

Deterring the People's Republic of China

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Introduction

Successfully deterring the PRC will require a new approach to deterrence that accounts for inherently greater instability of a three-party system. The United States must confront two nuclear-armed near-peer adversaries, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation (Russia) simultaneously. “Both China and Russia have the ability to unilaterally escalate a conflict to any level of violence, in any domain, in any geographic location, and at any time” (Richard, 2021a). Both are aggressively pursuing military modernization and information operations campaigns to challenge international norms to act unilaterally against the interests of the United States (2021a). To effectively deter one from acting against Western interests requires the capacity to simultaneously deter the other. The relative stability of post-World War II strategic deterrence relied on mechanisms that are inadequate for a three-party system. The theory of deterrence has not changed. However, the U.S. must develop unique approaches to deterrence to account for the unique geo-political situation of the 21st century (Richard, 2021b).

Fundamental Deterrence Theory

Deterrence is “an effort to stop or prevent an action” (Mazarr, 2018). The number of competitors in the international system does not change the essential goal of deterrence. There are two basic approaches to accomplishing this goal. “Deterrence by denial seeks to deter an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed, thus denying a potential aggressor confidence in attaining its objectives” (2018). Deterrence by punishment seeks to deter an action by increasing the anticipated cost, thus causing a potential aggressor to reconsider the risk equation and their stake and will in the transaction (2018). As the number of actors involved in these transactions increases, the variables each party must consider will increase exponentially.



Three-Party Deterrence Dynamics

During the Cold War, the U.S. applied an approach to strategic deterrence in which every instrument of national power was oriented toward deterring the expansion of communism (Klinger, 2020). Today, the U.S. must develop an approach to deter the expansion of two separate visions for the international order, specifically those of Russia and the PRC. Each of these nations has independent goals for the evolution of the international order in the 21st century. The U.S. should adapt the Cold War approach to deterrence to account for the increased instability a third party introduces.

Russia rejects the rules based international order led by the United States and its allies (Nixey, 2019). The invasion of Ukraine is only the latest manifestation of Putin's conviction that a multi-polar, anti-liberal, and state-centric international system is superior. Despite their inability to overwhelm a far-inferior military in Ukraine quickly, Russia still fields one of the largest militaries in the world (Beale, 2022). Their strategic forces modernization program is unmatched as is their arsenal of approximately 2,000 low-yield non-strategic nuclear weapons (Woolf, 2022). Russia excels at manipulating ambiguity to gain an advantage in the information domain and undermine Western unity. Before Russia's recent aggression brought clarity to the risks associated with the Kremlin's vision, the NATO alliance was not unified on how to define the greatest threat to North Atlantic security (Clingendael, 2019). Russia's vision of the future relies on the dissolution of western alliances and the rejection of the liberal international order in exchange for a system where a nation's influence is only as strong as its individual ability to apply pressure on others.

The PRC openly seeks to regain great power status and establish itself as the center of global commerce and culture. Evidence of this aspiration is apparent in the One Belt One Road



initiative, an international and domestic development program that aims to connect China's population centers on the East China Sea with resources, raw materials, and culturally rich regions throughout the eastern hemisphere (Hurley, 2018). Furthermore, Beijing is directing an extensive military modernization campaign intended to accelerate weapons technology evolution to establish parity with the most sophisticated military capabilities in the world (Klinger, 2020). However, of all the PRC's most impressive accomplishments over the last decade, none is more worrisome than the revelation of over 300 missile silos under construction in the western desert in summer 2021 (Loh, 2021). The PRC's strategic forces are evolving from a defensive, no-first-use, minimum deterrence nuclear posture into a coercive, flexible-use force with the capacity to compel in great power competition.

The PRC is learning what it can do with the capacity to compel from Russia's war in Ukraine, where NATO is reluctant to act because of the threat of Russian nuclear weapons (Magnier, 2022). The U.S. originally refused to endorse the transfer of 40-year-old Cold War-era fighter aircraft to bolster Ukraine's depleted air ultimately because of Russia's low-yield nuclear weapons (Phillips, 2022). NATO rejected international pleas for a no-fly zone for a similar reason (Youssef, 2022). Even relatively benign, routine, pre-planned activities such as a periodic ICBM test are apparently too provocative for the current environment (Stewart, 2022). While Western policymakers may rightly prioritize prudence over posturing as Moscow's military advance stalls, observers in Beijing are learning that with robust, diversified nuclear capabilities a nation can take nearly any action, short of nuclear use, against non-US allies without the fear of Western-led direct intervention. As reunification with Taiwan is a "fundamental condition" for the fulfillment of the PRC's rejuvenation by 2049, it should be no surprise that Beijing will



continue to develop the force it needs to keep the United States functionally neutral if reunification requires open armed conflict to succeed (Valchev, 2021).

