiguity as to what constitutes a war and whether those factors are at hand, or not.

In this sense the term threshold means a quality or capability on the side of the defender, which can have an effect primarily on the adversary and on military dispositions or operations, but also on third parties and on the public opinion and the political-military decision-making of the defender. This interpretation of the term is obviously closely related to “deterrence” and also to “escalation”, yet not identical.

Although there is an abundance of references to “threshold” in recent Norwegian and Swedish official documents and writings on defence policy, there is a dearth of analytic writings on the subject, and I have found none in other languages than Norwegian and Swedish.³ There may also be a limited utility in conducting exegesis of official documents, as such documents are often political committee-products making ample use of constructive ambiguity.⁴

Two studies on the topic of threshold defence have been published by the FOI, generating some secondary non-scholarly articles. There is also a classified study by the Norwegian institute, FFI, which has given rise to secondary articles.⁵ While a lack of conceptual clarity can be an asset in reaching agreement in formulating policy, it can become an impediment when that policy is to be implemented. This has led the Swedish MoD to commission a third study from FOI. It is primarily on conclusions from that study this text is based.

THE SIX FUNCTIONS OF A THRESHOLD

After surveying official documents and articles in which the term “threshold” is used in relation to the defence of a small nation, it seems clear that there is considerable overlap between “threshold” and “deterrent” (defined narrowly). But it seems equally clear that the term threshold also has connotations that lie outside the concept of deterrence, at least if that concept is

3 Cf. Prop. 73 S (2011–2012), *Proposisjon til Stortinget (forslag til stortingsvedtak) Et forsvar for vår tid*.

4 Cf. Other widely used terms, such as “balance of power” and “national interest” which most people instinctively believe they understand, but where the exact or intended meaning of the terms are notoriously difficult to pin down. Robert Dalsjö, *Sverige och Nationella intressen* FOI Memo 5470, 2015-11-17.

5 Krister Andrén, *Krigsavhållande tröskelförmåga: Försvarsmakten bortglömda huvudoppgift?* (Stockholm: FOI, 2014); Madelene Lindström, Fredrik Lindvall, *”Si vis pacem, para bellum”: Perspektiv på en svensk tröskel* (Stockholm: FOI, 2015); Espen Skjelland et. al. *Operationell nektelse – et radikalt terskelforsvar* (Kjeller: FFI, 2015).



defined narrowly. The fact that “threshold” is both a metaphor and a concept can actually be used analytically to try to find these meanings or connotations.

A threshold marks a passage from one room in a building into another, or a passage from the inside of a building to the outside. A threshold is also a something that presents an obstacle or obstruction to the movement of objects across. Visitors can stumble on a threshold. Some thresholds creak when walked upon. If fit snugly to the floor, a threshold also helps to keep out small objects such as sand, dirt, water, mice and insects. Finally, a threshold is usually combined with a door that fits tightly and can be closed and locked.

Based on this, and from a close reading of both policy documents and analytic texts, I venture to suggest that a threshold – in this context – can fulfil six functions:

Conventional deterrent

This should be self-explanatory as tomes have been written on the theory and practice of deterrence, which basically is about influencing the cost-benefit calculations of the potential aggressor ahead of a decision to attack or to escalate. Deterrence is often divided into two variants: deterrence by denial, in which the forces of the defender have the capability to deny the aggressor the attainment of his objectives (in space, time, function, etc) and deterrence by punishment, in which the defender raises the price that the aggressor would have to pay for the attainment of these objectives. This price can either be exacted from the forces of the aggressor which are attacking the defender, or from other forces (counter-force targeting), or it can be exacted from valuable assets of the aggressor (counter-value targeting), including in the aggressor’s homeland.

The capability to deter is often divided into three components:

- The capability to deny or to punish an aggressor
- The will to use this capability if challenged
- Communication of the existence of this capability and will to the potential aggressor, to own population, and to third parties.

All three components have to be present for deterrence to work, but they may exist in different proportions depending on the nature of the deterrent. To this one might add a fourth component which is uncertainty or risk. While certitude about will and ability normally strengthens deterrence, too much certitude about the defenders abilities might allow the aggressor to calculate how much it would take to overcome the defender’s defences (denial) or what the cost of aggression would be (punishment). It should be noted, however, that the

effects of such deterrence might differ depending on whether the aggressor is averse or prone to risk.

Another dimension of uncertainty or risk is that, by attacking, the aggressor risks starting a train of events that he cannot control and cannot know where it might take him. The possibility that other actors might come to assistance of the defender should be factored in here. However, in this context it matters greatly if the aggressor is a gambler or cautious.

