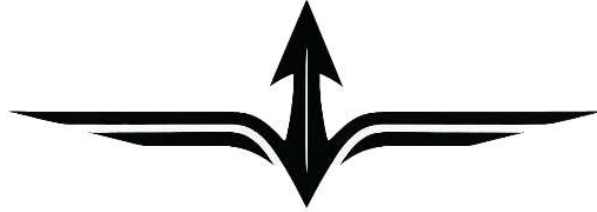


CHAPTER 2



Deterrence Under Pressure in the Indo-Pacific

Andrea Malji

“Deterrence is still fundamentally about influencing an actor’s decisions. It is about a solid policy foundation. It is about credible capabilities. It is about what the United States and our allies [collectively] can bring to bear in both a military and nonmilitary sense.”²

— General C. Robert Kehler
Commander, U.S. Strategic Command (2011–13)

The strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific is undergoing a decisive transformation shaped by three forces: the diffusion of power, compressed decision timelines, and expanding strategic autonomy of capable regional states. The era of uncontested U.S.

predominance has ended.³ In its place stands a region defined by competitive multipolarity, one in which the United States and the People's Republic of China remain the most consequential actors, yet far from the only ones capable of shaping outcomes.⁴ In this environment, deterrence has reemerged as the organizing principle of American statecraft, not only to prevent major war, but to preserve a regional setting that supports open commerce, sovereign decision-making, and long-term stability.⁵

China is accelerating military modernization,⁶ expanding coercive leverage in maritime and gray-zone arenas,⁷ and pursuing regional primacy across the Western Pacific. Russia, though constrained by sanctions and demographic decline, continues to unsettle norms through arms transfers,⁸ cyber operations,⁹ and strategic coordination with Beijing¹⁰ and Pyongyang.¹¹ Meanwhile, key middle powers—India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia—are exercising greater strategic agency, investing in defense modernization, and shaping the regional balance through selective alignment and calibrated hedging.¹² Their choices will significantly influence whether the Indo-Pacific evolves toward openness and stability or coercion and hierarchy.

These dynamics make deterrence both more essential and more complex. Cold War models, characterized by clear blocs, predictable escalation ladders, and a singular principal adversary, no longer define competition in a region where power is diffused, interdependence is deep, and strategic competition spans multiple domains, including military, economic, technological, cyber, and informational. Adversaries increasingly operate below the threshold of armed conflict, using cyber intrusions, economic pressure,

disinformation, and maritime militias to shift facts on the ground without crossing traditional red lines.¹³ These tactics blur thresholds, complicate attribution, and compress the time available for calibrated responses.

Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific is therefore not a single-domain or single-adversary undertaking. It is an integrated contest in which strategic signaling, coalition cohesion, technological advantage, and secure industrial capacity matter as much as forward posture and firepower. The task for the United States is to construct a deterrence framework capable of withstanding sustained coercive pressure, reassuring allies, managing escalation risk, and countering aggression in both the gray zone and in high-end contingencies.

This chapter outlines the logic and foundational principles of such an approach. It provides the strategic frame through which the rest of the volume should be read, by linking America's aims in the Indo-Pacific to the operational, institutional, and domain-specific discussions that follow.

Deterrence as a Strategic Pillar of U.S. Statecraft

Deterrence has long served as a stabilizing element of U.S. strategy, but its significance is amplified under conditions of competitive multipolarity. In the Indo-Pacific, deterrence is the principal mechanism through which the United States prevents coercion by larger states, maintains a free and open region, and preserves access to critical sea lanes, markets, and information networks. It is not merely a military function; it is the strategic lens through which U.S. policy, posture, and partnership must be designed.¹⁴

At its core, deterrence rests on three mutually reinforcing elements. First, effective deterrence requires a clear articulation of interests and thresholds.¹⁵ Adversaries must understand that the United States is committed to protecting its treaty obligations, core partners, and the free and open use of major sea lanes. They must also clearly understand which actions would cross established thresholds and trigger a response. Ambiguity risks miscalculation, while clarity strengthens deterrence.¹⁶

Second, deterrence depends on credible capability and presence.¹⁷ Power must be visible, survivable, and sustainable. The United States must be able to project force across vast distances, endure in contested environments, and integrate with capable allied and partner militaries.¹⁸ Deterrence erodes when capacity fails to align with declared objectives or when forward posture appears brittle or episodic.

