

[SE5-LT-2] Nuclear Deterrence and Conventional Deterrence

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Full Summary

This panel discussion focused on the inter-relationship between conventional deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons. The concept of deterrence includes a broad range of different elements, including the credibility of deterrence capability and its close relation to assurance. The concepts of both deterrence and assurance can differ depending on the eyes of the beholder, and policies aimed at deterring an adversary and assuring an ally at the same time do not always have equal effects. Often times, relatively little is required to deter an adversary, while significant amounts of energy must be expended to assure an ally.

Recent remarks by officials in the United States also highlight the fact that deterrence commitments can be contradictory. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently completed a trip to Asia and Europe, and his remarks in each respective location contrasted greatly with one another. In a move that surprised some analysts, Gates referred to the United States as the "indispensible nation" in Asia. Meanwhile, when speaking to an audience in Europe, Gates criticized developments in the U.S.-European NATO alliance and cited examples of Europe's inability to carry its weight within the alliance. He suggested that the NATO alliance faces a grim future, contrasting with the highly reassuring tone he took in Asia.

Reflecting on the recent intervention in Libya, Gates criticized the European countries for not demonstrating their ability to carry their respective share of the security alliance balance. These remarks were directed not only at the NATO members, but were intended for a domestic audience as well. The comments reinforce the perception that NATO-Europe is a free-rider in the existing security agreement, while referring to the Asian allies as "partners" goes a long way in improving the perception of the U.S.-Asian alliance. In response to these comments, Chinese officials expressed concern over the potential for the creation of an Asian version of NATO. While these concerns may seem unrealistic and premature to analysts in the United States, it is worth noting that those in China harbor such feelings.

The conference largely focused on nuclear issues, but this panel spent some time discussing developments in U.S. conventional deterrence capabilities. Specifically, the United States has considered developing a Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS) capability. Elaine Bunn emphasized that this was still in the conceptual stage, however its consideration was worth discussion. The attraction of CPGS is largely a response to the threats of the 21st century, which include terrorism and nuclear armed terrorist states. Although nuclear weapons currently have this ability to respond globally in a time sensitive manner, a nuclear strike is far less acceptable than a conventional strike in dealing with these newer threats. From this stand point, advocates of CPGS believe it enhances deterrence and assurance by providing a more effective and more useable response to threats. Meanwhile, opponents argue that U.S. conventional weapons would be destabilizing.

China and Russia in particular expressed concern over the development of the CPGS capability. Despite the fact that CPGS remains in the conceptual stage, Russia and China have argued that it would be threatening to their respective security. The panelists believed that strategic stability dialogues remain the most useful forum to discuss the development of the CPGS system. Although this topic has received little attention during formal discussions, in the future negotiations of pre-launch notification guarantees could prove to be fruitful starting points. The existing limits in military-to-military relations with these countries are clear, and completely eliminating the concerns of Russia and China toward CPGS is unlikely. However, mitigating their concerns is a worthy goal.

On the subject of extended deterrence, several U.S. experts recently completed a series of dialogues with their counterparts in South Korea and Japan that focused on the alliances and deterrence. One of the conclusions of these talks is that countries in Asia have a fundamentally different threat perception than that of the United States. Asian countries typically think of state actors as the primary source of security threats, which is a view that the United States shared during the Cold War. However, in the post-9/11 environment the United States is increasingly worried about the threat of non-state actors. Thus, the real challenge from Asia's perspective is how to shape the strategic environment. In the recent dispute over the Senkakku/Diaoyutai islands, Japan was more surprised by China's response in restricting rare-earth exports to Japan than it was by the vociferous denunciations from Beijing. This underscores the fact that military responses are not the only tools to be considered when thinking about deterrence. Economic and political instruments of power are also important.

The United States has insisted for so long that nuclear weapons are essential to our national security, that it has influenced the perception of these weapons among our allies. U.S. allies in Asia now view nuclear weapons as more important than the United States does, and

changes in nuclear policy from Washington often influences deterrence perceptions. As the United States continues to negotiate the START treaty and move away from its reliance on nuclear weapons, Washington will depend more upon its allies to serve as a deterrent. The strengthened security relationships that are a natural response to this change will both assure U.S. allies, and also deter adversaries. However, the United States continues to express the belief that allies could be doing more for the alliance which is evident in discussions surrounding ballistic missiles.

Not only is the changing nuclear policy encouraging a strengthening of the U.S. alliance system in Asia, but so are the new economic realities. The U.S. defense budget will likely continue to face downward pressure for the foreseeable future, increasing the need for collaboration and cooperation in the security realm. All parties within the alliance must make changes in the relationship that make the defense systems more economically efficient but still credible. This change, while necessary, requires careful consideration because changes in doctrine can have very significant and potentially dangerous implications. The recent speech by Gates is an example of this, as it not only reached multiple audiences but it included multiple messages. There are clear differences between the U.S. nuclear declaratory policy and its goal of achieving “global zero.” Furthermore, the recently completed Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) also references the declaratory policy. Although it does not disavow the goal of achieving “global zero,” it does place the policy in a different context. The Obama Administration has attempted to strike a delicate balance between the messages which may appear contradictory. There is a goal to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy and to reduce the overall number of nuclear weapons. Yet at the same time, the United States is revitalizing its nuclear infrastructure to ensure that it remains available.

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