

Integrated Deterrence: Which of These Two Words Is More Important?

By

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At a 2002 workshop organized by the United States Air Force to examine surveillance and reconnaissance needs for a then-new War on Terrorism, one attendee proclaimed, “What we need is intergalactic, all-domain, comprehensive situational awareness across the past, present, and future.” While speaking tongue and cheek, it was hard to disagree with that sentiment. Who would not want a military equipped with such capability? What made this recommendation especially unhelpful was that it did not identify targeted solutions for immediate problems.

In a security climate where problems must be tackled in weeks, months, or a year rather than decades or centuries, decision-makers need to prioritize and focus on end-states that are delivered in a finite time horizon with a limited budget and achievable outcomes. [*A Sum Greater Than Its Parts: Integrated Deterrence and Strategic Competition*](#), a recent report by MITRE and the Aspen Strategy Group, addresses this issue.

The abstract is promising, claiming that integrated deterrence offers a strategy for “managing strategic competition, maintaining peace, and, if necessary, prevailing in conflict” during competition with China. The report also promises “actionable recommendations for policymakers, military leaders and private sector stakeholders” and delivers a laundry list of 31 major initiatives to enhance deterrence.

While a few of the recommended initiatives are sensible and would be useful for deterring China, like modernizing military capabilities to provide assurance and demonstrate resolve, several others are unproven and their implementation could distract from a laser-focused deterrence strategy needed for China. [Indo-Pacific nations are acutely affected on a regular basis](#), either by economic coercion or the looming possibility of conflict over Taiwan or other [contested territory](#). As a result, effective deterrence of China’s increasingly aggressive and coercive behavior must initially rely upon regional solutions to limit China’s most dangerous ambitions.

For a document proposing a China strategy, there is a strange obsession with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European issues. The term NATO appears nine times in the report, including a recommendation to consider internal dynamics in the alliance, while front-line allies in the Indo-Pacific that are key to deterrence (Australia, Japan, and South Korea) are mentioned as mere afterthoughts.

While there are good reasons to consider NATO, as part of any [global strategy that includes deterring Russia](#), the emphasis on NATO seems misplaced given likely targets of Chinese aggression. The report also focused a large set of recommendations on developing public-private partnerships for deterrence, going as far as to “encourage all companies from allied nations to actively participate in strategic initiatives.” While portions of the private sector play a critical role in national security initiatives, it is unclear how a restaurant owner in Latvia could actively contribute to deterring Chinese aggression, for example.

Another group of recommendations suggests the broader use of economic levers including the use of “economic warfare” to undermine an adversary’s willingness to wage war. This ignores the fact that a broad range of economic measures aimed at isolating Russia had a [limited impact on the Russian economy](#) and proved to be an abject failure in deterring Russia’s

invasion of Ukraine. The utility of economic sanctions in deterring adversaries has [historically proven](#) to be questionable. One study shows the use of sanctions leads to a higher probability of future conflict for democracies, as sanctions tend to signal weakness rather than strength. The utility of economic sanctions and other types of economic warfare to deter remains unproven.

The final grouping of recommendations in the report proved the most useful, suggesting that we must understand the adversary, define clear objectives, and build a grand strategy to win a strategic competition with China. MITRE needed to lead with clear objectives and an understanding of China's goals and decision calculus. Instead, a long list of potential actions that *might* deter China is presented without sufficient links to China's objectives. Rather than utilizing a [strategy-to-task](#) framework that links ways and means to the ends in a logical fashion, the report presents a broad range of ways and means primarily focused on integration.

Allies and diplomatic measures should play a crucial role in the realization of integrated deterrence, but policymakers must have clear and pragmatic options available. Prioritization of resources and initiatives to maximize deterrence requires a strong appreciation for the Indo-Pacific region, its unique dynamics, and China's role in the region. Allies and partners must work bi-laterally and multi-laterally to [operationalize deterrence](#) in the region.

China is a significant and well-resourced adversary. To compete with and deter China effectively, the United States and its allies must be thoughtful about what initiatives are pursued and what resources are expended. Integration can improve outcomes, but only when it improves outcomes as part of a unified deterrence strategy. In a world where deterrence of China is urgently required, proven and effective measures that deliver deterrence must be brought together under a unifying strategy. This is the type of integration which should be implemented.

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