

Nuclear Weapons and Military Preparedness in the Asia-Pacific

By

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The United States is not militarily prepared to deter conflict with China over Taiwan. Whilst American military power in the Asia-Pacific is formidable, the sheer logistical challenges of deterrence with conventional forces in a multipolar maritime theater fundamentally undermine the United States' preparedness to fight and defeat a People's Republic of China (PRC) assault on Taiwan.

Alternatively, credible deterrence may be more readily achieved through the threat of low-yield nuclear weapons actively dispersed throughout the Asia-Pacific. Specifically, it is achieved through the threat of nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) deployed aboard American submarines. However, the risk of nuclear escalation and the undisclosed conditions under which Xi Jinping could use force need to be factored into American deterrence posture. These conditions likely include [any attempts to introduce nuclear weapons into the Taiwan issue and any American security guarantees for the self-governing island.](#)

Preparedness is not a well-covered concept in academic literature and is therefore not as well understood by most civilian strategic thinkers. It is chiefly a military concept for thinking about force generation and deployment. Preparedness is the sustainable capacity to apply capabilities to accomplish government-directed tasks over time. It is composed of readiness and sustainability. Readiness is the ability of a capability to be applied to a specific activity within a nominated time frame for a specified period of time to achieve a desired effect. Sustainability is the ability of a force to maintain the necessary level of combat power for the duration required to achieve its objectives.

There is a fundamental difference between conventional and nuclear preparedness. Conventional forces for theater missions need significant time for mobilization and deployment to signal intent. In contrast, nuclear-armed forces are always "on," that is deterrence of some form is already operational and credibly signalling intent. Nuclear deterrence provides an operational level of capability (O-LOC) that is readily useable and presents the immediate threat of devastating damage, as opposed to unready conventional deterrence.

Conventional deterrence has significant inadequacies, as Richard K. Betts kindly points out. First, success in conventional operations is likely to be overestimated due to uncertainty in the balance of forces, political constraints, and conditions of engagement. Second, an extreme imbalance of forces is critical to successful outcomes of the initial phase. Third, the deterrence factor of military capabilities depends on political factors, namely the motives and beliefs of the adversary. Fourth, extremely high confidence in conventional options is required to provide the same level of deterrence as the threat of nuclear retaliation. Finally, conventional deterrence raises the risk of escalation to nuclear war. The United States' Asia-Pacific deterrence posture must factor these shortfalls of conventional deterrence, especially when further undermined by the momentous logistical challenges associated with operating in a vast Asia-Pacific maritime environment.

During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were integral to American and allied preparedness. Credible and reliable deterrence in the Cold War can be attributed to McNamara's [resilient, flexible, and survivable](#) American forces. Continuous nuclear modernization programs throughout the Cold War generated large numbers of strategic platforms and weapons that enabled adaptability in American force development and plans. The Cold War also highlighted the importance of a viable industrial infrastructure that is

required to produce strategic forces and provide deterrence, assurance, dissuasion, and damage limitation.

As the Cold War competition ended, the US and Russia gradually decreased their sizeable and diverse nuclear arsenals. [From 1987 to 2005](#), arms control treaties played a central role in reducing nuclear arsenals. Many in the West believed that nuclear deterrence was a thing of the past.

However, this decline in the American arsenal presents a problem today. There is a renaissance in geopolitical competition, and the US now faces two nuclear-armed peers—China and Russia. Although, China’s growing military challenge to regional stability was obvious for some time, it is only in the past few years that the US acknowledged China as a peer competitor. In addition to Russia threatening the use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine, China is diversifying and increasing its nuclear arsenal, presumably in an attempt to gain parity with the US and undermine overall American deterrence and extended deterrence capabilities. It was American nuclear preparedness that helped keep the Cold War cold.

Russia and China are substantially increasing their nuclear preparedness. The US and its allies must acknowledge this reality and adjust, with credible options, their nuclear preparedness. This is especially true in relation to the concept of [extended deterrence in the Asia-Pacific, which never got nearly enough attention as Europe did during the](#) Cold War.

However, there is a lack of credible confirmation that the US still views nuclear weapons as a central pillar of deterrence and strategic ambiguity, especially in the Asia-Pacific. In fact, there is quite the opposite with the introduction of “integrated deterrence” in 2022. This concept (which is really just a buzzword) of integrated deterrence actually minimizes the role of nuclear weapons in American grand strategy. The concept has negative implications for preparedness posture settings in the Asia-Pacific that are necessary to deter and defeat PRC aggression against Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

This compares to Western Europe during the Cold War, which was never satisfied with purely conventional deterrence and wanted American nuclear weapons to provide immediate, reliable, and credible deterrence. The US and its allies must consider the sheer logistical difficulties of conventional deterrence in a maritime environment as vast as the Asia-Pacific. Logistical challenges for conventional deterrence over significant and contested distances, including tasks to guarantee prompt replenishment of disabled combat ships, establish defensive perimeters for fleet support and ensure the safety of fleet replenishment oilers and dry-cargo/ammunition supply ships. Furthermore, significant budget constraints since 2013, coupled with longer-term financial and industrial base uncertainty, raise significant [questions about the future of the US Navy’s long-term ability to project power and maintain sea-control](#) (as opposed to sea-denial) in the Asia-Pacific region.

Europe was, and remains, one single geostrategic entity connected by land. Thus, collective deterrence was relatively easy. Whereas, in the Asia-Pacific, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan are significantly more dispersed and separated by long sea-lines-of-communication, with neutral and non-aligned states dotted between them. American forces will need to move significant numbers of vessels, aircraft, troops, supplies, and munitions across these vastly dispersed and contested distances.

There is also the difficulty of concentrating large numbers of strike aircraft at locations other than on aircraft carriers. Whereas, penetrating long-range stealth bombers may offer an advantage because of their range, they may not be sufficient to perform all warfighting and deterrence tasks.

A lack of diverse permanent bases on allied soil greatly increases the demands and stress on an aerial fleet and the logistics involved in keeping American forces adequately supplied. It also makes for significantly longer transit times for ships and submarines to and from distant resupply points. Submarines and many surface combatants are currently unable

to replenish their missile magazines without sailing back to the United States. Indeed, it is only now that American planners are starting to think very seriously about the logistics and operational issues of extended deterrence in Asia, which were never given much attention because American seapower in this region was never contested.

As the earlier discussion illustrates, significant logistical challenges associated with conventional deterrence in a maritime environment as vast as the Asia-Pacific call into question reliance on conventional systems to deter aggression at different rungs of the escalation ladder. Low-yield nuclear weapons, such as the SLCM-N, are the most likely solution to the deterrence credibility challenge. An American—and allied—deterrence posture that poses the problem of nuclear escalation in the Asia-Pacific is likely to [credibly deter Chinese nuclear escalation](#). Absent such an effort, China may see the opportunity President Xi is looking for.

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