The Origins of Collective Deterrence

what history tells us, and how the future might look like

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On 7th August, 2026, Mecca was back in the news, not because of the Hajj pilgrimage, but for something that changes the security architecture in West Asia. On that day, *Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan* signed the ***Makkah Joint Defence Agreement***. It is a trilateral mutual defence pact that establishes a "collective defence arrangement" under which an **attack on any one of the signatories would be considered as an attack on all** three combined. This type of arrangement is an example of a "collective deterrence" strategy, which has historical roots. To state clearly, collective deterrence is a military strategy that increases the cost of attacking for the aggressor, threatening a combined military response against any aggression.

How has this strategy played a role in warfare and military strategies of nations?

Does it always work?

What are the conditions for the success of collective deterrence?

For finding answers to these questions, let's see what history has to offer.

Security Dilemma & Alliance-based deterrence

Between 431 and 404 BCE, two Greek superpowers, namely **Athens** and **Sparta**, indulged in a 27-year-long war, which is now known as the **Peloponnesian War**.

Each side had developed its own capabilities and had allies in Greek city-states and the Peloponnese, respectively. In *History of the Peloponnesian War,* the ancient Greek historian **Thucydides** identifies the main cause of the conflict as :

"***The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta], made war inevitable.***"

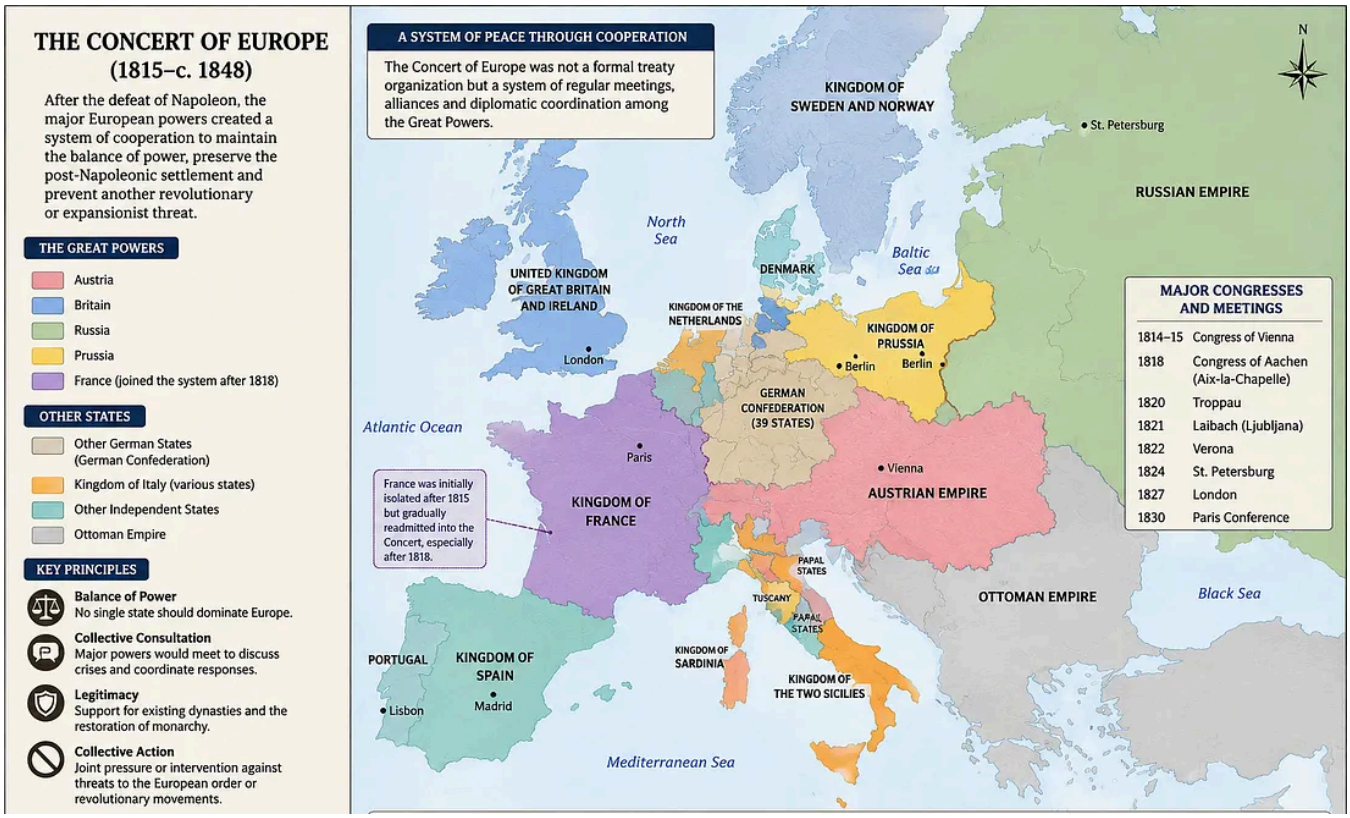
This is what the term "security dilemma" means, in context of modern international relations theory. When two alliances are wary of the rising power of the other, they enter into a security dilemma, creating a situation of conflict.

