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Allied Assurance and Extended Deterrence in Multipolarity¹

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Today, the United States and its allies find themselves amidst significant changes in the strategic environment. These changes are generating new extended deterrence and assurance requirements.² Extended deterrence and assurance are not the same; the first has to do with influencing the adversary, the second with influencing allies. British Defense Minister Denis Healy famously quipped that it may only take five percent credibility to deter Moscow, but 95 percent to assure the allies.³ This *Information Series* draws on interviews with experts in allied countries that were conducted in the June-August 2022 timeframe.

Extended deterrence and assurance encompass a spectrum of actions, ranging from hosting U.S. nuclear weapons abroad to filling ambassadorial posts promptly. Changes in extended deterrence and assurance commitments and the force posture supporting them are not unprecedented in U.S. history. They go through seasons of readjustment and change as the strategic environment evolves. For example, in the 1970s, the United States developed limited nuclear options in response to the Soviet Union reaching strategic parity with the United States, which was seen as undermining the credibility of U.S. assurance commitments to allies.⁴ Then in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States significantly reduced its tactical nuclear weapon arsenal – and could do so without visibly undermining its extended deterrence and assurance guarantees.

What has remained constant throughout has been the continuing allied desire for assurance and the U.S. interest in providing extended deterrence and assurance, factors that are unlikely



to change in the future. Given NATO's enlargement since the end of the Cold War, the United States expanded its extended deterrence and assurance commitments even as it reduced the force posture that supported the attainment of extended deterrence and assurance goals during the Cold War.⁵ While the change could be justified by the post-Cold War strategic environment in the 1990s, today, the United States and allies are faced with significant changes yet again; only this time, the changes are not for the better. As Admiral Charles Richard, Commander of the Strategic Command recently pointed out, "We have to account for three-party [threats]... That is unprecedented in this nation's history. We have never faced two peer nuclear-capable opponents at the same time, who have to be deterred differently."⁶

Challenges to the Credibility of U.S. Extended Deterrence and Assurance Commitments

The United States carries special responsibilities to assure allies and deter adversaries through its extended nuclear deterrence commitments—its "nuclear umbrella." More than 30 countries around the world, including 29 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, Australia, Japan, and South Korea are currently protected under this umbrella. U.S. extended deterrence and assurance have come under strain given the negative regional trends, particularly the challenges of a resurgent Russia, the rise of China as a nuclear peer, and the emergence of nuclear-armed North Korea. Each of these countries harbors revisionist geopolitical goals, sometimes with global implications, making their armed build-ups particularly worrisome. Given these negative developments, U.S. extended deterrence and assurance requirements must be reevaluated to ensure their continued credibility and viability.

What Do Allies in Europe Want?

Just as deterrence is in the eyes of those whom the United States seeks to deter, assurance is a matter of an ally's perceptions influenced by U.S. actions that communicate its will, capability, and credibility to come to an ally's defense in its hour of need.

The outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine will be an important factor in shaping how allies perceive their assurance needs in the future, particularly with respect to those that are close to Russia's borders. The results of the war are directly tied to these states' perceptions of their own security. Should Russia come out of the war stronger, some U.S. NATO allies, particularly those that were a part of the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact, may be even more nervous about Russia's threat than they are today, and their assurance requirements will likely increase. Extended deterrence could be weakened should Russia win in Ukraine. Consequently, the United States would have to work harder to assure these allies, potentially increasing the strain on its already thinly stretched defense budget.



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The extent to which Russia's war in Ukraine degrades Russia's capabilities, industrial potential, and manpower resources, and lessons that Russia may learn from the conflict will shape how safe U.S. allies feel and their demands on U.S. assurances. Should Russia emerge from the war significantly weaker, assurance demands could even decrease until such time that Russia reconstitutes its military capabilities and presents a threat to Europe again. Nevertheless, even under the best-case scenario, at least some European allies will want a tangible U.S. presence to continue to serve as the glue that holds European security together.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several European countries have recently announced extensive defense modernization programs. Some of these programs, for example the Czech Republic's or Poland's announcements of the F-35 purchases, could enable European states to be more involved in nuclear sharing arrangements with the United States.⁷

Russia's invasion of Ukraine also means that—despite a general recognition that China is the “pacing threat”—the United States also must focus on Europe for the time being. This attention and additional U.S. forward deployments have been welcomed by European countries. From an allied perspective, U.S. forward-deployed conventional forces remain the most visible and valuable component of assurance in NATO countries that do not host U.S. nuclear weapons. European member states welcome NATO's efforts to bolster the deterrence of potential Russian aggression by strengthening its military presence closer to Russia's borders. The U.S. conventional presence generally is seen as adequate for now, although there is a “the more, the better” sense among allies, particularly in countries close to the frontlines. The chief concern for both allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific is whether the United States will have enough capability to deter aggression and engage militarily, if necessary, in two theaters simultaneously.