Third, deterrence requires a demonstrated willingness to accept costs.¹⁹ Adversaries judge not only capabilities but also whether the United States will act when challenged. Credibility derives from consistency, follow-through, and visible allied unity.²⁰ Patterns over time, rather than declaratory statements, shape perceptions of American resolve.

As the 2025 National Security Strategy emphasizes, maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific demands credible and sustained deterrence across domains, strong cooperation with capable allies and partners who assume greater responsibility, and secure technological and industrial foundations.²¹ A forward, combat-credible posture, combined with economic leverage and

concerted national action, forms the backbone of effective deterrence. Deterrence is thus not episodic but continuous.

In this context, deterrence is not about recreating Cold War-style standoffs. Instead, it is about preventing China, Russia, and North Korea from using coercion or force to alter the region's strategic alignment. It also requires careful risk management: projecting strength without provoking escalation, and reassuring allies without foreclosing diplomatic off-ramps. Consequently, deterrence today spans every domain from maritime, cyber, and space to economic, informational, and industrial.²² It is as much about securing data flows, semiconductors, and critical minerals as it is about safeguarding sea lanes and airspace.

For these reasons, deterrence is not one tool among many. It is the organizing principle that aligns U.S. strategy with the operational, technological, and industrial demands of the Indo-Pacific Century.

Structural Conditions of Deterrence in a Competitive Multipolar Indo-Pacific

Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific unfolds within the broader condition of competitive multipolarity described in this volume's opening chapter, but its practical operation is shaped by distinct regional structural constraints. Globally, power is distributed across multiple major actors in an uneven fashion. Regionally, however, the Indo-Pacific exhibits a more concentrated dynamic. The United States and China are the most consequential actors in the region, yet neither can dominate the strategic environment without the cooperation of capable regional states.

This produces a condition best understood not as rigid bipolarity, but as contested bipolarity: a setting in which two principal powers shape the military balance while middle powers exercise decisive influence over access, legitimacy, and escalation pathways.²³ Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia are not passive terrains. Their basing decisions, defense investments, diplomatic alignments, and economic partnerships constrain and channel the behavior of great powers.

This structure matters profoundly for deterrence. It means denial strategies cannot be executed unilaterally, escalation risks are geographically and politically fragmented, and credibility depends as much on coalition cohesion as on U.S. force posture. Deterrence must therefore be designed not simply to dissuade adversaries but to reassure partners and preserve their freedom of maneuver under pressure.

Deterring Coercive Powers, Leveraging Assertive Middle Powers

The Indo-Pacific deterrence challenge is not monolithic. It requires countering actors that seek to alter regional alignments through coercion while leveraging the growing strategic influence of assertive middle powers whose agency is central to regional security.

Countering Coercive Powers

China represents the most complex and consequential deterrence challenge. Beijing is modernizing its military, fielding asymmetric

capabilities designed to erode U.S. advantages, expanding its nuclear forces,²⁴ and employing maritime militia, economic pressure, and information operations to gain positional advantage. Its approach is incremental, multi-domain, and calibrated to shift the status quo without provoking open conflict. Deterring China requires combined denial capabilities, coalition-backed staying power, and disciplined escalation management.

Russia plays a secondary but meaningful destabilizing role. Its growing coordination with Beijing and Pyongyang,²⁵ arms transfers to regional militaries, and persistent cyber activity complicate the regional balance. Russia's nuclear signaling, not just in Europe but strategically relevant in Asia, underscores the need for strong U.S. commitments and a credible deterrent posture.

North Korea remains a direct and immediate threat. Its missile testing cycle, advancing delivery systems, and illicit proliferation activities create persistent risks of miscalculation.²⁶ Deterring Pyongyang requires integrated trilateral U.S.–South Korea–Japan coordination, robust conventional and nuclear readiness, and limits on opportunities for coercive manipulation.

Leveraging Assertive Middle Powers

The Indo-Pacific is equally shaped by assertive middle powers, including India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia.²⁷ These states are strategic actors whose choices expand or constrain the operating environment.