A security dilemma has the ability to push states towards collective deterrence.

When states enter into a security dilemma, they may **cooperate**, even out of fear, to form a credible deterrence and pave the way for stability. Another scenario is they trigger the formation of counter-alliances, enter an arms race, which eventually leads to mistrust and swiftly transitions into a war, i.e., results in an **escalation.** With these possibilities on the table, let's see how collective deterrence has continued to shape security architectures across the globe, even to this day.

European Security Architecture Before the First World War

Napoleon Bonaparte, the emperor of France, had succeeded in consolidating power in continental Europe, while other powers like Britain, Austria, and Prussia repeatedly tried to defeat France through separate coalitions. The victories of France in the Napoleonic Wars that preceded the Battle of Waterloo can be attributed to the absence of unified resistance by other European powers. The situation changed drastically after his invasion of Russia in 1812, in which the allied forces (Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria) collectively coordinated against France. In the War of the Sixth Coalition (1813–1814), they defeated Napoleon at Leipzig, captured Paris, and exiled him to Elba. In 1815, after the first successful test of their collective military response, the allied powers attempted to prevent another similar French domination over Europe by the creation of the ***Quadruple Alliance,*** which was a commitment to maintain post-Napoleonic settlements. The combined military and political power of the four powers made another Napoleonic-style challenge much more difficult. The agreement further evolved into the ***Concert of Europe,*** which was a broader system of great-power **cooperation**.



But the established cooperation didn't last long enough. After agreeing to preserve the European balance through cooperation, they increasingly developed conflicting national interests. In the Crimean War (1853–56), Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire fought against Russia. Further, the German and Italian unifications till 1871 altered the European balance of power. As 1882 neared, Europe had the ***Triple Alliance*** between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. In 1894, Russia subsequently moved closer to France, resulting in the *Franco-Russian alliance*. The changing power equations in Europe brought Britain closer to France through the *Entente Cordiale in 1904* and to Russia through the *Anglo-Russian Entente in 1907*. Together with France, Russia, and Britain, this produced the **Triple Entente**.

Now Europe increasingly looked like:

Triple Alliance
Germany — Austria-Hungary — Italy

vs.

Triple Entente
France — Russia — Britain

As 1914 neared, events like the Bosnian crisis (1908–09) and the Balkan wars (1912–13) intensified pre-existing suspicions and polarised the alliances even more.

The Trigger

On June 28, 1914, Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary blamed and then declared war on Serbia shortly afterwards. Then, the already existing alliance system came into picture, which eventually resulted in the First World War (1914–1918).

Until the formation of the Concert of Europe, collective deterrence was looked at as a force for good, a means of cooperation and collective security. But diverging national interests and regional rivalries led to the collapse of cooperation focused system, eventually into the First World War. As cooperation turned into escalation, it highlights both the strength and fragility of collective deterrence frameworks.

Aftermath of WW1

The failure of 1914 made one thing clear, i.e., if there are rival security arrangements that eventually do become sources of mutual distrust, alliances can never guarantee peace. The victors then tried to tackle an interesting question :

Could collective security be organised in a manner that prevented the emergence of competing blocs?

A temporary solution to this question was worked upon when the ***League of Nations*** was formed in 1920 by the Paris Peace Conference. More importantly, the goal had shifted from competitive alliances to **maintaining world peace through collective security**. For a while, the world looked like a quiet place. But this was the silence before the storm.