Recognition of the importance of nuclear weapons to overall deterrence and the security of allies is apparent in NATO's new Strategic Concept. Few experts argue that the United States ought to pursue unilateral nuclear weapon reductions now, and many voice strong opposition to the idea at this time. They also oppose U.S. adoption of a no-first use declaratory policy. Allies consider the U.S. nuclear weapon modernization program and its bipartisan support important for both extended deterrence and allied assurance. Generally, few allies in Europe appear to be worried about the tactical nuclear weapon disparity between NATO and Russia, at least for the near-term. Some allies worry that a U.S. eagerness to resume arms control discussions with Russia would send an unhelpful signal to Russia and should not be pursued at this time. It is also apparent to allies in Europe that China is not interested in meaningful arms control.

U.S. conventional actions in other states matter for extended deterrence and assurance too, and the way the United States withdrew from Afghanistan or failed to enforce President Obama's stated red line in Syria damaged its credibility. But allies overall appear satisfied with steps the



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United States has taken to assure them and maintain the credibility of extended deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, particularly increased conventional deployments to countries closer to the frontline.

What Do Allies in the Indo-Pacific Want?

Currently, there are five nuclear powers geographically located in the region: China, India, North Korea, Pakistan, and Russia. China's rise, North Korea's nuclear capabilities, and their revisionist intentions are the most problematic from an assurance perspective and the regional security dynamic. Without the United States extending deterrence and assuring allies, the military balance is distinctly in favor of authoritarian states. The lack of a U.S. presence in the region would likely strengthen proliferation pressures among other local democracies.⁸ Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Richard Marles recently stated that "in the years ahead, the U.S.-Australia alliance will not only have to operate in a much more challenging strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific, it will need to contribute to a more effective balance of military power aimed at avoiding a catastrophic failure of deterrence."⁹ Distance plays an important role in shaping allied perceptions of their security and consequently of their assurance needs. Unlike in Europe, allies in the Indo-Pacific are separated by thousands of miles of water, giving a whole new meaning to the term "tyranny of distance."

Strategic nuclear weapons remain a centerpiece of allied assurance in the region. Some experts in Asia argue that U.S. ballistic missile defense and conventional long-range strike weapons are insufficient for assurance.¹⁰ Others see the reduction in the U.S. nonstrategic nuclear weapon arsenal since the end of the Cold War as an expression of decreasing U.S. interest in forward-deploying nuclear weapons and hence in allied assurance.¹¹

Alliance dynamics in the region are further complicated by the fact that two U.S. allies, Japan and South Korea, have historical animosity that impedes their mutual cooperation. For example, in a 2019 survey, a majority of South Koreans would back North Korea in war with Japan.¹² A majority see Japan as a military threat, according to another poll.¹³ This "brittle" alliance structure means that should U.S. nonproliferation policies fail and one country were to develop a nuclear weapon, others would feel a stronger push to follow.¹⁴ It also makes alliance management and policy coordination more difficult and increases the importance of an American presence in the region to help calm and overcome these historical animosities.

For allies in the Indo-Pacific, the lesson of Ukraine appears to be that the United States will be reluctant to involve itself in a conflict directly with China on allies' behalf unless an ally is protected by something akin to NATO's Article V. This places a premium on the development of their own capabilities and political will to defend their territories. Allies perceive the need to develop their own capabilities to resist long enough to deny China an opportunity for a *fait accompli*.



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Indo-Pacific allies are also concerned that U.S. deployments to Europe to assure allies and extend deterrence there will drain resources that otherwise could be used to enhance the U.S. deterrence posture in the Indo-Pacific region where China continues to gain strength daily. But it is clear that a Putin victory in Ukraine would have devastating consequences for extended deterrence and assurance in the region and Indo-Pacific allies are aware of the tradeoffs and difficult decisions involved in prioritizing one theater over another.

Given large distances in the region, it is clear that any potential conflict with China will be fought largely with forces that are already deployed to the area and that allies may not have an option to bring in weapons amid active hostilities, unlike the situation in Ukraine.¹⁵ In a “hot” conflict with China, resupply routes are not going to be available without assuming disproportionately large risks to U.S. and allied operating platforms.¹⁶ That means not only that the United States should preposition weapons forward as much as possible but also that allies should develop their own capabilities to resist as long as necessary to muster the international support to punish the aggressor.

At the same time, the United States may face political difficulties in increasing its land-based deployments in Japan. While Japan recently agreed to increase funding for hosting U.S. military forces on its territory, the U.S. military presence remains a contentious issue in the country.¹⁷ Because allies in Asia rely exclusively on U.S. strategic weapons for their ultimate security, their modernization is an essential component of the credibility of U.S. assurance guarantees and extended deterrence.¹⁸ Allies consider the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) program and the low-yield ballistic missile warhead (W76-2) important to counter China’s advantages in short- and intermediate-range weapons. The SLCM-N is particularly important according to allies in this region because of the difficulties associated with operating dual-capable aircraft due to the range and geographical distances involved, lack of U.S. forward-deployed nuclear weapons, and the retirement of the nuclear-armed Tomahawk Land-Attack Missile (TLAM-N), at the time the only practical non-strategic nuclear option for the theater.

