

An Indo-Pacific Nuclear Alliance Closes the Deterrence Gap Faster than Conventional Rearmament

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The Indo-Pacific is entering a period of acute strategic imbalance. China's rapid military modernization across nuclear, conventional, cyber, and space domains has outpaced the ability of regional powers to respond through traditional force buildup alone. While governments often default to expanding conventional capabilities with more ships, missiles, aircraft, and bases, this approach is slow, expensive, and increasingly insufficient against a peer competitor with both scale and nuclear backing. By contrast, forming an Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance offers a faster, more credible way to close the deterrence gap.

Crucially, this challenge is not just about China. The region faces a multi-nuclear threat environment that includes an increasingly capable North Korea and a resurgent Russia, willing to use nuclear and conventional signaling to shield conventional aggression. The cumulative effect of these actors compresses decision-making time and raises the stakes of deterrence failure. At its core, the argument is about time, credibility, and strategic effect.

The Time Problem: Conventional Forces Are Slow to Build

Modern conventional military capability is not something that can be generated quickly. Building advanced submarines, fifth-generation aircraft, integrated air and missile defense systems, or long-range strike capabilities takes years—often decades. For example, Australia's plan to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under Pillar I [will not deliver](#) operational capability until the late 2030s or early 2040s. As a stopgap, rotational deployments and being considered in the interim. However, these do not fully close the capability gap.

Similarly, scaling up missile production, hardening bases, and integrating joint command systems across the region require sustained industrial mobilization. Western defense industries, particularly in the United States, [are already under strain](#) from commitments in Europe and the Middle East. Expanding production lines for precision munitions or advanced systems is constrained by supply chains, workforce shortages, and political processes.

In short, conventional rearmament is a long game. The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, however, is deteriorating on a much shorter time scale.

A Multi-Nuclear Threat Environment

Focusing solely on China understates the scale of the challenge. The Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaped by three distinct nuclear pressures:

- China is [expanding and diversifying](#) its nuclear arsenal at a pace not seen in decades, while integrating it more closely with conventional operations.
- North Korea [continues](#) to refine its nuclear weapons and delivery systems, including intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the United States and regional

allies. Kim Jong Un has also signaled a lower threshold for potential nuclear use in a crisis.

- Russia, while geographically more distant, [remains an Indo-Pacific actor](#) through its Far East presence and strategic alignment with China. Its behavior during the war in Ukraine under the shadow of nuclear threats demonstrates how nuclear coercion can enable prolonged conventional conflict.

This layered nuclear environment complicates deterrence. It is no longer about balancing a single adversary, but managing overlapping deterrence relationships, where escalation in one theater can have cascading effects in another.

The Deterrence Gap: Nuclear-Backed Coercion

China's growing nuclear arsenal fundamentally alters the deterrence equation. While conventional forces can impose costs, they cannot fully offset the coercive power of nuclear weapons. Beijing can leverage its nuclear capabilities to deter external intervention in a regional conflict, particularly over Taiwan, while using conventional forces to achieve [fait accompli](#). North Korea adds a different kind of instability. It has a smaller but [less predictable nuclear force](#), with a demonstrated willingness to engage in brinkmanship. Meanwhile, Russia's nuclear posture [reinforces](#) a broader norm, that nuclear weapons can be used to shield aggression and shape adversary behavior via threats of use.

This creates a deterrence asymmetry: regional states may possess capable conventional forces, but without nuclear backing, their ability to deter escalation is limited. The United States provides extended nuclear deterrence, but questions about credibility, response timelines, and escalation risks persist, [especially](#) as adversaries develop capabilities to target bases in the United States and nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) systems.

The Speed Advantage of a Nuclear Alliance

A nuclear alliance can be established far more rapidly than building conventional parity. Unlike ships or aircraft, nuclear deterrence is not primarily about quantity. Instead, it is about credibility, survivability, and signaling.

Consider NATO. Its nuclear sharing [arrangements](#) allows non-nuclear members to participate in nuclear planning, host nuclear weapons, and integrate delivery systems without developing their own arsenals. This framework was established quickly during the Cold War and endured for decades as a cornerstone of deterrence.