The Cracks Appear

The League of Nations had many members, but three among them tested its integrity. These were Germany, Italy, and Japan. The same countries that were known as the Axis Powers in the Second World War. Why did the League of Nations fail to prevent another global conflict?

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and established a puppet state of Manchukuo. It was precisely the kind of aggression the League of Nations was supposed to discourage. The League of Nations responded by establishing the Lytton Commission to investigate. But the investigation and deliberation took a long time. In the end, the League's eventual response was to refuse the recognition of Manchukuo. Japan ultimately withdrew from the League. The message conveyed was :

Deterrence and consequences may take months or years to have intended effects.

This was a condemnation without the rapid deployment of forces.

Another major test of the League's resolve came in 1935, as Italy under Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, which was a member of the League. This was a perfect test:

Will the League defend one of its member states against an external aggressor?

In response, the League imposed economic sanctions on Italy. Important measures such as an oil embargo weren't imposed, and the Suez Canal remained open to Italian shipping. The League's response was limited to formal sanctions and lacked concrete consequences for Italy. In the end, Italy conquered Ethiopia. A major dilemma confronted the members of the League :

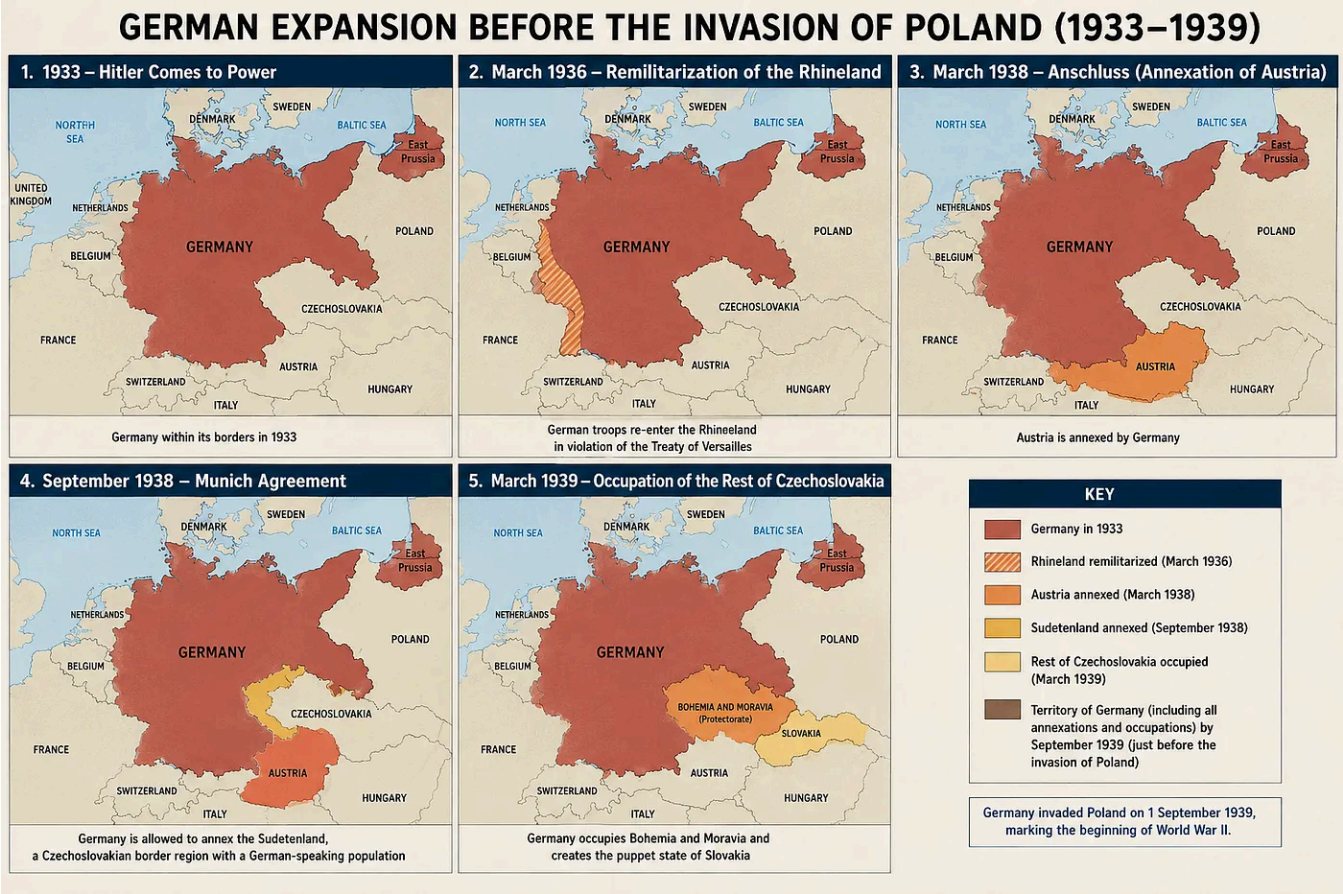
If collective security cannot protect a member from an invading great power, why should other states trust it?

