

Beyond a Pacific Defense Pact 3: A Nuclear Alliance as the Ultimate Backstop to Grey Zone Coercion

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Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific increasingly occurs in the grey zone, the space between routine statecraft and open armed conflict. China, North Korea, Russia, and Iran employ a range of coercive tactics designed to alter the strategic environment without triggering a conventional military response. These activities include cyber operations, maritime harassment, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, and limited military provocations. Because these actions remain deliberately below the threshold of war, they often exploit the reluctance of states to respond with force. As grey zone competition intensifies, the question confronting policymakers is not only how to deter such activities, but also how to ensure that responses to them are credible. In this context, a nuclear alliance could serve as the ultimate strategic backstop for military responses to persistent grey zone coercion.

Grey zone strategies rely heavily on ambiguity and escalation management. The states that employ these tactics understand that their adversaries—particularly democratic states—are cautious about escalating disputes into major military confrontations. By operating just below the threshold of armed conflict, grey zone actors seek to [gradually erode](#) the strategic position of their opponents while avoiding a decisive response. Maritime coercion in disputed waters, persistent airspace incursions, cyber intrusions, and limited military demonstrations all serve this purpose. Over time, these actions can reshape the operational environment, undermine alliances, and weaken the credibility of deterrence.

The difficulty lies in crafting responses that are both proportionate and credible. Conventional military responses to grey zone activities risk escalating a crisis if they are perceived as excessive, yet insufficient responses can embolden further coercion. This dilemma has led analysts to argue that deterrence in the grey zone requires a layered approach that combines political, economic, and military tools. However, even robust conventional responses may prove insufficient if adversaries believe that [escalation dominance](#) ultimately rests in their favor. It is in this context that nuclear deterrence retains enduring strategic relevance.

A nuclear alliance would not be designed to deter grey zone activities directly. Nuclear weapons are instruments of last resort intended to deter existential threats and large-scale conventional aggression. Nevertheless, the [presence of a credible nuclear backstop](#) fundamentally shapes the broader strategic environment in which grey zone competition occurs. By reinforcing the credibility of allied military responses, nuclear deterrence can prevent grey zone crises from escalating into major wars while simultaneously discouraging adversaries from testing the limits of conventional deterrence.

In practical terms, a nuclear alliance would strengthen escalation management in the Indo-Pacific. If regional states believed that their security rested on a collective nuclear deterrent, they would be better positioned to respond firmly to grey zone provocations. Maritime patrols, cyber countermeasures, and limited military deployments could be undertaken with greater confidence that adversaries would [hesitate to escalate](#) beyond the conventional level.

In this sense, nuclear deterrence functions as a strategic umbrella under which lower-level military responses can occur without triggering uncontrolled escalation.

The experience of the Cold War offers a useful historical precedent. During that period, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization relied on nuclear deterrence to [prevent large-scale aggression](#) by the Soviet Union while simultaneously engaging in conventional competition across multiple domains. Although grey zone tactics—including espionage, proxy conflicts, and political interference—were common, the presence of a credible nuclear deterrent helped ensure that such competition did not escalate into direct war between nuclear powers. A similar logic could apply in the Indo-Pacific today.

In the contemporary regional context, a nuclear alliance could involve close coordination among the United States and key Indo-Pacific partners. Such an arrangement would not necessarily require the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Instead, it could mirror [existing extended deterrence frameworks](#) in which nuclear-armed states provide security guarantees to non-nuclear allies while maintaining operational control over nuclear forces. Through mechanisms such as joint planning, strategic consultation, and integrated command structures, allied states could strengthen the credibility of collective deterrence without undermining existing non-proliferation commitments.

Importantly, a nuclear backstop would also reinforce political resolve among allied states. Grey zone strategies often aim to exploit divisions within alliances by testing whether partners will [respond collectively](#) to incremental coercion. If adversaries perceive hesitation or disunity, they may conclude that the risks of escalation are manageable. A formal nuclear alliance could signal a high level of strategic commitment among participating states, thereby increasing the perceived costs of continued grey zone pressure.

Critics may argue that linking nuclear deterrence to grey zone competition risks lowering the nuclear threshold or introducing unnecessary escalation dynamics. These concerns highlight the importance of clearly [defining the role of nuclear weapons](#) within a broader deterrence framework. The objective would not be to threaten nuclear retaliation for minor provocations, but rather to ensure that adversaries understand that attempts to escalate beyond the grey zone could encounter a unified and credible deterrent response. In this sense, nuclear deterrence functions as a stabilizing force that sets clear limits on how far coercion can be pushed.

As the Indo-Pacific becomes the central arena of strategic competition, the persistence of grey zone tactics will continue to test existing security arrangements. States that rely solely on conventional responses may find themselves [locked in a cycle of incremental coercion](#) that gradually shifts the balance of power. By contrast, a nuclear alliance would provide a strategic foundation that reinforces the credibility of allied military responses across the escalation spectrum.

Ultimately, understanding grey zone actors and the tactics they employ is essential for effective deterrence. Yet deterrence also requires credible escalation management and the assurance that adversaries cannot exploit the space between peace and war indefinitely. In the Indo-Pacific, a carefully structured nuclear alliance could provide the strategic backstop necessary to ensure that responses to grey zone coercion remain both credible and effective while preventing escalation into catastrophic conflict.

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