In light of allied concerns, the United States ought to consider expanding bilateral consultations and explore options for the forward deployment of nuclear weapons. It would be better to discuss the issue now rather than in the midst of a crisis. Many interviewees argued in favor of an expanded strategic dialogue to include discussions of U.S. nuclear force planning and principles and that now is not the time to change U.S. declaratory policy to support “sole purpose” or “no first use.” In addition, they argued that United States should not continue deferring or cancelling necessary strategic system tests because adversaries will likely interpret such a step as a sign of weakness.



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Conclusion

Communicating resolve, assurance, and deterrence will become more complex in a multipolar environment. The United States and its allies face the difficult task of convincing an adversary that the prospective costs and uncertainties of aggression outweigh any potential gains. U.S. and allied signals and communications will be closely monitored not just by the intended recipient but also by adversaries and allies in other parts of the world.

The United States would do well to remember that “Usually the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing.”¹⁹ Currently, the United States extended deterrence and assurance posture face several gaps that make it look less willing than it should be; chief among them are conventional forces incapable of sustaining two simultaneous engagements in geographically separate regions and asymmetries in short- and intermediate-range nuclear forces. It is time for the United States to consider how best to prudently close the gaps in ways that strengthen extended deterrence and contribute to the assurance of allies.

¹ This *Information Series* is based on an upcoming *Occasional Paper* titled *Multipolarity, Extended Deterrence, and Allied Assurance* and interviews that were conducted in preparation for the *Occasional Paper*.

² For an elaboration on this point see Keith Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Great Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, *Occasional Paper Vol. 2, No. 8* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.

³ Denis Healey, *The time of my life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

⁴ See National Security Decision Memorandum-242, Policy for Planning the Employment of Nuclear Weapons, January 17, 1974, available at https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm_242.pdf and Policy Guidance for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons, April 3, 1974, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/SIOP-25.pdf>.

⁵ The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined in 1999, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and the Republic of North Macedonia in 2020. All NATO members except for France are participants in the Nuclear Planning Group.

⁶ Tara Copp, “US Military ‘Furiously’ Rewriting Nuclear Deterrence to Address Russia and China, STRATCOM Chief Says,” *Defense One*, August 11, 2022, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2022/08/us-military-furiously-rewriting-nuclear-deterrence-address-russia-and-china-stratcom-chief-says/375725/>.

⁷ Brad Lendon, Yoonjung Seo and Joseph Ataman, “Poland to buy hundreds of South Korean tanks, howitzers after sending arms to Ukraine,” *CNN*, July 28, 2022, available at <https://abc17news.com/news/national-world/cnn-asia-pacific/2022/07/28/poland-to-buy-hundreds-of-south-korean-tanks-howitzers-after-sending-arms-to-ukraine-2/>; Jan Lopatka, “Czechs want F-35 fighter jets, CV-90 fighting vehicles,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2022, available at <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/czechs-want-f-35-fighter-jets-cv-90-fighting-vehicles-media-says-2022-07-20/>.

⁸ Rod Lyon, “Nuclear strategy in a changing world,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, October 1, 2019, p. 44.

⁹ Richard Marles, “The U.S.-Australia Alliance: Aligning Priorities in the Indo-Pacific with Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles,” *Transcript*, Center for International and Strategic Studies, July 11, 2022, p. 8, available at



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¹⁰ Kim Min-seok, "Would United States risk New York to protect Seoul?," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 26, 2022, available at <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/06/26/opinion/columns/extended-nuclear-deterrence-South-Korea-US/20220626200111690.html>.

¹¹ Rod Lyon, "The Challenges Confronting US Extended Nuclear Assurance in Asia," *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2013), p. 936.

¹² Jesse Johnson, "Nearly half of South Koreans would back North in war with Japan, while 40% 'have no idea'," *The Japan Times*, November 8, 2019, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/11/08/national/politics-diplomacy/nearly-half-south-koreans-back-north-vs-japan/>.

¹³ "Nearly 60% of South Koreans view Japan as military threat: joint survey," *The Japan Times*, May 29, 2015, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/05/29/national/nearly-60-of-south-koreans-view-japan-as-military-threat-joint-survey/>.

¹⁴ Rod Lyon, "The Challenges Confronting US Extended Nuclear Assurance in Asia," op. cit., pp. 936-937.

¹⁵ See Franklin Miller's contributions in *Journal of Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (August 2022), p. 116, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Proceedings-4.22.pdf>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lucy Craft, "Japan approves 5 years more funding for U.S. military presence as China, Russia and North Korea threats loom large," *CBS News*, March 22, 2022, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/japan-us-military-host-nation-budget-china-north-korea-russia-threats/>.

¹⁸ Rod Lyon, "A Shifting Asian Nuclear Order," Special Report, *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2016, p. 24.

¹⁹ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 213-214.

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