



***FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT: CHINA IS  
TAKING CUES FROM RUSSIA TO  
RESPOND TO US EXTENDED  
DETERRENCE***

BY DAVID SANTORO

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China doesn't like extended deterrence, the longstanding US policy that commits Washington to defending its allies against aggression, including, in some cases, with nuclear weapons. That's why, as I've argued in a recent [Foreign Affairs article](#), China has developed a sophisticated approach to undermine, negate, and even defeat that policy.

One aspect of the Chinese approach often goes unnoticed: the fact that it is increasingly mirroring the Russian approach, partly because China has of late joined forces with Russia to counter the United States. This development requires attention because Moscow has always been more aggressive than Beijing against US extended deterrence.

So, the United States can now expect a stronger challenge from China and should thus redouble its efforts to strengthen extended deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

***On China-Russia similarities***

There are—always have been—striking similarities between the Chinese and Russian approaches to US extended deterrence.

Both China and Russia see US extended deterrence as an inseparable part of a larger problem that includes US alliances, which themselves fit in a broader effort designed to counter them. In a recent [joint statement](#), for example, China and Russia talk about the need to strengthen “international security and global strategic stability” and castigate US extended deterrence as one of the obstacles, among others, to that goal.

Both China and Russia, as a result, are pushing back hard against US extended deterrence and doing so through integrated diplomatic, economic, and military actions, while increasingly, as mentioned, working closely together. Their goal is to break extended deterrence by separating the United States from its allies. As Eric Edelman and Franklin Miller have [explained](#), “Russia and China will seek to stress and undermine US extended deterrence...by ‘seeking to de-couple’ the defense of the US homeland from defense of our allies.”

Both China and Russia have developed concepts and capabilities to negate and defeat US extended deterrence. They are getting ready for conflicts that would entail that they seize and secure territory quickly (in the Indo-Pacific for China and in the Euro-Atlantic for Russia), making it difficult for the United States to respond and restore the status quo.

In this regard, China and Russia appear confident that they are well-positioned to win because they think that they have greater skin in the game than the United States, as the fight would take place in “their” neighborhood and thus, they calculate, be more strategically important to them. They also believe that geography (proximity to the battlefield) benefits them militarily and assess that they now have the capabilities to execute a military operation quickly and effectively.

That's why the recent analytical literature [talks](#) about asymmetries of stakes, geography, and escalation in China's and Russia's favor.

### ***On China-Russia (fading) differences***

For a long time, there were also major differences between the Chinese and Russian approaches. Many of these differences, however, have either diminished, or no longer apply today because the Chinese approach has come to resemble the Russian approach, at least in three ways.

First, traditionally Beijing has seen US extended deterrence as an effort to prevent China's rise and rightful return as the Middle Kingdom, whereas, to Moscow, it is a vicious attempt to crush Russia.

For example, Wei Fenghe, China's former minister of national defense, [said](#) a few years ago that the United States wants to "create conflict and confrontation, and to contain and encircle others." By contrast, Russia's President Vladimir Putin [stated](#) last year that "the United States...has shifted the military aspect of NATO back into the spotlight, collectively declaring their intention to inflict a strategic defeat upon us."

So, while Beijing has seen US extended deterrence as an encirclement or containment problem, Moscow has viewed it as existential.

That is changing, however. Like Moscow, Beijing today is increasingly looking at US extended deterrence in existential terms, for two reasons. One is because the United States has labelled China its number one competitor and, recently, influential US voices have [insisted](#) that Washington should "win" the competition against Beijing and defeat the Chinese Communist Party. To Chinese, that means the United States wants regime change in China.

The other reason Chinese officials now consider US extended deterrence an existential problem is because they have seen the United States and its regional allies strengthen their activities. Recently, Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra, and Manila have enhanced their defense work, engaged new partners, and sought to build a region-wide security architecture through new mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, or the Australia, United Kingdom, and United

States security arrangement, dubbed AUKUS. To Beijing, these moves suggest that the United States is preparing to act militarily against China.

