

Beyond a Pacific Defense Pact 4: Blueprint for an Indo-Pacific Nuclear Alliance

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The Indo-Pacific is rapidly emerging as the central theatre of global strategic competition. Unlike the Cold War in Europe, where nuclear deterrence involved two superpowers across relatively defined front lines, the Indo-Pacific presents a far more complex landscape. The region spans vast maritime distances, multiple potential flashpoints, and several nuclear-armed adversaries. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear and missile programs, China is [rapidly increasing](#) both the size and sophistication of its arsenal, and Russia maintains nuclear capabilities alongside a growing strategic presence in the Pacific.

In such an environment, the [traditional model](#) of extended deterrence, where the United States alone provides nuclear protection to its allies, may not be sufficient to address the scale and diversity of contingencies across the region. A new framework may be required, an Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance built on shared responsibility, distributed deterrence, and sovereign nuclear capabilities among key allies.

Complicating the adversary: The logic of distributed deterrence

At the core of such an alliance would ideally be sovereign nuclear deterrents for Australia, Japan, and South Korea. This model would resemble the role of the United Kingdom and France within NATO. Both maintain [independent nuclear forces](#) and sovereign decision-making, while contributing to the alliance's broader deterrence posture.

Applying this model to the Indo-Pacific would significantly strengthen deterrence. If Australia, Japan, and South Korea each possessed sovereign nuclear capabilities, adversaries would face a far more complex strategic calculus. Rather than confronting a single decision-maker in Washington, they would [need to account for multiple independent governments](#) capable of responding to aggression.

This distributed architecture would complicate adversary planning and raise escalation risks. Any state considering coercion or military action against an Indo-Pacific democracy would have to account not only for the United States, but for several nuclear-capable regional powers with distinct strategic interests and decision-making processes.

Geography reinforces this logic. The Indo-Pacific spans an [immense area](#), from the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean approaches to Australia. The sheer distance between these theatres makes a purely centralized deterrence model increasingly difficult to sustain.

Flexible Deterrence through forward deployment and hosting

An Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance would therefore require forward deployment and hosting arrangements across the region. Australia, Japan, and South Korea could host a range of nuclear capabilities designed to provide flexible deterrent options across multiple contingencies.

These could include submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM-N) on Ohio- and Columbia-class submarines; nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) on Virginia- and [AUKUS-class](#) submarines; B83 gravity bombs for platforms such as the B-2 Spirit and B-21 Raider, alongside the rearming of the B-52 Stratofortress and B-1B Lancer; B61 nuclear bombs for the B61 nuclear bombs for aircraft including the B-2, B-21, B-52, and F-35A Lightning II; and Long-Range Stand-Off (LRSO-N) nuclear cruise missiles for the B-21 and B-52. In addition, nuclear warheads could be assigned to land-based, mobile intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers.

By dispersing these capabilities across multiple allied territories, the alliance would establish a more [resilient and survivable](#) deterrent posture. It would be far more difficult for an adversary to neutralize. Hosting arrangements would also strengthen operational integration among allied forces. As in NATO's [nuclear-sharing model](#), partner nations could contribute dual-capable platforms capable of delivering nuclear payloads in extreme circumstances.

Australia, Japan, and South Korea could commit to dual-capable [submarine](#) (DCS), aircraft (DCA), and land-based missile launcher (DCL) missions within the alliance structure. Dual-capable aircraft would provide visible and flexible deterrence signaling. Submarine-based systems would ensure a [survivable second-strike](#) capability across the region's vast maritime domain. While land-based mobile missile launchers would add a credible and responsive ground-based deterrent, reinforcing the threat of rapid retaliation.

Such arrangements would distribute both responsibility and capability among Indo-Pacific allies, reducing the burden on the United States while strengthening the credibility of deterrence. It would transform the region from one dependent on a single guarantor into a networked system of mutually reinforcing nuclear deterrents.

Why the Philippines should revisit extended nuclear deterrence

An Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance would also require a reassessment of the policies of other regional partners. One notable example is the Philippines. For decades, the Philippines benefited from [extended nuclear deterrence](#) under its alliance with the United States. However, that relationship was complicated when the Philippines [ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons \(TPNW\)](#) in February 2021. By joining a treaty that prohibits the development, possession, and use—or threat of use—of nuclear weapons, the Philippines has distanced itself from reliance on the US nuclear umbrella.

This decision sits uneasily alongside the increasingly contested security environment in the South China Sea. If Manila wishes to strengthen its security relationship with the United States and regional partners, it may need to reconsider its position. Reintegrating into the framework of US extended nuclear deterrence would provide a stronger strategic backstop against coercion or aggression in its maritime domain.

Restoring strategic stability through credible, distributed deterrence architecture

Ultimately, the purpose of an Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance would not be to encourage proliferation for its own sake. Rather, it would be to restore strategic stability in a region where the balance of power is shifting rapidly.

Deterrence works best when it is credible, distributed, and resilient. In a region as vast and strategically complex as the Indo-Pacific, relying on a single nuclear guarantor may no longer provide the level of deterrence required to prevent conflict.

By adopting a model like the United Kingdom and France within NATO, where allied states maintain sovereign nuclear forces while contributing to a broader alliance deterrence posture, Australia, Japan, and South Korea could build a more stable and credible strategic architecture.

Such an arrangement would ensure that any adversary contemplating aggression in the Indo-Pacific would face not one nuclear power, but several, each capable of defending its sovereignty and contributing to the collective security of the region.

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