Their decisions on force structure, technology acquisition, industrial cooperation, access management, and diplomacy shape the operating environment in ways that can either reinforce

collective deterrence or, if poorly coordinated, introduce friction and escalation risk. India's posture along the Himalayan frontier,²⁸ Japan's counterstrike developments,²⁹ Australia's pursuit of advanced capabilities,³⁰ and the Philippines' actions at Second Thomas Shoal³¹ all illustrate how middle powers influence regional stability, for better or worse.

For the United States, partnership is essential. Effective deterrence requires understanding each partner's strategic objectives, domestic constraints, and red lines. Building a resilient and responsive network of allies and partners will help persuade an aggressor that any hostile act would be futile.

Implications for U.S. Strategy

The United States cannot deter China, Russia, and North Korea alone. Nor can it impose a uniform framework on partners whose agency is central to the Indo-Pacific's competitive dynamics. Deterrence must distinguish between what must be prevented, specifically coercive actions by major powers, and what must be enabled, specifically partner capacity, strategic alignment, and national responsibility.

The result is a tailored approach: deny adversaries opportunities to exploit gaps between the United States and its most capable partners, while enabling those partners to contribute meaningfully to regional security. This differentiated posture strengthens deterrence across the Indo-Pacific and reflects the realities of competitive multipolarity.

Strategic Signaling, Credibility, and Escalation Management

Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific rests not only on material capabilities but also on how actions are perceived by adversaries, allies, and the broader strategic community. In a region marked by compressed timelines and coercive activities below the threshold of armed conflict, strategic signaling becomes the connective tissue between declared policy, operational posture, and adversary expectations. The challenge is not simply to project strength, but to ensure that capability, intent, and communication align in ways that shape decision-making in both peacetime and crisis.

The Dynamics of Signaling in a Competitive Indo-Pacific

Signals are rarely received as intended. Adversaries interpret U.S. actions through their own historical experiences, political priorities, and operational concepts.³² This makes signaling inherently unstable: measures meant to reassure can appear escalatory, while restraint can be interpreted as hesitation. The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis, for example, illustrates this dynamic.³³ The deployment of two carriers stabilized the immediate situation and reassured partners, yet it also motivated Beijing to accelerate the development of long-range strike and area-denial systems that now define the region’s operational landscape.³⁴ More recent senior-level U.S. visits to Taiwan³⁵ and assertive freedom of navigation operations³⁶ have strengthened allied confidence while prompting expansive demonstrations by the People’s Liberation Army, showing how assurance and provocation can emerge from the same signal.

Ambiguity, long viewed as a stabilizing tool, carries its own hazards. The 2012 Scarborough Shoal episode³⁷ demonstrated that

unclear signaling and inconsistent follow-through can enable adversaries to achieve gains without triggering open conflict. The episode led to a shift in perceptions as regional states assessed whether commitments were communicated and whether they were upheld. Ultimately, the lesson learned is that deterrence requires coherence between words and actions, between signaling and posture, and between national strategy and partner behavior.

Credibility as the Core Determinant of Deterrence

Credibility rests on more than military capability. It depends on whether adversaries believe the United States will act, absorb costs, and sustain commitments under pressure. Adversaries continually evaluate and reassess credibility over time by tracking the consistency of U.S. commitments, unity among allies, domestic resolve, and follow-through during crises. In the wake of North Korea's 2010 military provocations against South Korea, for example, subsequent U.S.–South Korea combined exercises signaled resolve while deliberately managing escalation risk.³⁸ This shows that credibility is strongest when political objectives, operational planning, and public messaging are aligned.

When signals lack such alignment, deterrence weakens. Episodic gestures, contradictory statements, or commitments that are unsupported by an operational posture invite opportunism. The Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaped by actors probing legal, political, informational, and military seams to test whether U.S. commitments are durable or conditional.

Escalation Management in a Multi-Domain Environment

Effective deterrence in the Indo-Pacific requires credible pathways for escalation that impose costs as well as viable off-ramps that preserve strategic stability. Because competition now spans cyberspace, outer space, the electromagnetic spectrum, and critical economic systems, escalation can emerge unpredictably and asymmetrically. Maritime militia confrontations, cyber intrusions targeting civilian infrastructure, and coercive economic measures are calibrated to remain below traditional red lines while shifting the regional balance.

To manage escalation under these conditions, the United States must integrate military, technological, informational, and diplomatic tools into a coherent approach. It needs a multi-domain posture that complicates adversary planning before conflict arises; secure and survivable command-and-control networks capable of absorbing early disruption, escalation options designed to provide proportional, synchronized responses across military, economic, and informational domains; and consistent messaging across alliances so that signals from Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, Manila, and New Delhi reinforce one another rather than introduce ambiguity.

