

## American Legitimacy and Integrated Deterrence

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As the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture argued in its October 2023 [report](#), the United States neglected to sustain political [legitimacy](#) through a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape by allowing the nation's nuclear deterrent to degrade over the past three decades, despite the clear resurgence of Russia, China, and North Korea. [Integrated deterrence](#), a cornerstone of the Biden administration's defense strategy, is a multifaceted approach aimed at preventing conflict and coercion by combining military might with diplomatic, economic, and informational tools. While this strategy may hold promise for addressing some of the complex security challenges of the decades ahead, it also presents significant risks and uncertainties.

Indeed, while integrated deterrence recognizes that military force alone is often insufficient to deter adversaries in today's interconnected world by incorporating diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and information operations, it also aims to create a more comprehensive and resilient extended deterrent posture emphasizing strengthening alliances and partnerships, recognizing that collective action can amplify deterrence effects. This approach can certainly help pool resources, share intelligence, and coordinate responses to threats, making aggression less appealing to potential adversaries.

Though integrated deterrence outlines a comprehensive strategy, the complexities of integrating diverse tools and actors across multiple domains can be incredibly challenging. Coordinating actions between military, diplomatic, economic, and informational agencies require seamless communication, shared goals, and a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Even then, it still may not work. It is arguable that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was the first example of integrated deterrence's failure.

Prioritizing non-military tools within an integrated deterrence strategy can mitigate the risk of escalation and unintended conflict while providing proportionate responses to aggression, potentially avoiding the need for military force. Despite the application of various non-military measures, Russia was not dissuaded from its invasion, demonstrating the limitations of this approach in altering aggressive behavior when considering the impacts on Russia's political influence, economic stability, and military capabilities. Economic sanctions against Russia over the past two years are proving an abject failure, as are diplomatic efforts to isolate Russia.

The effectiveness of an integrated deterrence strategy hinges on the same factor as previous and long-standing deterrence strategies—the ability to credibly threaten and, if necessary, impose meaningful costs on adversaries. This is difficult to achieve, especially when dealing with adversaries who are willing to tolerate economic pain, information warfare, or other non-kinetic actions.

At its core, integrated deterrence is designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing the US to tailor its response to specific threats and adversaries. Theoretically, this can make it more effective than traditional deterrence, but there is little evidence to support the theory. In fact, integrated deterrence has been successful at extending the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and has utterly failed to restore deterrence with Russia. Russia's nuclear threats have proven more successful in deterring American and European intervention on behalf of Ukraine.

The complexity of integrated deterrence leaves it prone to miscalculation and misinterpretation, as adversaries may perceive certain actions as escalatory or provocative. This can lead to unintended consequences and increase the risk of conflict, rather than supporting deterrence. Implementing integrated deterrence requires significant resources and investment across multiple domains. This can strain budgets and create competition for resources between different agencies and priorities.

Alliances, a [crucial aspect](#) of integrated deterrence, are important, but relying too heavily on them for deterrence can create vulnerabilities if allies are unwilling or unable to meaningfully contribute capability. This undermines the credibility of the overall deterrent effort. The shift to integrated deterrence as a preferred strategy for discouraging aggression against the interests and allies of the United States has seemingly positioned Russia and China in an advantageous position to seize a small window of opportunity to reshape the global power dynamic, while potentially creating the opportunity for states such as North Korea and Iran to extend their regional objectives beyond words.

Alternative strategies to integrated deterrence could focus on revitalizing traditional military capabilities while fostering deeper diplomatic ties with allies. Bolstering conventional forces and modernizing nuclear arsenals can serve as a powerful deterrent by signaling a nation's willingness and ability to defend its interests. Simultaneously, strengthening alliances and partnerships through information sharing, joint military exercises, and technology cooperation can create a united front against potential adversaries.

This multifaceted approach, combining hard power with robust alliances, may prove more effective in deterring aggression than relying solely on economic or informational tools. Moreover, a renewed focus on arms control agreements could reduce the risk of miscalculation and escalation, contributing to a more stable security environment. Ultimately, a balanced strategy that leverages military might, diplomatic cooperation, and arms control measures could offer a more comprehensive and robust approach to deterring aggression in the 21st century.

Time will tell if the choice to apply a strategy of integrated deterrence convincingly reinforces the all too important “[will](#)” necessary for any effective deterrence strategy or it results in the United States grossly miscalculating its ability to deter with non-military and non-nuclear means. If the Biden administration is wrong, American interests around the world will suffer greatly.

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