



***DECODING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGE
OF INTEGRATED NUCLEAR
DETERRENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC
REGION***

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Fighter aircraft from the U.S. 8th Fighter Wing, Japan, and the Republic of Korea conducted a trilateral escort flight of a U.S. B-52H Stratofortress Bomber operating in the Indo-Pacific, April 2, 2024. Image credit: Air & Space Forces Magazine.

On June 6-7, 2023, the [Center for Global Security Research](#) at Lawrence Livermore National Lab hosted a workshop on the [Division of Deterrence Labor Between and Among the United States and its Allies and Partners](#). Of the many substantive discussions and debates on the future of integrated deterrence, there is

one aspect of deterrence that I, personally, found quite interesting: the major differences between nuclear deterrence in Europe and nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region. This blog post is about my thoughts on the nature of those differences and the unique problem-set they create for the realization of effective, integrated nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region.

During the Cold War and until fairly recently, the United States' chief nuclear deterrence challenge stemmed from the Soviet Union and, later, Russia. In 2023, however, the nuclear calculus is both different and more complicated than ever before. Not only does the Russian nuclear challenge continue to evolve, but the rise of nuclear challenges from China and North Korea presents further complicating factors.

While the nuclear challenges themselves contribute to some of the noted complications, a surprising number of complicating factors stem from the alliance structures in each region. For example, in Europe, while the NATO alliance brings together 31 nations for collective defense, when it comes to discussions on concepts such as nuclear posture, burden sharing, and decision-making, it is difficult to achieve consensus among 31 allies—some of whom have different viewpoints on the urgency or severity of certain threats, whether they be nuclear or otherwise. Additionally, the NATO alliance features multiple nuclear-armed nations, each with their own nuclear stockpiles, their own methods of delivery, and their own rules of engagement for nuclear employment. While some states willingly discuss nuclear integration, other states, such as France, choose to limit participation in such integration. These factors and others create an environment wherein, despite being a longstanding alliance facing a common set of threats, integrated deterrence still remains a complicated topic even within the NATO alliance.

Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific, the situation is quite different. Compared to NATO, the sample of nations involved in the integrated deterrence debate is very small – only four or five nations or so. Furthermore, the alliance structure in Asia is more complicated than NATO. Instead of a single, all-inclusive alliance, relations in the Indo-Pacific quintessentially equate to

a series of bilateral security agreements between a given state and the United States. Thus, while the fewer number of involved states means that there are far fewer potentially competing security interests at play, the alliance environment also means that states, by default, do not necessarily have the common infrastructure for discussion and cooperation that the NATO states possess. While the United States is easily able to at least facilitate discussion with, for example, South Korea and Japan separately, discussions between South Korea and Japan on deterrence—nuclear or otherwise—is inherently a more problematic matter, even if the United States is involved.

To further complicate matters, though the Indo-Pacific region features fewer allied players, it actually features more nuclear challenges. At a minimum, the allied players face a China that is greatly expanding its nuclear capabilities and a North Korea that is said to have transitioned from merely a nuclear nuisance to a true nuclear adversary—according to one participant in the CGSR workshop. This equates to at least two nuclear challenges, though some may include Russia as part of the nuclear deterrence calculus in the region. Altogether, integrated deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region must contend with at least two, but possibly three nuclear challenges. On the other hand, while NATO features at least three nuclear-armed allied nations, the Indo-Pacific includes only one nuclear-armed allied nation: the United States.

All of these factors create an integrated deterrence picture that is not only distinct from Europe, but highly complicated in its own right. While it could be tempting to highlight the nuclear sharing agreements in NATO as a blueprint for the Indo-Pacific region, the reality is that what works for Europe cannot so easily be expected to work in Asia. If a nuclear sharing agreement is desired, then the Indo-Pacific allies must develop one from scratch.

Nevertheless, it was made clear during the workshop that both the United States and its allies in the region are well aware of the various challenges facing integrated deterrence and are hard at work at resolving them. Nevertheless, the alliance must contend with several key issues—such as how to properly integrate

nuclear deterrence when only one allied nation in the region is capable of delivering a nuclear strike. Where are, for example, the true boundaries and reasonable expectations for such integration? Some questions are more philosophical in nature: such as whether or not allied nations lacking nuclear weapons should expect to nevertheless have a say in the employment of US nuclear weapons. Others are more practical: such as whether or not the US should deploy nuclear weapons to allied countries. There are also more intangible concerns, such as public opinion on the role of US extended deterrence in the region. Lastly, there are adversary-oriented concerns, such as how to posture and deter one adversary without inadvertently unsettling the other, potentially causing unintended consequences.

All the while, the allied partners must also consider whether inter-regional nuclear deterrence with the NATO alliance is desirable – or even feasible.

Whether it be as a multi-lateral nuclear-sharing agreement, or as a bona-fide multi-national alliance similar in concept to NATO, it is clear that the principle solution to nuclear deterrence challenges in Asia is an approach that caters specifically to the unique circumstances and players involved in the Indo-Pacific region and, while some facets of the NATO alliance may also apply in Asia, ultimately, Asia's solution to integrated nuclear deterrence must be an Asia-specific solution, not a readapted NATO-specific solution. While there are plenty of heavy policy discussions ahead, discussions among all parties involved will be the basis for any final solution. For integrated nuclear deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, there is indeed still a long way to go. However, so long as discussions such as those held at the CGSR workshop are held in earnest, there will always be a path forward.

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