



***INTEGRATED DETERRENCE AND
MINILATERALISM:
THREE YEARS OF INDO-PACIFIC
SECURITY IN A NETWORKED WAY***

BY MATTHEW F. FLEMING

Matthew F. Fleming is a PhD student at Northeastern University. Fleming was formerly a U.S. Delegate at the U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Global Leadership Youth Summit with the East-West Center and the U.S. Embassies in Seoul and Tokyo. He is currently part of the Young Trilateral Leaders (YTL) Alumni Network with the U.S. Department of State and the Young Leaders Program with the Pacific Forum. Fleming completed a dual-degree Master's program, earning a Master's Degree in Global Affairs and Policy from Yonsei University in South Korea, specializing in International Security and Foreign Policy, and a Master's Degree in Media and Governance from Keio University in Japan, specializing in Global Governance and Regional Strategy. While in South Korea and Japan, Fleming completed his thesis on U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateralism.



Photo: Freedom Edge 24-2 in the East China Sea, Nov. 13, 2024. Credit: U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Geoffrey L. Ottinger

In the [2022 U.S. National Security Strategy](#) (NSS), the terms “deter,” “deterrence,” and “deterrent” are used forty-two times across its forty-eight pages, applying to broad ideas of aggression, conflict, and coercion, as well as more specific attacks and issues related to biological warfare capabilities, cyberattacks, and domestic terrorism. Introducing the concept of “integrated deterrence,” the 2022 NSS lays out a National Defense Strategy (NDS) intended to go beyond reliance “solely on conventional forces and nuclear deterrence,” aiming to “effectively coordinate, network, and innovate” by integrating capabilities across domains, regions, the spectrum of conflict, the U.S. government, and its allies and partners.

On December 10-11, 2024, the [Center for Global Security Research](#) (CGSR) at [Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory](#) (LLNL) convened its workshop, [Deterrence in the 2025 National Defense Strategy Review](#). This two-day workshop featured in-depth discussions on lessons from integrated deterrence, challenges in adapting deterrence strategies, and priorities for enhancing both conventional and nuclear deterrence in response to evolving threats. While key takeaways from this workshop can be found in the center’s [Workshop Summary](#), this blog aims to emphasize further the crucial role that building minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region plays in the ongoing implementation of a U.S. strategy for integrated deterrence, which seeks to better integrate its allies and partners in a “networked way.”

Concerns Regarding Integrated Deterrence Messaging

During the December workshop, several participants expressed concerns that the current messaging surrounding integrated deterrence could negatively impact perceptions of U.S. deterrence and reinforce the narrative of its erosion. The concerns primarily centered on the potential for perceiving an overreliance on non-military elements, such as soft power, diplomacy, and economic tools, in messaging as deterrents within the wider integration framework across the conflict spectrum, the U.S. government, and domains. While the value of these non-military capabilities is evident for broader strategic

engagement and essential for integration with military capabilities, their messaging as deterrents raises critical questions about which specific threats are being deterred, which capabilities are being employed, and whether they are appropriate for the task.

This lack of clarity could obscure the essential purpose of deterrence, which is to utilize military and nuclear capabilities to prevent armed conflicts and nuclear war. If deterrence messaging becomes too broad and overstates the role of non-military tools, conflating them with the capability to deter significant military aggression, this blending of responses could generate confusion regarding the escalation ladder and the threshold for a military response. Such ambiguity may further fuel the narrative of a weakening U.S. deterrence by unintentionally signaling a reduced commitment to maintaining a robust military deterrent. This could foster perceptions of hesitation in employing military or nuclear force rather than achieving the intended purpose of reinforcing deterrence through a unified and integrated strategy. However, these issues and concerns do not extend to integration with allies and partners or across regions within the current articulations of integrated deterrence. In contrast, the advancement of unilateralism in the Indo-Pacific exemplifies where the integration of allies, partners, and regions within this conceptualization of integrated deterrence has been more effectively carried out and presents considerable opportunities for further development.

