



THE NEED FOR RENEWED EXTENDED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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This month, the release of the US [National Security Strategy](#) sent shockwaves throughout the world. Although the impact was less acute than in Europe, America's Asian allies nonetheless saw the document as signaling a deprioritization of the Indo-Pacific. The NSS calls for a move away from "burden sharing" toward a strategy in which allies assume primary responsibility for regional security, while offering only limited discussion of China's increasingly coercive behavior.

Taken together with China's rapid nuclear and conventional modernization, these signals risk undermining confidence in Washington's extended deterrence commitments. The US must work to reassure its allies, and unless it intends to drastically increase spending for its conventional weapons, Washington can either seek to enhance its damage limitation capabilities or deploy theater nuclear weapons. Whatever the conclusion, it is essential that the actions be linked to a diplomatic effort to address regional concerns. This issue of deterrence was a central theme of the [Center for Global Security Research's](#) workshop, [The Dynamic Tripolar Strategic Balance: A Net Assessment](#). The conclusions drawn below are based on this author's analysis and are not

representative of the views expressed at the CGSR workshop.

Implications of China's nuclear buildup

China currently has more than [300](#) operational nuclear warheads and is predicted to reach over 1,000 by 2030. The rationale behind this rapid increase in warheads is the subject of much contestation. Some argue that China might be developing a [nuclear shield](#) that would enable it to invade Taiwan even if it has insufficient conventional forces to fully counter the US. Others argue that the change is more [politically driven](#), as China's leader, Xi Jinping, desires to create an arsenal that is commensurate with China's great power status. Finally, another view attributes the buildup to China's focus on becoming the [regionally dominant power](#).

Regardless of the rationale, it is clear that China has worked to harden its nuclear posture, improve its strike capabilities, and rapidly increase its number of warheads, while simultaneously drastically modernizing its conventional forces. These developments have left the US less confident in its ability to dominate a conventional conflict and provide a nuclear bulwark to protect its allies.

China is already pursuing a grey zone strategy that is eroding the sovereignty of the US's allies. Chinese coast guard pressure on the Philippines, growing activity around Japan's Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and increased intrusions near South Korea illustrate this intensifying trend. If Beijing judges Washington to be less willing to defend its allies, it will feel freer to accelerate these coercive activities.

Possible Solutions

Damage Limitation

As such, the US now has several options. One such solution is to increase its damage-limitation capabilities. [Damage limitation](#) is the idea of seeking the capacity to destroy an adversary's nuclear weapons while also pursuing a strategy that can defend the homeland from attack.

Trump's plan to pursue the [Golden Dome](#) is one such example, as a renewed US missile defense system

would create ambiguity in Chinese defense planners' minds about whether their nuclear strike could achieve the desired results.

However, damage limitation comes with its share of concerns. Systems like Golden Dome are extremely expensive, and so the idea of pursuing them in lieu of improving conventional forces is something policymakers will have to debate. Moreover, the improvement in China's strike capacity and the hardening of its nuclear posture put into question the feasibility of even achieving damage limitation.

Theater Nuclear weapons

The other possible option is the adoption of theater or regional nuclear weapons. This can either take the form of ground-based weapons, reliance on bombers, or the deployment of a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N). Due to the controversy surrounding ground-based weapons and the lack of feasibility of relying on a potential rotational air option, SLCM-N is the best option for a regional nuclear weapon.

The Navy first deployed a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile in the [mid-1980s](#), but, with the end of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush announced the US would withdraw all land and sea base tactical nuclear weapons. The weapons were retired in 2013 under a 2010 Obama order. Then, in 2018, Trump reversed that decision. Today, tactical nuclear weapons remain in a state of purgatory, as funding for SLCM-N was not included in the FY2026 Navy budget.

A major claim against pursuing SLCM-N is that it reduces the capacity for the Navy to have sufficient conventional strike weapons, which should be used as the main fighting ammunition over nuclear weapons. However, even a small number of SLCM-N could be enough to increase deterrence.

Regional Responses

Another argument against pursuing regional nuclear weapons is the potential blowback from regional actors, particularly in Southeast Asia, where such a provocative move would likely generate significant

opposition. Given the region's growing global importance, alienating Southeast Asia would undermine US grand strategy, even if a stronger nuclear deterrent were achieved.

When the US, UK, and Australia announced AUKUS, the deal that would allow Australia to acquire Virginia-class submarines, Southeast Asian countries raised an [alarm](#). Several countries stated that the deal would trigger an arms race and lead to proliferation across the region, while others treated it with circumspection. Importantly, this deal provides Australia only with nuclear-powered submarines, not nuclear missile capabilities.

A major issue with the AUKUS deal was a failure to properly communicate with regional powers. As such, any move to establish a regional nuclear capability must be accompanied by an intensive diplomatic campaign to reassure those in the region of its intent. There must be an emphasis on the fact that a more aggressive and confident China also negatively affects them.

Conclusion

In light of an increasingly nuclear-armed and conventionally capable China—and a US strategy that shifts more responsibility to its allies—the United States must act decisively to restore a credible nuclear deterrent. This means strengthening both nuclear and conventional postures while simultaneously deepening defense cooperation and pursuing meaningful arms control. Allied momentum is already building, with Japan rearming, the Philippines expanding US access, and Australia enhancing its capabilities; yet US hesitation risks allowing China's rapid military growth to outpace regional defenses. To stabilize the balance of power and reinforce this emerging coalition, Washington must send an unmistakable signal of resolve.

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