

# EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN THE AGE OF TRUMP: HARDWARE, SOFTWARE, AND MALWARE

BY ALEX SHYKOV

*Alex Shykov (USA) holds a Master's degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where he concentrated on the International Security Studies in the Asia-Pacific.*

2019 US-ROK-Japan Trilateral Strategic Dialogue offered an excellent forum to gauge the current strategic thinking and debates in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul. The event comprised experts' remarks apropos the extended deterrence in the Asia-Pacific and trilateral cooperation, as well as a two-move tabletop exercise (TTX) that brought alliance management issues to light.

The “hardware” component of extended deterrence was discussed at length, particularly the post-INF developments and implications for the region. The majority of participants agreed that INF withdrawal, albeit problematic in its execution and style, will positively contribute to countering Russian and Chinese previously unchecked advances. Putting aside the basing question, participants agreed that new missiles would strengthen the deterrence posture.

The second element, the “software,” which relies on assurance and credibility, needed more discussions and deliberations. Assuring allies that the United States will honor its treaty obligations in case of an attack is infinitely more challenging than developing a certain type of

military equipment. This is what strategists and policymakers grappled with throughout the Cold War. They succeeded by supporting allies economically and politically, and by signaling unified positions despite serious disagreements that were dealt with behind closed doors. In regards to adversaries, the United States consistently communicated that an attack on an ally will automatically precipitate a devastating American response. This, indeed, is the underlying logic of deterrence: an aggressor-state is dissuaded from launching an attack on an ally, knowing that the United States will retaliate on its behalf which would negate any potential gain from launching an attack in the first place.

Since it is a part of the [red theory of victory](#), it comes as no surprise that China, Russia, and North Korea are working hard to break the U.S. alliance structure. What is frustrating to watch is our commander-in-chief making comments that undermine allies' confidence and play right into our opponents' hands. For lack of a better analogy, I treat these comments as “malware.” One tweet might not unravel the alliance structure *per se*, but allow enough of them to roam in your system, and soon enough one will have to scrap the old and install a new infrastructure altogether.

In the recent past, few instances stand out. First, President Trump continues to downplay the importance of North Korea's short-range missile launches, even though these missiles threaten Japan's and ROK's survival and security. Second, bickering over trade deals and troops cost-sharing underscores Trump's transactional approach to foreign policy and skepticism of alliances writ large. Third, adopting North Korean lexicon and calling defensive military exercises “war games” is not just a diplomatic gaffe, but an insult to men and women in uniform. Put together, these blunders create a dangerous situation and invite aggressors to test our will to defend allies, particularly on the sub-conventional level.

As we are upgrading hardware, Trump unwittingly inserts malware into the trilateral

relationship. Particularly unhelpful has been “public-shaming” of [South Korea](#) and its contributions for military cost-sharing. Koreans are already overly sensitive when it comes to the U.S. troops and the move to [Camp Humphreys](#). Fueling the anti-American sentiments in the South facilitates North Korean long-held strategic thinking that once the U.S. troops out of the peninsula, South Korea will be ripe for reunification on the DPRK’s terms. Undoubtedly, Kim Jung Un is [enjoying](#) the new reality show.

TTX was designed to discern how the U.S., ROK, and Japan would react and respond to Beijing’s and Pyongyang’s coordinated assault on the rules-based international order. Japan and South Korea correctly calculated that the adversaries were seeking to alter the status quo, and that the situation merited a strong response. To demonstrate firm resolve and commitment to the alliance structure, all allied states, in fact, expressed willingness to “escalate to de-escalate.” Moreover, a component of the final move was North Korea’s wielding its nuclear card: a nuclear explosion in the Pacific Ocean as well as a missile launch over Japan. Allies unequivocally conveyed that they will watch the reaction and comments from the White House closely, and that their subsequent steps will be guided by what they observe.

Relatedly, neither Japanese nor South Korean delegates raised issues with Trump’s style of diplomacy, and only a handful of American experts acknowledged Trump’s malign effects on the U.S. standing in the world. One participant alluded that we need to brace ourselves for the partial or complete U.S. troop withdrawal from Korea, given Trump’s intransigence with cost-sharing and his [record](#). The fact that the U.S. credibility was not openly questioned is perhaps a good sign. However, Trump’s foreign policy track record was the elephant in the room. (Remember Paris Accords? JCPOA?).

The extended deterrence framework has played an essential role in ensuring peace in Northeast Asia, but currently it is undergoing major shifts. Allies have a decent understanding of an

appropriate response to revisionist states’ attempts to overthrow the status quo. However, Japanese and Korean participants (American as well, for that matter) remain unsure how to deal with self-inflicted wounds. Explicit signaling needs to be a priority; there should be no doubt in Beijing, Moscow, or Pyongyang that regardless of the domain and intensity, the United States and allies will respond and inflict unacceptable damage on the adversary’s forces. More hardware in the region will certainly alleviate some allies’ anxieties. However, returning to basics-updating the software and protecting it from malware-will deliver more bang for the buck.

*Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.*