



**FOSTERING CROSS-REGIONAL
THINKING IN THE DIVISION OF
DETERRENCE LABOR**

BY ALICE DELL'ERA

Alice Dell'Era (delleraa@erau.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Security Studies and International Affairs at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University – Daytona Beach Campus. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations and an MA in International Studies from FIU. Dr. Dell'Era is also part of the inaugural cohort of the “Mansfield Next Generation of U.S.-Japan Nuclear Policy Experts Training Program”.

Over the past decade, the international landscape in both Asia and Europe has experienced significant transformations. The erosion of stability in both regions has become increasingly pronounced, particularly within the past five years. This rapid change has prompted renewed discussions on the division of deterrence responsibilities among the US and its allies. A notable forum that exemplifies these discussions is the recent workshop titled *Toward a New Division of Deterrence Labor Between and Among the United States and its Allies and Partners*, hosted by the Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory on June 6 and 7, 2023. During this thought-provoking two-day event, participants from diverse institutions and countries engaged in insightful conversations aimed at assessing the current division of deterrence labor and exploring its potential evolution to effectively tackle the risks and challenges faced by the US and its allies, both globally and regionally. While all the topics discussed deserve attention, this article elaborates on a fundamental question that lingered in various formats throughout the workshop: how to conceptualize a division of

deterrence labor that synthesizes two distinct regional theaters?

The credibility of US extended deterrence and the division of deterrence responsibilities between the US and its allies have traditionally been viewed as a zero-sum regional affair. Following Obama's Pivot to Asia in the early 2010s, concerns arose regarding a potential [American decoupling](#) from Transatlantic security in favor of the Asian theater. It has since then become evident that the US remains fully committed to European security, a commitment further fortified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the question of a [“transatlantic bargain”](#) remains a central topic of discussion among experts. [Some](#) argue that, in the face of an increasingly assertive China, the US must be able to redirect its focus and resources towards the Indo-Pacific region, while Europeans should assume a greater burden of their own defense. Conversely, [others](#) advocate for sustained US leadership in both theaters, with allies in both regions intensifying their contributions to deterrence efforts to address the escalating challenge of confronting two major adversaries. In essence, these arguments are grounded in the belief that regional alliances are bound to compete for US attention and resources.

There is, however, a growing recognition that security in either region is intertwined with stability in the other. For one, the success or failure of US extended deterrence in one theater is now recognized as having significant repercussions in the other. The risks and challenges faced by European and Asian allies indeed transcend regional boundaries. This is exemplified by several noteworthy instances. Firstly, while China may not pose a direct threat to US allies in Europe, concerns have emerged regarding Chinese technological and infrastructure penetration in the Mediterranean region and Eastern Europe, raising apprehensions about the [potential risks](#) to the resilience of critical defense infrastructure in allied nations. Secondly, the growing coordination between Russia and China in the Far East has become a shared concern for both regions. Lastly, the elusive nature of cyber and information warfare implies that offensive actions in these domains are unlikely to be confined

to the boundaries of a single region. Beyond these shared challenges, there is also a growing recognition that the demands placed on and by allies in one theater have reverberating implications for allies in the other.

However, despite recognizing the growing security interdependence and interconnectedness of these two regional theaters, the division of deterrence labor in these spaces continues to be predominantly treated with an intra-regional oriented thinking. Indeed, the potential for cross-regional integration and/or coordinated action remains hampered by the regional focus of each alliance. Take NATO as an example; the Atlantic Alliance's traditional scope obviously remains confined to the North Atlantic region. This was recently [reiterated](#) by French President Macron when voicing opposition to a proposal for a NATO liaison office in Japan out of concerns about provoking China.

While it is important for the Atlantic Alliance – or Asian alliances – to remain centered on its regional focus and not transform into an alliance with global scope and membership, considering a division of deterrence labor from a cross-regional perspective could yield benefits. As highlighted by one participant in the workshop, ensuring cross-regional connectivity within the US alliance architecture is crucial to developing a more adaptable and responsive deterrence framework. [Advocates](#) of such an approach have clarified that its purpose does not entail broadening mutual defense commitments, but rather deepening coordination among cross-regional allies to optimize the allocation of resources for the United States and its allies. This coordination should involve enhanced political and defense diplomacy to explore the existing connections and synergies in the deterrence architecture between theaters.

During the CGSR workshop, some participants raised the need for open discussions regarding the potential role of NATO allies in the Indo-Pacific region, and vice versa. Clarifying and managing expectations over such cross-regional roles appears to be critical considering the uncertainties surrounding the so-called “two-peer problem.” As emphasized by

participants, whether allies acknowledge it or not, the two-peer problem is not going to be solely a concern for the United States. Therefore, it is essential to clarify expectations and make adequate preparations in the event of a crisis involving two major adversaries.

However, a cross-regional approach should not solely be aimed at exploring potential physical contributions, which may be limited in nature in light of constrained resources. Instead, it should center around drawing lessons from the deterrence architecture in one theater and their potential application to the other. Considering the differences between the European and Indo-Pacific theaters at both the consultative and operational levels, exchanging knowledge and experiences regarding the challenges and implications faced by each regional deterrence structure could yield novel insights and practical applications. During the workshop, for instance, Asia experts suggested developing NATO-like nuclear planning arrangements tailored to Indo-Pacific allies. Given NATO's own experience with such arrangements, engaging in a cross-regional discussion about the challenges, opportunities, and applicability of similar approaches in the Asian theater would provide practical guidance for Indo-Pacific allies aiming to establish such arrangements.

In this context, the US concept of integrated deterrence may provide a valuable framework for leveraging NATO-Asian connections more effectively. According to the [2022 National Defense Strategy](#), integrated deterrence “entails developing and combining our strengths to maximum effect, by working seamlessly across (...) our unmatched network of Alliances and partnerships.” In essence, integrated deterrence emphasizes close coordination and collaboration with allies through a whole-of-government approach aimed at integrating traditional and new tools of deterrence.

A cross-regional approach to deterrence upholds two fundamental logics of integrated deterrence. Firstly, it embraces the logic of collective cost imposition, the idea that [“aggression will be met with a collective](#)

[response](#).” Secondly, it sustains the logic of resilience, the “[ability to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption](#).” Indeed, close collaboration among allies across regions enables the pooling of capabilities, knowledge-sharing, and identification of best practices, thus facilitating the establishment of resilient networks. This approach may prove particularly valuable for generating innovative responses to challenges that may not be effectively deterred through the traditional conventional and nuclear deterrence tools, such as gray zones or hybrid challenges that fall below the threshold of overt aggression.

Cross-regional collaborations are indeed starting to take shape, as demonstrated, for instance, by NATO’s growing ties with Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan or by the latter’s participation in GCAP. Rather than restricting these collaborations, they should be embraced and nurtured. These cross-regional partnerships not only enable meaningful comparative insights from allies on the deterrence architecture in both regions but also [project a unified and cohesive front](#) that has the potential to reshape the strategic calculus of adversaries. Outside of these governmental initiatives, the CGSR workshop, by convening experts from diverse allied and partner nations to engage in thoughtful discussions on the challenges and opportunities associated with a new division of deterrence labor, serves as a compelling testament to the value of cross-regional thinking

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