The PRC's application of lessons it learns from US efforts to balance Russian provocations in Europe reveals the fundamental challenge of strategic deterrence in the 21st century. Whereas the Cold War relied on bi-polar stability to prevent open conflict between nuclear capable nations, successful strategic deterrence in the future will rely on finding a solution to three-party competition where the actions of one nation against another may lead the third to take actions at the expense of one or both nations (Walt, 1964). A similar concept from physics known as the 'three-body problem' famously has no known linear solution (Krishnaswami, 2019). The unpredictability of known and unknown variables as three entities interact makes it impossible to forecast outcomes of their interactions. Absent sudden equilibrium amongst them, maintaining strategic deterrence in three-party competition is a problem without a linear solution. Yet the cost of strategic deterrence failure, specifically the eventual use of nuclear weapons, is too great to bear.

United States Policy for the PRC

In his 2021 Interim National Security Guidance, President Biden asserts that "China, in particular, has rapidly become more assertive. It is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system" (INSSG, 2021). According to a fact sheet from the 2022 National Defense Strategy, "defending the homeland, paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC" is the nation's top defense priority, adding that "the Department will act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence, with the People's Republic of



China (PRC) as our most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge for the Department” (NDS, 2022). This position reflects a general shift in national defense policy to acknowledge risks associated with the PRC’s vision. The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) prioritized long-term competition with the PRC and emphasized modernization and partnerships to counter the PRC’s People’s Liberation Army’s technological advancements, force development, and growing international presence and assertiveness (NDS, 2018). The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review prioritized nuclear triad modernization, including the development of supplementary capabilities designed to deter Beijing from using its weapons of mass destruction or conducting other strategic attacks (NPR, 2018). These stated policies constitute a general response to the imminent return to great power competition. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) demanded that we “rethink the policies of the past two decades,” during which the nation’s primary focus was on the global war on terror and associated operations in the Central Command area of operations (NSS, 2017). There is increasingly urgent consensus among senior U.S. policy makers that deterring the PRC must become the primary focus of all instruments of national power.

National Power is the sum of all resources available to a nation in the pursuit of national objectives. The ability to advance national interests is dependent on the effectiveness of the employment of national power to achieve national strategic objectives. Avoiding counter-productive and conflicting activities by planning and executing them in a coordinated manner is critical to success.¹⁰ US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin introduced the concept of ‘integrated deterrence’ during a 2021 speech, stating “it means that working together is an imperative, and not an option. It means that capabilities must be shared across lines as a matter of course, and not



as an exception to the rule” (Austin, 2021). The US requires a similar, synchronized whole-of-government approach across all instruments of national power if its PRC policy is to succeed.

Framework for Strategic Deterrence in the 21st Century

In order to be successful, whole-of-government synchronization in strategic deterrence must be straight-forward, transparent, and universal in a way that mitigates cultural obstacles created by unique attributes of different organizations. Building upon the different types of deterrence and elements of national power, a simple matrixed framework can facilitate unity, clarity, and organization across the U.S. government (Table 1). The heart of the framework is its simplicity to align the idea ends and ways with means. To do this, the structure first identifies the policy objective; what must the adversary be deterred from doing or achieving? This point is the most critical element of the framework as it serves as the pillar that organizations must center their deterrence policies and action around.

Table 1: Integrated Deterrence Implementation Framework					
<i>Goal: Adversary deterred from attempting to achieve their desired objective.</i>					
		Elements of National Power			
		<i>Diplomacy</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Military</i>	<i>Economic</i>
Interagency Integrator		<i>DOS</i>	<i>NSC</i>	<i>DOD</i>	<i>Treasury</i>
Deterrence Elements	<i>Denial</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc.
	<i>Punishment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy Option 1 • Policy Option 2 • Etc.

Table 1. Framework for whole-of-government deterrence approach



Building from this center, the framework relies on deterrence theory and the elements of national power as organizing principles. On the left side of the framework are the two main “ways” of deterrence theory, deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment. Across the top, the framework lists the primary instruments of national power, specifically diplomacy, information, military, and economy. The intersection of deterrence ways and national power means creates a binning construct that allows the government to organize policy options and ideas into focused categories from which inherently aligned tasks will be identified.

A key to reliable integration across any large organization is the requirement for the designation of a lead agency or element to oversee the integration efforts. The framework identifies primary mission managers for each element of national power. These integrators would be responsible for overseeing the development and execution of policy options within that element of power. Additionally, the integrator would be responsible for developing and executing associated policy options and ensuring these policies are deconflicted with other agencies across the whole-of-government.

