



ADAPTING INDO-PACIFIC DETERRENCE IN A NEW NUCLEAR AGE

BY JIM STOKES

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The Indo-Pacific nuclear security environment is increasingly complex. With multiple nuclear-armed nations and increased geostrategic rivalry, how can the United States and its allies adapt the architecture of deterrence to forestall aggression, maintain peace, and manage strategic competition? While the geography, history, and institutions are different, NATO's transformation offers insights for Indo-Pacific deterrence adaptations.

The strategic goals and behaviors of China, North Korea, and Russia shape threat perceptions in Washington and capitals across the region. China's opaque modernization and rapid expansion of its nuclear arsenal and growing national power create uncertainty about its ambitions. North Korea also is modernizing and [expanding its nuclear forces](#), and its bellicosity creates instability on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. Russia's war against Ukraine, including its nuclear saber-rattling, may influence strategic thinking in Beijing and Pyongyang. Nuclear coercion may tempt these nations to usurp the status quo through force. Though not formal alliances, the strategic partnerships and increasing cooperation among these nuclear-armed powers challenge regional stability.

For decades, US extended nuclear deterrence has undergirded its commitments to NATO allies as well as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, yet the regional deterrence architectures are quite different. In 1949, Western Europe's limited geography, the proximity of the Soviet threat, and the collective experience of World War II made a multilateral alliance logical. Nuclear deterrence formed the bedrock of NATO strategy. European allies hosted US nuclear weapons and/or provided military forces that could employ them, in a close-knit nuclear posture. In 1966, NATO formed the [Nuclear Planning Group](#) (NPG) to improve alliance decision-making. The United Kingdom and France developed nuclear deterrents for their national defense, which also contributed to NATO collective security.

Created in the 1950s, US bilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific formed into a “[hub and spokes](#)” system. The region's vast geography, diversity of political regimes, and historical grievances among them made a multilateral alliance unworkable. The [Southeast Asia Treaty Organization](#), or SEATO, alliance was akin to NATO yet politically weaker, disbanding in 1977. US nuclear deterrence was designed to deter Soviet/Russian strategic nuclear threats and was sufficient to deter China or North Korea. Unlike in Europe, no regional allies have nuclear deterrents, requiring complete reliance on US extended nuclear deterrence.

Despite increased attention and resources for almost two decades, concerns remain about US commitments. More importantly, the minimal regional US nuclear posture sustained since the Cold War [is no longer suitable](#) and [must be changed](#). Non-nuclear allies must take more prominent roles as contributors to deterrence, politically and militarily, in bilateral alliances and an emerging multilateral format. Upgraded capabilities, backed by political resolve and clear communications, will bolster deterrence, reassure allied populations, and sustain nonproliferation norms.

NATO's transformation

Since its inception, NATO's deterrence has relied on a mix of conventional and nuclear forces. NATO's force posture has undergone vast changes since 1949, propelled by domestic and intra-alliance politics, strategy, technologies, and threat perception. Current debates about “[NATO 3.0](#)”—shifting the burden of conventional defense more to Europe—echo the 1960s. Washington encouraged its allies then to invest in conventional forces to lessen reliance on nuclear weapons. [Flexible Response](#) provided a continuum of political-military options to deter aggression and, if necessary, defeat it.

Today, NATO is transforming to counter the Russian threat. It has [revitalized its defensive plans](#), implemented a new [force readiness model](#), and updated its [defense planning process](#)—the demand signal for allied capability development. Increased defense spending and expanding defense industrial capacity will build up collective defense forces.

Formidable conventional defense has a deterrence effect, yet a nuclear-armed adversary necessitates a credible nuclear deterrent. Credibility is based on an adversary's perception of military effectiveness, political will, and strategic communications. Nuclear deterrence remains [the cornerstone](#) of alliance security, and [NATO allies continue to adapt it](#).

Non-nuclear allies provide [dual-capable aircraft](#), the backbone of NATO's nuclear forces. [Transition to the F-35A](#) is underway, and US nuclear weapons in Europe [have been modernized](#). NATO's [nuclear sharing arrangements](#) are a visible expression of allied unity and a shared commitment to deterrence. Allies also provide critical enablers as "[conventional support to nuclear operations](#)." In the annual [STEADFAST NOON nuclear exercise](#), NATO allies demonstrate how they can effectively conduct a nuclear mission.

NATO has updated its nuclear "software"—the ways to facilitate internal allied decision-making. It revised its nuclear policy in 2024 and is strengthening its [nuclear planning capability](#). Political leaders [exercise decision-making](#) to ensure crisis preparedness, and NATO [is modernizing](#) its nuclear consultation, command and control capabilities.

