

## Deterrence Without Resolve Is No Deterrence at All

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There is a comforting fiction at the heart of much contemporary strategic thinking: conventional military capabilities can substitute for nuclear deterrence without requiring the same political will. It is a neat idea—reassuring, technologically optimistic, and politically convenient. It is also dangerously wrong.

Deterrence does not reside in platforms, precision, or posture. It resides in belief—specifically, the adversary’s [belief](#) that you are both capable of inflicting costs and willing to do so. Strip away that second element, and deterrence collapses into theater.

This is the central problem confronting Australia and its allies as they navigate a rapidly shifting Indo-Pacific security environment. As nuclear risks grow, particularly with China’s expanding arsenal, there has been a noticeable intellectual [pivot](#) toward elevating conventional capabilities as a more “usable,” credible, and politically palatable form of deterrence. Long-range strike, autonomous systems, undersea warfare, and advanced ISR are all presented as tools that can impose meaningful costs without crossing the nuclear threshold.

However, this argument only holds if those tools are used. Too often, the debate stops at capability acquisition. Billions are spent, platforms are announced, doctrines are drafted. Yet, there is a conspicuous silence when it comes to the harder question: under what circumstances would Australia employ these capabilities in anger? What thresholds trigger their use? What risks are we prepared to accept in doing so?

Without clear answers, the signal sent to adversaries is not strength, but hesitation. Consider the logic from the perspective of a competitor. If Australia invests heavily in long-range strike but avoids articulating when it would employ it, an adversary may conclude that those capabilities are politically constrained. If grey-zone coercion, such as the deployment of sea mines, harassment of maritime assets, or interference with undersea infrastructure, does not elicit a forceful response, then the lesson learned is not deterrence, but permissiveness.

In this sense, ambiguity is not always stabilizing. It can just as easily invite probing. The uncomfortable reality is that conventional deterrence demands a level of resolve that many policymakers are reluctant to acknowledge. Unlike [nuclear weapons](#), whose very horror lends them a paradoxical clarity, conventional forces sit in a murkier space. They are more usable, but precisely for that reason, credibility hinges on demonstrated willingness.

A missile that will is restricted from use is not a deterrent. A submarine that will not be deployed into contested waters does not shape adversary behavior. A cyber capability that remains permanently in reserve does not impose costs. Deterrence, in the conventional domain, is performative. It must be signaled, exercised, and at times demonstrated.

This does not mean recklessness or a rush to escalation. It means recognizing that deterrence is not cost-free. If the objective is to prevent adversary action, then one must be prepared to act before the situation becomes intolerable. Waiting until costs are imposed on you, economically, militarily, or politically undermines the very logic of deterrence. This is where

much of the current discourse falls short. There is a tendency to treat conventional capabilities as inherently stabilizing, as though their mere existence alters adversary calculations. But capabilities without credible intent are inert. Worse, they can create a false sense of security, masking the erosion of deterrence beneath a veneer of preparedness.

The challenge is particularly acute for middle powers like [Australia](#), which rely heavily on alliances and extended deterrence. As questions grow around the credibility of U.S. nuclear guarantees, especially in a more contested and multipolar environment, there is an understandable desire to bolster national self-reliance through conventional means. This is a sensible objective. But it cannot be achieved through hardware alone.

If conventional forces are to serve as a substitute or even a supplement to nuclear deterrence, then they must be embedded within a clear framework of political resolve. This requires more than capability development. It requires declaratory policy, strategic signaling, and a willingness to accept escalation risks.

For example, if the [laying of sea mines](#) in Australian waters is deemed unacceptable, then that must be stated clearly and backed by a credible commitment to respond with force if necessary. Anything less invites incremental encroachment. Over time, such encroachment normalizes behaviors that would once have been considered intolerable.

History offers ample evidence of this dynamic. Deterrence erodes not in dramatic moments, but through a [series](#) of small, unchallenged actions that cumulatively shift the baseline of what is acceptable. By the time a clear red line is crossed, it is often too late as the adversary has already recalibrated expectations.

The solution is not to abandon conventional deterrence, but to take it seriously. This means confronting uncomfortable questions. Are we prepared to use long-range strike capabilities against an adversary's military assets in the initial stages of a crisis? Would we target grey-zone actors operating below the threshold of armed conflict? How do we signal our intentions without triggering the very escalation we seek to avoid? There are no easy answers, but avoiding the questions altogether is not a strategy, it is an abdication.

Ultimately, deterrence is about shaping perceptions. It is about convincing an adversary that the costs of action will outweigh the benefits. This cannot be achieved through ambiguity alone, nor through capability acquisition in isolation. It requires a coherent [integration](#) of means, messaging, and above all else, will.

If policymakers are unwilling to countenance the use of conventional force, then they should be honest about the implications. In such a scenario, conventional capabilities do not replace nuclear deterrence; they merely decorate its absence.

The risk is not just strategic failure, but strategic surprise. An adversary that perceives a gap between capability and intent will exploit it; once that perception is formed, it is exceedingly difficult to reverse.

Deterrence, in the end, is a test of credibility and resolve. It is not measured by what you possess, but by what an adversary believes you will do. In strategic competition, credibility is not claimed; it is proven and without resolve, deterrence is nothing at all.

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