Deterrence seeks to prevent undesired behaviour by convincing those who might contemplate it that the probable cost will exceed the anticipated gain. Although deterrence is an ancient strategy, it has assumed special prominence in the nuclear age, where the purpose of military establishments has increasingly become preventing instead of winning wars.

Deterrence theory and strategy have gained widespread acceptance for intellectual, political, and psychological reasons. But the propositions of nuclear deterrence theory have never been subjected to the usual empirical testing prescribed by social science. This is in large part due to the absence of reliable evidence of the calculations and decisions of Soviet and Chinese policymakers.

Deprived of good data, scholars have turned to the study of conventional deterrence, which seeks to prevent the use of force by non-nuclear threats. The pioneering empirical study of conventional deterrence, by Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, was published in 1974. Building on the work of George and Smoke, other scholars have sought to test deterrence theory and strategy by detailed case studies and statistical analyses of a large number of cases.

The monograph begins with a review of the selection and coding of data used by prominent studies of deterrence and identifies their conceptual and empirical inadequacies. The authors then build on this critique to reformulate deterrence theory and elaborate a research programme to test its propositions.