Policy Recommendations

Further development and application of this framework will be critical for success in three-party strategic competition. In inherently unstable systems, it is important to maintain clarity in strategic direction. The illustration below demonstrates how this can be done to develop three policy options to deter PRC expansion (Table 2). Two recommendations are built around the theory of deterrence by denial and aim to shape PRC perception that they will not succeed. The third option leverages deterrence by threat of punishment in that the PRC will perceive the impending cost is not worth the benefit. Applying the framework to develop these



three basic recommendations, one already begins to identify opportunities and leverage points within U.S. policy to deter the PRC.

Integrated Deterrence Implementation Framework					
<i>Goal: People Republic of China is deterred from altering the global balance of power.</i>					
		Elements of National Power			
		<i>Diplomacy</i>	<i>Information</i>	<i>Military</i>	<i>Economic</i>
Interagency Integrator		<i>DOS</i>	<i>NSC</i>	<i>DOD</i>	<i>Treasury</i>
Deterrence Actions	<i>Denial</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Block access to nations Limit consultations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OPSEC Deception Delay Conceal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Space and Missile Defense Trilateral Agreement Nuclear deterrence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exclusive trade practices Duties Compete
	<i>Punishment</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demarche UNSC resolution Eject diplomats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting PRC atrocities Reveal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conventional overmatch Decisive response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sanctions Tariffs Seize assets

Table 2. Whole-of-government deterrence framework for deterring the PRC

Policy Recommendation #1 – Space and Missile Defense Trilateral Security Pact between Australia, United Kingdom, and United States (AUKUS)

The Space and Missile Defense Trilateral Security pact would enhance space and missile defense through a “shared commitment to the international rules-based order, to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region” (Morrison, 2021).

Potential elements of this pact include:

- Combined path to enhanced endoatmospheric situational awareness to counter China’s emerging hypersonic glide vehicle and missile technology; encourage combined investment in Hypersonic Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS) technology
- Combined exploitation of ground-based sub-orbital and space surveillance 2D and 3D radar sites in Australia to detect and characterize launches from mainland China



- Construction of similar radar sites in the northern United Kingdom to characterize resident space objects during the subsequent orbital revolutions around the earth
- Acquire next-generation Geosynchronous Space Situational Awareness Program (GSSAP), Space-Based Infrared System, Space-Based Space Surveillance, and future exquisite overhead ISR systems
- Share advanced Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense Systems and upgraded standard missile technology to increase capability and capacity while enhancing interoperability and standardization in future ship design

Policy Recommendation #2 – Promote Access, Transparency and Freedom of Speech

The perception of a successful information operations campaign must be organic, driven from the bottom up yet directed by charismatic leadership willing to take risks. Traditionally governments are poorly suited to generate the clicks and page views necessary for its messages to go viral. Innovative thought, planning, and action may be achieved through a public / private partnership created to lead a combined IO effort targeting the Chinese people – the Chinese Communist Party’s great source of worry and potential instability. A coordinated information operation campaign should:

- Subsidize access to low earth orbit or mid earth orbit broadband satellite constellations to provide free and open high-speed internet access over the Chinese mainland
- Amplify allied/partner messages that counter PRC global expansion efforts
- Promote Taiwan as a tourist destination
- Encourage private and open-source intelligence firms to release commercial imagery on PRC military buildup, expose potential human rights violations, poor environmental practices, over-polluted cities, extreme COVID lockdowns, and technological mishaps



Policy Recommendation #3 - Reveal Capabilities, Induce Doubt

If “the threat of force can be used to compel an adversary to modify current behavior or shape future action by deploying and posturing military capabilities and issuing warning statements that convey a decision to use force if one’s conditions are not met” then the targeted reveal of a new threat of force can be used for the same effect (Strategy, 2018). This is not without precedent, as in 2014 the USAF revealed the existence of GSSAP. The reveal should be a space or missile defense-related capability:

- De-classification and authorized reveal of space capabilities
- Accelerate and demonstrate exquisite weapons programs
- Accentuate depth and breadth of US, alliance capabilities

Conclusion

If US policymakers choose to pursue a strategic vision to retain the nation’s relative influence in world affairs and the Western-led liberal international system, a new approach to operational deterrence theory is required for strategic deterrence in the 21st century. The PRC’s rapid expansion and potential for continued growth pose a particularly ominous challenge as they strive to become the strongest nation in the world (Heinrichs, 2022). What worked for two-party deterrence will not work for three-party deterrence. The United States will require a whole-of-government deterrence approach to account for the instability of three-party strategic competition to preserve the international system in a way that minimizes the risk of great power conflict without unintentionally compromising core interests.



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