Deterrence Integration with Allies, Partners, and Regions in the Indo-Pacific

In 2016, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [introduced the concept of the Indo-Pacific region](#), encompassing the countries bordering the Indian and Pacific Oceans, while presenting a new vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) focused on promoting the "establishment of the rule of law, the pursuit of economic prosperity, and a commitment to peace and stability." The U.S. Trump administration adopted this concept, incorporating a similar articulation of this more integrated region into its regional priorities as outlined in the [2017 NSS](#) and subsequently proposing its own [Shared Vision of a](#)

[Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#) in 2019. The significance of the Indo-Pacific region cannot be overstated; the Indo-Pacific accounts for [60% of the world's population and 40% of its GDP](#). Additionally, it encompasses the crucial [supply chain route through the Taiwan Strait](#), the countries directly neighboring China's [aggressive militarization of the South China Sea](#), and the [destabilizing threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) (North Korea/DPRK). Furthermore, the United States has key security treaty allies in this region: Japan, the Republic of Korea (South Korea/ROK), Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand.

While integrated deterrence was formally introduced in the October release of the 2022 NSS and further explored in the October [2022 NDS](#), the earlier February release of the [2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) (IPS) had already stated that "integrated deterrence will be the cornerstone of our approach." In this strategy, the IPS directly highlights integration "across warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflict" as a method to ensure the U.S. and "our allies and partners can dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain." The 2022 IPS contains five pillars: 1) "Advance a Free and Open Indo-Pacific;" 2) "Build Connections Within and Beyond the Region;" 3) "Drive Regional Prosperity;" 4) "Bolster Indo-Pacific Security;" and 5) "Build Regional Resilience to Transnational Threats." Following the two-year anniversary of the inaugural 2022 IPS, the U.S. Department of State released its fact sheet on [The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific](#), outlining the administration's accomplishments categorized by each of the five pillars. Here, pillars two and four arguably best illustrate [U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's articulation of integrated deterrence](#) as using "existing" and "new" capabilities "in networked ways—hand in hand with our allies and partners." In this enduring comment document, pillar four is referred to as "Bolstering Regional Stability" instead of "Bolster Indo-Pacific Security," while pillar two retains its original name from the IPS. The importance of unilateral partnerships as the foundation of a networked approach to integrated deterrence in the

Indo-Pacific becomes clear through the achievements outlined by these two pillars.

Minilateralism as the Core of Networked Deterrence Integration in the Indo-Pacific

Minilateralism refers to the establishment of smaller partnerships among a limited number of nations, typically focusing on specific regional or security challenges. Unlike broader multilateral structures, these partnerships are more flexible, enabling member nations to align their priorities, strategies, and capabilities to address targeted issues effectively and efficiently. They can also serve as valuable mechanisms for conflict avoidance, particularly when bilateral relationships among members of minilateral groups become strained. By facilitating cooperation based on shared values, these partnerships reinforce collaboration and provide additional avenues for engagement, outside of direct bilateral interactions and without escalating to larger multilateral forums. In 2015, the U.S. [Obama administration emphasized](#) the value of this more networked approach in the region, calling for the need to move “beyond the ‘hub-and-spokes’ model of the past, toward a more networked architecture of cooperation among our allies and partners—including through expanded trilateral cooperation frameworks—built on shared values and interests.”