An [Indo-Pacific equivalent](#) could replicate key elements of such an arrangement:

- Forward deployment or rotational presence of U.S. nuclear-capable assets
- Nuclear-sharing arrangements with trusted allies such as Japan, South Korea, and potentially Australia
- Integrated nuclear-planning mechanisms to ensure regional input into deterrence strategy
- Hardened and distributed basing to enhance survivability

These steps do not require decades of industrial buildup. They rely on political decisions, alliance coordination, and doctrinal integration. These are areas where progress can be made over years, not decades.

Credibility Through Integration

Deterrence is about perception. Adversaries must believe that [the costs of aggression](#) will outweigh the benefits. A nuclear alliance enhances credibility in several ways.

First, it raises the stakes of conflict. If multiple states are integrated into a nuclear deterrence framework, any aggression risks broader escalation. This [complicates](#) an adversary's planning and reduces the likelihood of limited, opportunistic actions.

Second, it distributes risk and responsibility. Extended deterrence is more credible when allies are [actively involved](#) in nuclear planning and posture. This reduces doubts about whether the United States would act alone in a crisis.

Third, it signals resolve and unity. Formalizing nuclear cooperation [sends a clear message](#), that the region is prepared to escalate, if necessary, rather than relying solely on conventional responses that may be insufficient.

Cost and Efficiency

Conventional rearmament is not only slow, but it is extraordinarily expensive. Building fleets of advanced platforms, sustaining them, and integrating them into joint operations imposes massive fiscal burdens.

A nuclear alliance, by contrast, leverages existing capabilities. The United States already possesses a robust nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. The marginal cost of [extending deterrence](#) through alliance structures is significantly lower than building new conventional forces from scratch.

For middle powers like Australia, Japan, and South Korea, this is particularly important. Attempting to match China's conventional military growth is economically unsustainable, let alone simultaneously accounting for North Korean and Russian contingencies. A nuclear alliance provides a [cost-effective](#) way to achieve strategic balance across these multiple threats.

Addressing Political and Normative Challenges

Of course, forming a nuclear alliance in the Indo-Pacific is not without challenges. Non-proliferation norms, domestic political sensitivities, and regional perceptions all complicate the issue. Countries like Japan have strong anti-nuclear culture which is shaped by history. Australia has long positioned itself as a supporter of non-proliferation. Any move toward nuclear sharing or hosting would require careful political management and public communication.

However, these constraints are not insurmountable. NATO [demonstrates](#) that nuclear sharing can coexist with non-proliferation commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

framework. The key is transparency, adherence to legal obligations, and a clear defensive rationale. Moreover, the strategic environment is changing. As the [combined pressures](#) from China, North Korea, and Russia intensify, the political calculus around deterrence may shift accordingly.

Complement, Not Replacement

A nuclear alliance is not a substitute for conventional forces. Rather, it is a force multiplier. Conventional capabilities remain essential for day-to-day operations, crisis management, and limited conflicts.

However, [without credible nuclear backing](#), conventional forces risk being outmatched in scenarios where nuclear-armed adversaries control escalation. The most effective approach is a layered deterrence strategy:

- Nuclear deterrence to prevent large-scale war and coercion
- Conventional forces to deny and punish aggression
- Resilience measures to ensure continuity under attack

A nuclear alliance strengthens the top layer of this structure, enabling the others to function more effectively across multiple threat vectors.

Conclusion: Speed Matters in a Multi-Threat Era

The Indo-Pacific does not have the luxury of time or the simplicity of a single adversary. Conventional rearmament, while necessary, cannot close the deterrence gap quickly enough to match the pace of strategic change driven by China, North Korea, and Russia.

An Indo-Pacific nuclear alliance offers a faster path to credible deterrence. By leveraging existing capabilities, enhancing integration, and signaling resolve, it can stabilize the regional balance in the near term, while stalling for longer-term conventional investments to mature. The choice is not between nuclear and conventional approaches, but between acting quickly or falling behind. In a rapidly shifting, multi-nuclear strategic environment, speed is not just an advantage. It is a necessity.

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