



## HOW THE US AND ALLIES CAN FORM A BETTER REGIONAL DEFENSE POSTURE AGAINST CHALLENGERS

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The waning of the US' longstanding military and technological superiority against a nuclear-armed adversary magnifies the importance of the US alliance network, making it more crucial to deterring and defeating regional challengers in a conflict. Potential adversaries, including China and Russia, seek to weaken the US alliance architecture to limit its freedom of operations and access to the region.

Nuclear-armed adversaries' use of advanced anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities and gray-zone tactics—employing unconventional tools for coercive and disruptive measures to change the status quo but stopping short of provoking outright interstate military warfare—is of particular concern. To overcome those challenges, the US will need as many options as possible, as well as help from its allies to tailor its regional deterrence architecture to check near-peer competitors and rogue states, and show that the US and its allies can act decisively if deterrence fails.

There are, however, issues the US and allies must resolve to maintain and strengthen regional tailored deterrence architecture. The first is a threat perception gap between the US and its allies in Asia.

Even when the gap is narrow, there seems to be a difference in how to respond to regional challengers.

The Taiwan Strait is the most dangerous hot spot in Asia, and could set the US and China on a collision course. Southeast Asian countries are on the frontline as they confront China's actions to make its claims regarding the nine-dash line in the South China Sea *fait accompli*. Tensions have steadily increased between Japan and China over the Senakau/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea since 2012. Lastly, South Korea is concerned about increasing Chinese military activities in the Yellow Sea, as well as in the East Sea. Regional states are reaching a common understanding that China is using gray-zone tactics to pursue national interests and becoming more assertive as its military capabilities and economic leverage grow.

Nevertheless, there is a perception gap between states experiencing tensions with China and those that have relatively good relations with it. Even among regional states in conflict with China, there is disagreement over whether China is trying to work within the existing international system or will weaponize its economic power and use military force to resolve conflicts and change the *status quo*.

Another factor precluding a united perception of major security threats is the different relationships countries have with the major regional challenger. While China is not a major energy supplier, as Russia is in Europe, economic interdependence with China complicates national defense strategies. Economic interdependence between China and regional countries is uneven, with the latter relying very much on the former's huge market. Moreover, Chinese investment in neighboring countries—the Belt and Road Initiative being the most notable example—provides opportunities for economic development and the risk of increasing vulnerability to Chinese influence. The US-built San Francisco system in Asia—marked by a hub-and-spoke network of formal bilateral security alliances and open access to the US market, giving US allies in the region huge security and economic incentives—is not what it used to be. China has

become an attractive alternative market and source of development aid, though not as open nor as transparent as the US market and aid.

Maintaining deterrence throughout the full spectrum of a crisis—from gray zone to red zone, where conflicts involve interstate military conflict but lie beneath the nuclear response threshold, and then from the red to black-and-white zone, involving nuclear attacks on the US homeland or an ally—requires the US and its allies to act in unison with a shared understanding of threats and how to manage them. Allied solidarity against a regional challenger throughout a crisis is a key assumption for a Blue theory of victory—a set of approaches that the US and allies should pursue to deter regional adversaries, manage escalation control in crisis and conflict, and safeguard core interests. Differing threat perceptions between the US and its allies—and among its allies—of a nuclear-armed regional challenger will make a Blue victory impossible. US reassurance of its extended deterrence commitment to allies, both conventional and nuclear, will not resolve concerns about entrapment in a military conflict between two great powers.

Reaching consensus on threat perceptions and showing solidarity and resolve in a crisis involves many factors, in the military sphere as well as across political, economic, and social areas. Obtaining critical information in a timely manner and guaranteeing its authenticity through intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations is crucial in developing a common threat perception. Better and wider information gathering and sharing coverage will allow the US and allies to better understand the security environment and a crisis. Obtaining and sharing critical information earlier in a conflict, perhaps even before it escalates from gray zone to red zone, will help the US and allies to establish a common understanding of the regional threat faster, enabling earlier warnings and more time to prepare a response.

Such readiness will make it harder for a regional challenger to establish a *fait accompli* and carry out surprise armed provocations. While the US possesses state-of-the-art ISR capabilities, it should help allies and partners develop more advanced ISR capabilities of their own to deter and, if necessary, prevail over regional challengers before and during a crisis. The US already has a dense information sharing network in the region, including the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance, plus partners like South Korea and Japan that possess capable ISR assets and plan to acquire more advanced capabilities. Nevertheless, more should be done to strengthen partner ISR capabilities and information sharing, allowing information from diverse sources to be cross-checked by allies and partners, thus increasing confidence in shared intelligence and narrowing the threat perception gap.

Bolstering conventional military capabilities, especially related to denial strategies, should also be emphasized for future collaboration between the US and allies. The Trump administration seems to look at blunter approaches and renewing focus on its nuclear capabilities for deterrence purposes. But nuclear capabilities are no panacea for escalation control; finding ways to reinforce its conventional superiority together with regional allies and partners would provide better, wider, and more practical options to manage escalation and respond to provocations. Since strategic competition between the US and China is different from that of the US-Soviet fight during the Cold War, allied conventional capabilities in Asia should focus on supporting denial strategies and tactics rather than aiming to obtain superior counterforce capabilities that could result in misperception and miscalculation by the Chinese leadership. These could include an advanced allied counter-missile strategy, maritime-denial strategy, anti-submarine warfare tactics, and enhanced force mobility concepts that would impose higher costs on potential challengers while preserving allied forces. Investing in conventional denial capabilities with greater interoperability will not only improve tailored deterrence architecture in Asia but also buy

time for the US and partners to share crucial information and choose appropriate countermeasures helping to contain a crisis.

The US *2018 National Defense Strategy* stressed the importance of strengthening its alliance network, which helps the US against regional adversaries by improving understanding of the theater security environment and broadening options and tools. While allies will look to the US to maintain and enhance its tailored extended deterrence architecture and ensure that it has escalation control over potential adversaries, allies and partners will be asked for more burden-sharing and increased levels of interoperability, as the US cannot bear increasing costs alone at a time of economic slowdown and fiscal austerity. To prevail over nuclear-armed adversaries, the US and its allies and partners should use limited resources wisely, investing more in allied ISR and conventional denial capabilities to narrow the threat perception gap among partners and increase the costs regional challengers have to bear for their provocations.

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