

# SESSION 1: STATE OF NUCLEAR EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN EAST ASIA TODAY

## Extended Nuclear Deterrence in Northeast Asia

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The place to start any discussion about the future of extended deterrence -- which is essentially an American phenomenon -- is with a heresy: There is no such thing as the “nuclear umbrella.”

Of course, the United States has security commitments to many countries in Northeast Asia. For example, the 1960 Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan commits the parties to “act to meet the common danger” from an “armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan.” And, of course, the United States also has a very effective arsenal of nuclear weapons that is second to none that could be used in such a case.

But there is *no specific commitment* to use any of those nuclear weapons in defense of any ally. Neither the US-Japan agreement nor any other US defense agreement commits the United States to use nuclear weapons in any specific scenario. The nuclear umbrella is, at best, an implication of the US defense commitments. It is, in certain cases, an unavoidable implication. But the important observation is that extended nuclear deterrence does not simply occur naturally. The United States and its allies must continually engage in a process that credibly links security commitments to available nuclear forces.

One way to think about much of the history of extended deterrence is as an ongoing process to make real the commitment implied by the dual reality of US security commitments and the existence of US nuclear weapons. In Europe, this process took the form of planning activities and “nuclear sharing” arrangements in which European pilots in so-called “dual capable” aircraft trained to drop American nuclear bombs. In Japan (before 1972) and South Korea (before 1991), the commitment was implied by US nuclear weapons stationed on their territories.

With the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, there are no US nuclear weapons forward deployed in the Asia-Pacific region. In Northeast Asia, the United States faces a special challenge in demonstrating the credibility of extended deterrence. North Korea, in particular, seems to regard its small nuclear arsenal as a short of shield from behind which it can initiate limited offensive military operations against South Korea. The sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island demonstrate that the United States needs to be mindful of the credibility of extended deterrence.

Since 1991, American officials have largely pointed to specific capabilities in the American arsenal that are said to be maintained for the unique task of extended deterrence, on the grounds that defense expenditures demonstrate a seriousness of purpose. So, for example, in 2001, the Bush Administration told Japan that the United States was retaining the option to deploy nuclear-armed Tomahawk missiles (which were sitting in storage) on US attack submarines just to show we were serious about defending Japan.

The problem with this approach is that US conventional and nuclear capabilities continue to evolve – relying on hardware commits us to those capabilities long past their obsolescence. The United States would not, under any conceivable circumstance, have redeployed the nuclear Tomahawk. All along, the Navy intended to retire the system in 2013. In 2010, the Obama Administration had to choose between explaining to Tokyo that, perhaps, American officials hadn't been entirely truthful in 2002 and the system would be retired – or spending money the Navy didn't have to maintain the system in storage. Fortunately, the Obama Administration decided to proceed with the retirement of the nuclear Tomahawk.

The Obama Administration calculated, correctly in my view, that consultations were much more important than the nuclear Tomahawk. One result of the *Nuclear Posture Review* process has been much more significant consultations with US allies, especially Japan and South Korea. For example, the United States and South Korea have established an “Extended Deterrence Policy Committee” that helps provide some of the same consultation functions that exist in NATO.

Unfortunately, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review also continued the short-sighted practice of emphasizing hardware as a proxy for the “nuclear umbrella.” This time, the United States asserted that the US commitment to extended deterrence was demonstrated by the effort to make nuclear-capable the Joint Strike Fighter (and extend the life of the B61 nuclear gravity bomb it would carry) and maintain the capability to forward deploy US bombers, like the B2, particularly in Guam.

These are, however, irrelevant capabilities that may not survive the current budget austerity. There are no military missions for the B61s deployed in Europe -- one NATO official admitted to me that “we would never drop a B61 off the wing of an airplane” -- and the Air Force does not want to spend the money on giving the JSF an obsolete nuclear capability. (Nor do our European partners seem keen to modernize their own “dual capable” aircraft.) Nor would the United States forward deploy *nuclear-armed* B2s, either in Guam or elsewhere. (Conventionally-armed bombers are another matter.) The B2 can reach targets from North Korea to Iran directly from Missouri, which is what the United States did in the early stages of operations against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Obama Administration is already considering ways to save on the F-35, having reduced the number of aircraft to be purchased by one-third. Some officials have proposed eliminating the nuclear capability for the fighter as a further cost-saving measure. The possibility that Congress could kill the entire F-35 program remains

unlikely, but is no longer unthinkable. Similarly, the lifetime extension program for the B61 is facing delays. There is simply no guarantee that the capability to forward deploy nuclear-capable fighter aircraft will survive the current budget environment.

Other senior officials, including the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have openly question the strategic triad, leading some analysts to conclude that the bomber leg will not survive indefinitely.

Either this Administration or the next may end up explaining that the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, in its own way, was not entirely truthful about the importance of the F-35.

In this current environment, it is time to be honest that the primary source of nuclear deterrence for US allies comes from the strategic triad of intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles and bombers. In the foreseeable future, the United States will be focused on maintaining these capabilities -- either as a triad or dyad -- while gradually shedding theater capabilities like the nuclear Tomahawk. Budget pressures will only grow once the Defense Department begins to plan for the replacement of these systems, particularly the fleet of ballistic missile submarines. Wasting money on irrelevant systems that have perceived political value, but no military utility, is not a solid foundation for defense. The United States should spend its money to optimize its ability to credibly provide security, with consultations providing an important means for allies to convey their assessment of the threat and the United States to demonstrate how it can meet the threats to their security.

US nuclear weapons continue to play an important, if declining, role in meeting US security commitments. The capabilities inherent in the “central strategic forces” of the US should provide more than enough deterrence for the homeland, our forces abroad and our allies. Generally speaking, the capabilities embedded in the strategic triad are more than sufficient for effective deterrence in Northeast Asia. To a first approximation, the challenge is a political challenge rather than a military one – how to demonstrate that the United States is as committed to the defense of Seoul as it is to the defense of Seattle. This argument needs to be rooted in shared interests and values, which endure, rather than specific military systems, which will continue to evolve. Ultimately, consultations will be the most important tool.

During the Cold War, for example, the US emphasized the formal commitment of US ballistic missile submarines and missile warheads to NATO. Today, the United States maintains a rotation of ballistic missile submarines in the Pacific. The United States might propose a number of measures to help Japan and South Korea better understand the role of those assets in their security. Such consultations could be supplemented by displays, such as port visits by ballistic missile submarines. For countries like Japan, where sensitivity to US nuclear weapons deployments is high, the United States could arrange for visits by Guided Missile Submarines (SSGNs) – converted ballistic missile submarines that no longer carry nuclear weapons. Finally, the United States might provide for liaison officers to serve at US Strategic Command (STRATCOM). The

liaison officer could serve in a non-nuclear field, such as cyber-security, if political sensitivities are too great. The goal of such efforts would be to ensure that foreign officials have detailed and accurate views of the role of nuclear weapons in their security, as well as a mechanism to convey their assessment of the security environment and views about defense choices.

It is important to note that such consultations are not intended to convince South Korea or Japan that nuclear weapons are an all-purpose deterrent. Quite the contrary – a realistic assessment of US military capabilities will note that nuclear weapons play a smaller role than ever and would only be considered in the most extreme circumstances. A realistic assessment of allied capabilities would emphasize the role of conventional forces, including missile defenses, much more than nuclear weapons.