Effects and capabilities

First it must be stated that the cases we are considering here are about deterrence within a highly asymmetric power relationship. This is because one side has considerably larger capacity than the other both to dish out punishment and to absorb it. This makes it a sub-case of the strategic problem of finite deterrence or *dissuasion du faible au fort*. In the absence of nuclear equalizers of their own, small states choosing to follow this approach will need to use cunning, creativity, ruthlessness and a deep understanding of the nature and value-system of the adversary (and of any allies/third parties) to identify the right buttons to press in order to create the necessary leverage.

In this context it is useful to recall what French strategists said; to deter Russia from attacking France it would not be necessary to match Russia in destructive power, only to be able to hurt Russia more than Russia could gain by attacking France.

Deterrence ipso facto concerns abstract or cognitive factors such as an aggressor’s perception of the defenders will and ability, or an aggressor’s cost-benefit calculus before a decision to attack or to escalate. The effect one is looking for here is obviously that the adversary abstains from the actions that he otherwise would or might have taken, such as acts of coercion, aggression or escalation. The decisive effects take place in the cognitive realm (the aggressor’s cost-benefit calculus) but can have considerable consequences in the physical realm (coercion/aggression/escalation or not). In order to achieve the desired effect on the adversary’s cost-benefit calculus, the defender has to have the qualities or capabilities mentioned earlier (capability to deny or punish, as well as the will to use them) and this has to be communicated to the adversary.

As to the concrete military and other capabilities (to deny or to punish) needed in order to deter an adversary, as well as their type and extent, numerous articles and books have been written and it seems little use here to start on a new list. But it should be kept in mind that the instruments of deterrence have to be fashioned primarily to fit an adversary’s mind-set



and value-system, and that human weaknesses (emotion, pride etc) may strongly affect the adversary's decision-making process. Moreover, the amount and type of deterrence needed in a concrete situation is most probably dependent on what interests are at stake for the adversary, as well as his appetite or aversion to risk. That is to say that a deterrent that may be sufficient if only marginal interests are concerned may not suffice if he perceives that matters of central importance are at stake. Likewise, a deterrent that may work on a risk-averse or rational actor may not deter a risktaking or emotional adversary.

Defence

Thus, we arrive at the second function a threshold might have, which is concerned with what happens in the physical world after deterrence fails and the ability and will of the defender turns from a deterrent into a factor creating problems or losses for the aggressor, and which is an asset for the defender.

What happens in the real world after deterrence fails cannot be a part of deterrence, except as a prerequisite or condition. Furthermore, we have numerous examples from both the Cold War and from the period after where deterrence has been attempted without the actual ability or will to follow through if deterrence fails.⁶

Here, there are reasons to focus primarily on capabilities and effects that would come into play in the early stages after deterrence has failed, i.e. in the early stages of a war, or in the period after escalation from one level of conflict to another. While the capacity to mount a dogged defence, or resort to partisan warfare, may be very relevant to both deterrence and defence, they do not dovetail with the threshold concept as interpreted here. This also shows that there are capabilities and effects that may fit nicely into the concepts of deterrence and defence, but without fitting the threshold concept.

Effects and capabilities

Even though deterrence and defence are considered here as separate entities, it is still fruitful to make an analogous distinction between – on the one hand - defensive measures and capabilities that have the effect of denying or delaying the aggressor's attainment of his objectives, and – on the other

6 A distinction between deterrence and defence was a fact of life in Nato for much of the Cold War and now seems to resurface again, cf. B. H. Lidell Hart, *Deterrent or Defence: A Fresh Look at the West's Military Position* (New York: Praeger, 1960). In another variant this distinction appeared during peace operations in Bosnia during the first half of the 1990s - whether to only deter attacks on the safe areas, or also to defend them. Finally, a distinction between the two is inherent in the now very common practice of European states to maintain "hollow forces".

hand - measures and capabilities that have the effect of raising the price (in losses, time, opportunity cost, reputation, etc) the aggressor has to pay for the attainment of his objectives. There should also be a place in the taxonomy for capabilities and mechanisms that raise the level of uncertainty for the aggressor, such as capabilities that might have the effect of derailing the aggressor's plan of attack, or of expanding (escalating) the conflict as to the actors involved, the level of force applied, or the geographic extent.

As was the case with the function of deterrence there is an abundance of writings on the subject and there seems to be little utility in the context of this text to draw up a list of concrete effects to be achieved and the capabilities needed to do so.