Over the past three years, minilateralism has been a focal point of the achievements noted under pillar two’s connections within and beyond the region and pillar four’s building of regional stability in the IPS. Emerging from the [Trilateral Leaders’ Summit at Camp David](#), the U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation has further operationalized through trilateral multi-domain exercises like [Freedom Edge](#), improved interoperability with [real-time data sharing on DPRK’s ballistic missile launches](#), and deeper institutionalization through the signing of the [Memorandum of Cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework](#). The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) is enhancing real-time maritime monitoring and information sharing through the [Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness](#) (IPMDA) and building cyber resilience with its [Quad](#)

[Cybersecurity Partnership](#). The U.S.-Japan-Philippines partnership has seen further development and strengthening of its capacity building and defense cooperation through the U.S.-Japan-Philippines [Inaugural Trilateral Maritime Dialogue](#) and trilateral exercise in the [5th Maritime Cooperative Activity](#). The launch of the [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) (PBP) and the increasing [engagement by NATO with its Indo-Pacific Partners](#) (IPP/IP4) highlights the growing integration these smaller groups are experiencing regionally, globally, and within existing frameworks. Furthermore, the U.S. is enhancing its capabilities as well as those of its allies through the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#), \$393 million in [foreign military financing](#), and \$34 million in [International Military Education and Training](#) (IMET). Simultaneously, by concentrating on unified strategies for emerging technologies such as AI, quantum computing, space, and cyber through the [Trilateral Economic Security Dialogue](#) and the anticipated [Quad Principles for Research and Development Collaborations in Critical and Emerging Technologies](#), these partnerships are promoting integrated approaches for developing both “new” and “existing” capabilities. These efforts go beyond simply enhancing bilateral cooperation for extended deterrence; the minilateral partnerships observed in the Indo-Pacific demonstrate a strong enhancement of posture aligned with the 2022 NDS’ approaches of “denial,” “resilience,” and “collective cost-imposition” strategies for deterrence.

Future of the IPS, Minilateralism, and Integrated Deterrence

On January 10, 2025, just one month before the IPS’s three-year anniversary and during the final month of the Biden administration, the administration released its [last enduring commitment document](#). The transition from action-oriented titles such as “advancing,” “building,” and “bolstering” to declarative titles of “An Indo-Pacific that is Connected,” “An Indo-Pacific that is Prosperous,” and “An Indo-Pacific that is Resilient” reflects the Biden administration’s emphasis on solidifying its legacy. This change moves away from framing the IPS goals as ongoing initiatives and presents them as current realities of the Indo-Pacific, grounded in a

lasting vision established by the foundation the administration has facilitated.

While the crucial importance of the U.S. network of allies has long been clear, the strengthening of minilateral partnerships observed since the region was defined as the Indo-Pacific, along with the introduction of integrated deterrence, has further highlighted their essential role and potential in fostering a more integrated approach to our alliances and partnerships across regions. As the U.S. aims to enhance its own capabilities and those of its allies while advancing interoperability on technical, human, procedural, and informational levels, these more focused partnerships provide essential pathways for progress that the incoming U.S. administration should continue to develop. However, similar to earlier challenges regarding the messaging of integrated deterrence and the conflation of different capabilities, critical questions surrounding minilateralism and deterrence require further research and attention.

The initiatives have strengthened capabilities, promoted dialogue, facilitated avenues for development, and further operationalized key aspects of deterrence and force posture in the region. However, the flexibility that allows for more targeted forms of partnerships could also introduce challenges in consistency. This means that minilateralism balances informal partnerships that can be more targeted and flexible while also striving to become more institutionalized and consistent. The repercussions of navigating this balance for deterrence remain to be seen. Additionally, questions about how minilateralism will address the emerging [two-peer problem](#) and whether a [U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group](#) (NCG)-like system would benefit from expanding trilaterally warrant further exploration. Lastly, AUKUS's capabilities for nuclear-powered submarines under pillar one for Australia remain a [future objective for the early 2030s](#), while its development of stronger interoperability under pillar two necessitates further development, highlighting that minilateralism is not a cure-all solution for streamlined development; rather, it requires ongoing support and promotion to make progress. Although the last three years of the 2022 IPS and 2022 NSS focus on integration has facilitated the

further development of minilateral partnerships, this may not hold true going forward amongst numerous leadership changes in partnering countries and within the United States. While continuity is not always the right answer, consistency in the value these minilateral partnerships provide for the deterrence of a networked approach should remain, even if the term integrated deterrence does not.

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