Germany was watching closely.

The Road to World War II

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany, he withdrew from the League in 1933. The single most important deterrence test of the League came when he ordered German troops into the Rhineland in 1936. Britain and France condemned the move but did not intervene militarily. He learnt an important lesson here:

The Western powers may possess the capability to stop German expansion, but they may not possess the political will to use it.



Unwilling to get involved in another major European conflict, Britain and France tried to accommodate some German demands rather than confronting Hitler militarily. But each step he took further strengthened his resolve to test Britain and France to their limits. In 1938, Germany annexed Austria. There was no effective military response. Hitler then demanded Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in the same year, to which Britain and France agreed. The limits had been reached when Germany invaded Poland in 1939, which triggered the Second World War, as Britain and France declared war on Germany soon after. This lasted till 1945, when Japan surrendered to the Allied Powers after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were reduced to ruins.

The Shifting Nature of Collective Deterrence

After the devastation caused by WWII, Europe had to rethink its strategy, as it clearly failed even after the formation of the League of Nations. What they needed was an understanding among themselves to deter any foreign aggression decisively. The opportunity arrived when the Soviet Union blocked Western land and water access to West Berlin. The US and Britain responded with the Berlin Airlift, in which they supplied resources to West Berlin by air. Their response demonstrated that:

We are willing to bear substantial costs to maintain our position in Berlin.

The blockade was lifted in May 1949, and the crisis was a major demonstration of Western resolve immediately before NATO's creation. That is essentially **deterrence through resolve and capability**. This was a major shift from the League of Nations that led to the ***formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation*** in 1949.

NATO: A Post-WW2 Experiment

With the formation of NATO, Europe had shifted from a system of inadequate sanctions to a formal military obligation under the famous Article 5, that states:

An armed attack against one NATO member shall be considered an attack against them all.

For the first time, there was a substantive level of American military presence in various locations across Europe. Unlike the League of Nations, European security was now backed with American power. Factors like integrated military planning, joint exercises, robust interoperability and perhaps more influentially, ***nuclear weapons*** had shifted the consequences for any aggressor. The risk of "*mutually assured destruction*" eventually compelled the cold war rivals to de-escalate during the Cuban Missile Crisis in which an understanding was reached between the US and Soviet Union. The Soviet Union never launched a major military attack against NATO during the Cold War. The measures taken by NATO members after 1949 played a crucial role in avoiding another global conflict, at least for a while.



NATO Members During the Cold War

The Paradox of Collective Deterrence

After the Cold War ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO's resolve of collective deterrence as a strategy lost it's purpose. There was no major

aggressor to deter. But building on to the momentum they had gained throughout the Cold War, NATO kept moving eastwards slowly, one member at a time. This created a *security dilemma* for Russia. The maps show NATO members during and after the cold war:



This security dilemma is perhaps one of the many reasons of Russian actions in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014) and in Ukraine (2022). Since 1991, NATO has gradually inducted nearly all major Russian neighbours, only except Belarus and Ukraine. This can be an outcome when collective deterrence continues without an aggressor in the first place.

How does the future look like ?

From the alliances of ancient Greece, the Concert of Europe, League of Nations and finally to NATO, history offers no clear verdict on collective deterrence. What it offers rather are the conditions for collective deterrence to effectively function. One lesson that emerges from above analysis is:

Collective strength is only as effective as the credibility, cohesion and political will behind it.

With the conflict in Iran unresolved, it would be premature to enlist the strengths and weaknesses of the ***Makkah Joint Defence Agreement*** that came into effect

recently. What remains to be seen is how factors like interoperability, mutual arrangements and conflicting national interests play a role in an increasingly fragile security in the Middle East.



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