While deterrent and defence might be said to be the two main functions of a threshold, I would argue that there are also four ancillary functions: marker, alarm bell, trip-wire, and barrier against hybrid threats.

Marker

The term threshold is sometimes used to signify a kind of signal, marker or red line, such as "this is a sovereign right that we will exercise, even if opposed", or "this is a national interest that we will uphold", or "that is a behaviour that we will not tolerate". This signalling can be directed at the adversary, at the own organisation or population, or at third parties.

Effects and capabilities

The effect one is looking for here is that the adversary, but also the home audience, as well as friends and allies, understand that this is an issue where we will stand our ground and that if anyone wishes to challenge us on this matter they had better be prepared for some kind of conflict. Thus it is also a signal of a will to escalate if need be. Here, will and communication are more salient factors than actual capabilities, though these also matter.

Manifestations of this in the physical world can typically be by a capability to maintain military presence in a contested or exposed area (such as the island of Gotland or the Falkland Islands), by participation in international exercises (such as BALTOPS), by patrolling or upholding the freedom of navigation over international waters, or by dispatching ships or aircraft to uphold territorial integrity. It can also be done in the abstract or cognitive world, by for example statements of intent or a decision to commit resources.

Alarm-bell or early warning

A threshold can also function as an alarm bell which alerts the defender, the own population and the outside world to the fact that an act of aggression is taking place. If placed well forward, such an alarm bell can also provide early warning.

Effects and capabilities

The effect one desires to achieve here is unambiguous and politically/publicly usable indication that an act of coercion or aggression is taking place, or about to take place. The capabilities needed for this would vary with the geopolitical circumstances, but could typically be the forward presence of troops or aircraft/ships, which will force the aggressor to attack them at an early stage in order to pursue his objectives. Less effective, but still useful, could be the capability to monitor the activities of the adversary in a manner which would unambiguously reveal hostile intent.

Trip-wire or trigger

By trip-wire one does not usually mean a mechanism that would make the aggressor stumble and fall (although this would also be relevant), but a mechanism that would trigger a reaction from other states (such as allies), drawing them into the fight on the defender's side.

Effects and capabilities

The effect one strives for here is that third parties to the conflict should consider that their own interests or reputation are at stake if the smaller state was successfully coerced or attacked, and thus come to the smaller state's assistance in some form.

The means (the term capabilities is an uneasy fit here) used for this purpose have traditionally been

- formal and informal alliances with mightier powers (collective defence);
- placing valuable foreign assets such as allied troops in the aggressor's path;
- making clear the negative effects for friendly/allied powers of a defeat for the small state;
- playing the "credibility card" against reluctant allies, as well as the application of soft power.⁷

History also clearly shows that the chances of actual outside help (as opposed to sympathy or pity) may vary very much depending on the international "mood" (cf. Bush Jr/Blair vs Obama/Cameron), but that the chances nonetheless increase if the victim stands his ground and puts up a spirited defence and gives the aggressor a bloody nose.

⁷ Collective security is theoretically another option, but it is thoroughly discredited since the 1930s, and again in 2008 and 2014.

Should the small state be successful in drawing in other powers on its side, there is an obvious need for a capability to receive military assistance and put this to effective use, meaning inter alia the infrastructure and the interoperability needed for this.

Barrier

A possible sixth function of a threshold has emerged in the wake of Russia's use of "hybrid" tactics in Ukraine and elsewhere recently. Arguably, such tactics are essentially a form of "salami tactics by proxy" intended to allow the aggressor to destabilise the target state, confuse third parties as to what is happening, and move his positions forward (physically or politically) without actions being attributed or triggering a forceful reaction from the defender or from his allies or partners. To somewhat mix metaphors, Russia's hybrid tactics are about sneaking under the "article 5 threshold".

Effects and capabilities

When faced with this threat, the defender's threshold (provided it is suitably configured) can have the effect of constituting a barrier against such attempts, thereby forcing the aggressor to either desist, or to resort to the open use of armed force. If he resorts to the use of open force he also moves up the ladder of escalation into what is clearly an armed attack and thus also is article 5 territory.

In order to achieve the effect of creating a barrier against such use of irregular, proxy, or non-attributable forces on the small state's territory, the small state needs the capability to closely monitor the situation (especially in vulnerable areas), to identify individuals and groups that might work for an adversary, and to track down and neutralise subversion and clandestine networks. There is also a need for good and uncorrupted police forces, which need back-up from paramilitary forces able to quickly identify contain and handle any attempts to sneak under the threshold.