It is not surprising, then, to hear Chinese officials voice stronger concerns about US intentions. For example, Qin Gang, China's former minister of foreign affairs and former Chinese ambassador to the United States, [said](#): "The US claims it wants to 'compete to win' with China, and does not seek conflict. But in fact, the so-called 'competition' by the US is all-round containment and suppression, a zero-sum game of life and death."

Second, Beijing has been generally less aggressive than Moscow in countering US extended deterrence. Unlike Russia, which engages in overt, high-risk confrontations, as in Ukraine, China has favored incremental pressure, using "salami-slicing" and coercion.

That's partly because their tools are different. Beijing resorts predominantly to economic measures because China is an economic powerhouse, whereas Moscow employs political subversion and military force more readily because Russia is weak(er) economically but a military superpower.

But here too, that's changing. As Chinese military power is increasing, Beijing is becoming more militarily adventurist. In the South China Sea, for example, Chinese vessels have of late repeatedly collided with Filipino ships, sometimes dousing them with water cannons and injuring onboard personnel. Worryingly, a just-released RAND report [finds](#) that China is redefining hybrid warfare to include the use of nonmilitary tools for enhancing lethality.

That's why Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, recently [warned](#) that "China continues to pursue unprecedented military modernization and increasingly aggressive behavior that threatens the US homeland, our allies, and our partners."

Third, for a long time Chinese nuclear weapons did not have a major role against US extended deterrence. That's because the Chinese tradition supports a strategy of assured retaliation, and of not integrating nuclear strategy with conventional strategy, or pursuing nuclear

warfighting, because of the idea that these weapons only prevent nuclear coercion and deter nuclear attack.

That's why Beijing has [claimed](#) to have a "self-defense nuclear strategy" and why it has maintained tight control over its arsenal, never delegating authority over nuclear strategy to the Chinese military. That's also why China has developed a small nuclear force and refused to engage in arms races, while pledging never to be the first to use nuclear weapons.

The Chinese nuclear tradition stands in contrast with the Russian nuclear tradition. Moscow has made the large nuclear arsenal it has inherited from Soviet times, which it has modernized, the cornerstone of its defense policy, even emphasizing its readiness to use tactical nuclear weapons early (and first) in a conflict.

China, however, is now engaged in a rapid nuclear build-up, so change might be in the offing. Of course, Beijing denies that its nuclear "modernization"—it insists it is not a build-up—will lead to change, either in Chinese nuclear policy or posture.

But even before independent observers began [shedding light](#) on what looked like a build-up, evidence was [mounting](#) that Beijing had abandoned its traditional nuclear approach and embraced one more similar to Moscow's. Significantly, in unofficial dialogues Chinese scholars now confess that Beijing has made "adjustments" to its nuclear approach.

Just as Moscow has waived the nuclear threat during the Ukraine war, Beijing could do the same over Taiwan. This is plausible especially given the apparent belief in Beijing that Russian nuclear weapons and threats have deterred the United States and West from direct intervention in Ukraine.

### ***Implications and recommendations for the United States***

China's embrace of the Russian approach to US extended deterrence is bad news for the United States because it means that Beijing will become more confrontational.

This is concerning, for two reasons. First, because it adds complexity to an already heavily charged security environment; there are active wars in Europe and the Middle East. Second, because managing two increasingly combative peer (nuclear) competitors—Russia and China—forces the United States to rethink its longstanding deterrence and defense assumptions and practices, especially given that Moscow and Beijing are strengthening their cooperation and, in Moscow's case, developing new ties with another US nuclear-armed adversary: North Korea.

Detailed recommendations for action by the United States are beyond the scope of this piece. Suffice to say, however, that Washington should further strengthen extended deterrence. Given the magnitude of the China challenge—it is the only power able to supplant the United States, Washington should also urge its regional allies to do more on the defense front.

The United States, of course, should remain involved in Europe to help manage the Russia threat, but it should push its European allies to contribute more, both because they can do so and because their increased actions will facilitate a greater US focus on China.

In times of strategic shifts, leaders must prioritize and realign their teams. It is true in business as in international relations; the United States should do so as the China challenge is growing.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*