

Nuclear Challenges: Inhibition and Extended Deterrence

By

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An American [grand strategy of inhibition](#), characterized by efforts to curtail the spread of independent nuclear weapons programs, has long been a cornerstone of American foreign policy. Rooted in the belief that preventing nuclear proliferation is essential for global security, this strategy led the United States to employ a range of tactics, including diplomatic negotiations, economic incentives, and even coercive measures, to dissuade states from acquiring nuclear weapons. Recent debates over the [credibility of American extended deterrence](#) raise questions about the sustainability of this strategy.

Central to the concept of inhibition is the idea that the US is willing to go to great lengths to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons, even at the expense of strained diplomatic relations or the imposition of sanctions. This commitment was evident in American interactions with both adversaries and allies, as seen in its efforts to dissuade countries like [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#) from pursuing nuclear weapons. Inhibition failed in the latter case and may soon fail in the former, but the lack of proliferation by American allies are cases of success.

The Pragmatic Approach of Inhibition

Historically, the United States was always willing to engage with other nuclear powers, even adversaries such as the Soviet Union, to advance shared inhibition goals. The 1963 [Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#) discussed by both the United States and Soviet Union before and after the Cuban Missile Crisis, was understood as an inhibition tool. As [Marc Trachtenberg](#) notes,

A test ban, the Soviets would be told, would mean that “there would be no additional nuclear powers in our camp.” The Russians, for their part, would prevent allies from building nuclear forces. And these commitments would be linked: the United States would “take responsibility in respect to non-dissemination with relation to those powers associated with it, if the Soviet Union is willing to take a corresponding obligation for the powers with which it is associated.”

This pragmatic approach, characterized by a mix of cooperation and competition, highlights the adaptability of the inhibition strategy in the face of evolving geopolitical dynamics. Ultimately, the US is willing to work with either friend or foe, to pressure, coerce, and threaten nascent nuclear states, to include both allies and adversaries, to keep them non-nuclear.

The Role of Extended Nuclear Deterrence

[Extended nuclear deterrence](#), a key component of American grand strategy, refers to the United States’ commitment to defend its allies with nuclear weapons, if necessary. This commitment serves as a crucial aspect of the security assurances provided by the US to its allies under the [nuclear umbrella](#), reinforcing the broader framework of alliances that underpin global

security. However, the credibility of American extended nuclear deterrence is under [scrutiny](#), particularly in light of doubts about the United States' willingness to prioritize the defense of its allies over its own interests.

The United States' willingness to trade Los Angeles for Seoul, for example, raises concerns about the reliability of American security assurances and the potential impact on its inhibition efforts. Such doubts not only affect the perception of American commitment to its allies but also raise concerns about the effectiveness of extended deterrence in supporting the broader strategy of inhibition. As such, ensuring the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence is crucial for maintaining global stability and preventing nuclear proliferation.

Reevaluating Kenneth Waltz's Proposition

[Kenneth Waltz's](#) proposition that more nuclear states can lead to a safer world raises profound questions about the nature of nuclear deterrence and international security. In a world where [South Korea](#) is concerned about American security commitments, they may consider proliferating nuclear weapons to ensure they have a credible deterrent against North Korea. They may come to the belief that more is better and develop their own nuclear arsenal in hopes of obtaining more security. However, the complexities of nuclear proliferation and the risks associated with additional nuclear-armed states suggests that Waltz's argument may not hold true. The proliferation of nuclear weapons introduces uncertainties and escalatory risks that could destabilize regions and increase the risk of nuclear conflict rather than decrease the risk.

A scenario in which South Korea acquires nuclear weapons could potentially strengthen North Korea's resolve to consider early nuclear weapons use in conflict, compensating for weaknesses in its conventional military capability. This is precisely the kind of hypothetical situation that prompted the United States to adopt a policy of extended deterrence alongside the grand strategy of inhibition. There is a [concern](#) that when the US (or any nuclear state) faces an adversary lacking parity in escalation capabilities, that adversary might resort to early nuclear weapons use to compensate for strategic shortcomings. However, testing an American response to nuclear attack is a risky endeavor fraught with the possibility of further escalation.

Sustaining the Strategy of Inhibition

Instead of advocating for a proliferation-friendly approach, it is imperative for the United States and the international community to continue their efforts to inhibit nuclear proliferation. This includes diplomatic engagement, economic incentives, and, when necessary, coercive measures to dissuade states from acquiring nuclear weapons. The [risks of nuclear proliferation](#) far outweigh any potential benefits, and concerted efforts to prevent it remain essential for global security and stability.

Despite these challenges, the sustainability of the inhibition strategy remains feasible. The key lies in reaffirming American commitment to its allies and maintaining a credible deterrence posture. This requires not only a clear and consistent articulation of American security guarantees but also investments in conventional military capabilities and diplomatic efforts to address the underlying security concerns of allies. The US must continue to craft convincing strategic narratives regarding its commitment to allied security via maintaining escalation dominance, nuclear superiority, and narrative control.

Furthermore, the US can leverage its alliances and partnerships to reinforce norms against nuclear proliferation. By working closely with its allies and engaging with potential nuclear aspirants through dialogue and diplomacy, the US can continue to promote the goals of inhibition while ensuring the credibility of its extended nuclear deterrence.

Conclusion: Upholding the Principles of Inhibition

The United States' grand strategy of inhibition is a linchpin of American foreign policy and is rooted in the belief that preventing nuclear proliferation is crucial for global security. While recent debates on the credibility of American extended deterrence raise valid concerns, the strategy of inhibition remains not only relevant but imperative in today's world.

The risks posed by nuclear proliferation far outweigh any perceived benefits, making it essential for the US and the international community to continue their efforts to inhibit nuclear proliferation. By reaffirming its commitment to allies, maintaining credible deterrence, and engaging diplomatically with potential proliferators, the US can uphold the principles of inhibition and mitigate the risks associated with nuclear proliferation. In doing so, the US will not only safeguard its own security but also contribute to a safer and more stable world.

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