In recent years, NATO rebooted its public communications. The [2022 Strategic Concept](#) and subsequent summit communiqués clarified core principles of nuclear policy. NATO speaks more openly about nuclear deterrence, and in 2025 invited media to [observe STEADFAST NOON](#) for the first time. Senior allied ministers, including from NATO's [newest members](#), issued statements about participation, in transparency to their publics and to express political resolve. NATO's non-nuclear allies are not tacit supporters of nuclear deterrence, but active and increasingly vocal contributors.

An updated Indo-Pacific deterrence architecture

Washington is leading adaptation of its alliances to the "challenge of [preparing for limited war](#) under the nuclear shadow." Credible options must be available to prevent nuclear coercion and deter aggression. A multilateral Indo-Pacific alliance à la NATO may be infeasible, but an updated deterrence architecture is possible and necessary. It should integrate robust, interoperable, and survivable conventional and theater nuclear forces. Bilateral nuclear dialogues should evolve into decision-making bodies, and a quadrilateral format for nuclear consultations similar to NATO's NPG should be established.

Japan, South Korea, and Australia are investing in conventional forces, including deep precision strike, anti-submarine warfare, and missile defense capabilities, which bolster defense and contribute to deterrence by denial. Japan's [counterstrike capabilities](#) and South Korea's [Three-Axis system](#) offer ways to manage escalation dynamics and respond to aggression. When integrated with US forces, allied conventional forces help ensure the nuclear threshold remains high. Defense investments receive double credit for deterrence value.

In contrast with NATO's nuclear posture, the United States has relied on its strategic nuclear forces to maintain deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. Experts have called for new US [theater nuclear capabilities](#) to close deterrence gaps. Regional allies should consult candidly and confidently about a future theater nuclear posture and their roles within it.

Establishing nuclear sharing arrangements would be a significant step forward. The F-35A is already certified for [US B61 nuclear gravity bombs](#) and could employ a [future stand-off nuclear-armed missile](#). Dual-capable F-35A squadrons in Japan and South Korea could be stood up within a few years, sending a potent deterrent signal. Further into the future, allies could operate longer-range dual-capable missiles, as [West Germany did in the Cold War](#). Aligning investment with US plans for [theater nuclear capabilities](#) will be critical.

Host nation basing arrangements also can provide critical support. Bases enable operations, logistics, and protection for dual-capable forces in theater or deploying US forces. [Air base support for US](#)

[strategic bombers](#) provides operational flexibility. US naval vessels will begin deploying with [sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles](#) in the 2030s. Revision of laws or policies may be necessary, [as Japan is considering](#). Basing arrangements do not require forward-stationed US nuclear weapons, which may be too politically sensitive, but can facilitate movement of forces for nuclear signaling.

Advanced conventional capabilities, dual-capable forces, and/or basing arrangements can provide valuable contributions to an adapted deterrence architecture. Long-term investments will yield political clout and greater stakes in deterrence without abrogating any ally's non-nuclear status. Though politically sensitive, they are less provocative, cheaper, faster, and more effective than developing independent nuclear arsenals.

New deterrence hardware requires an updated operating system. Bilateral alliances will remain prominent but should be deepened. Military headquarters should integrate planning to develop joint deterrence options, using conventional and theater nuclear capabilities. Prudent peacetime planning enables crisis preparedness and enhances political control. Political dialogues with [Japan](#) and [South Korea](#) should evolve into joint decision-making bodies, overseeing policy, plans, and posture, with procedures for crisis consultation. Australia lacks such a mechanism, [which should be established soonest](#).

A quadrilateral format should be created to deepen cooperation and demonstrate political resolve. US-Japan-ROK trilateral ministerial meetings, in which the United States [reiterated its extended nuclear deterrence commitments](#), should expand to include Australia. This quad format could foster shared threat perceptions and enable coordination of national policies, public statements, and posture changes. Though it may lack the NPG's consensus decision-making, it could facilitate consultation and coordinated responses, backed by secure communications systems.

Strategic communications also deserve a refresh. Allies should issue agreed joint statements which clearly underline political resolve, shared interests, and commitments to deter aggression. Political flexibility will require some ambiguity, but these statements should reinforce both the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence and the increasing multilateral ties among all four allies. Buttressing words with actions, deterrence exercises should not just "show the flag," but demonstrate real mission readiness and interoperability. Infrastructure upgrades, procurement of dual-capable systems, host nation arrangements, and other posture changes may not be publicized, but adversaries will surely take note of these deterrence adaptations.

While the Indo-Pacific region may not have a multilateral alliance like NATO, the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Australia can deploy a deterrence architecture purpose-built for the 21st century. Non-nuclear allies can and should have greater deterrence roles. Its purpose should be clearly communicated: to maintain peace through deterrence, uphold nonproliferation commitments, and serve as a viable means to reduce nuclear risks.

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