Escalation management is not a constraint on deterrence but its enabler. It prevents crises from transforming into conflict while reassuring allies that U.S. strategy is deliberate and controlled. It also demonstrates to adversaries that coercive behavior will trigger consequences while leaving diplomatic off-ramps intact.

Foundational Principles for Strategic Adaptation

Deterrence strategy is shaped not only by how states behave, but by the underlying resources they can mobilize and sustain over time. Power rests on resources that states can convert into influence.³⁹ The distribution of economic, technological, and financial capacity matters as much as force posture alone because those resources are increasingly fungible and can be translated from capital into military capability, technological innovation, or diplomatic reach.

Traditional proxies, such as gross domestic product (GDP) capture scale, but they obscure productivity, innovation, and surplus capacity, all qualities that determine whether power can be sustained under pressure. Historical experience illustrates this limitation. At the height of its global primacy, Britain did not dominate through aggregate GDP or military spending, but rather through superiority in manufacturing, finance, trade, and naval power.⁴⁰ Contemporary competition reflects similar dynamics. States that generate disproportionate value through knowledge- and technology-intensive activity—and that possess the financial depth to absorb costs, regenerate capability, and endure disruption—enjoy decisive advantages in long-term deterrence.

It is against this backdrop that deterrence in the Indo-Pacific must be designed. Competitive multipolarity has transformed the operating environment: power is more widely distributed, competition unfolds across multiple domains simultaneously, and adversaries employ a spectrum of coercive tools that remain below the threshold of open conflict. Under these conditions, deterrence must be adaptive, multidimensional, and designed for endurance. Three foundational principles shape such an approach.

First, deterrence depends on the effective combination of U.S. power and capable partners who assume greater responsibility for regional security.⁴¹ No single state—not even the United States or China—can unilaterally shape the Indo-Pacific’s strategic trajectory. The region’s defining feature is the agency of capable states whose choices influence whether the balance tilts toward openness or coercion. For the United States, sustainable deterrence is achieved through practical cooperation, which holds more weight than symbolic alliances. This includes deepened coordination with treaty allies, selective trilateral and minilateral arrangements, and growing technological and industrial collaboration. When partners invest in their own defense capacity, allow access, and align their strategic priorities, cooperation amplifies deterrence rather than substituting for it.

Second, escalation management must be disciplined and deliberate. For deterrence to succeed, adversaries must understand the clear limits of what is tolerable and the consequences that follow from crossing them. It is equally important, however, to provide them with clear pathways to de-escalate the situation.⁴² This requires signaling in which words and postures reinforce one another, calibrated to avoid triggering rash moves or miscalculation. The Indo-Pacific’s multi-domain character complicates this task: cyber intrusions, space interference, maritime militia confrontations, and economic pressure can all precipitate crises without traditional warning indicators.⁴³ Effective escalation management, therefore, demands preplanned response options, cross-domain integration, secure and survivable command-and-control systems, and consistent messaging among capable partners.

Third, innovation is a strategic imperative, not a luxury.⁴⁴ The Indo-Pacific is emerging as the principal proving ground for next-generation deterrence. The density of military capability, technological sophistication, and contested domains means that traditional approaches are insufficient. Sustaining deterrence requires new operational concepts, the expanded use of unmanned and autonomous systems, hardened and diversified supply chains, distributed maritime and air networks, and space architectures capable of absorbing disruption and rapid reconstitution.⁴⁵

Recent conflicts have underscored the importance of industrial depth, cost-imposing technologies, and integrating commercial innovation with military requirements. This is especially true in a theater characterized by vast distances and dispersed forces.

Taken together, these principles of capable partnership, disciplined escalation management, and continuous innovation connect the strategic logic of deterrence to the operational, institutional, and domain-specific analyses that follow in this volume. They form an approach suited to the Indo-Pacific Century: selective and strength-based, cross-domain, and built to sustain deterrence under persistent pressure.

Conclusion: Deterrence for the Indo-Pacific Century

Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific is no longer a narrow question of military balance or a contest defined by a single dyad. It has become the organizing principle of American statecraft in a region where power is dispersed, interdependence is deep, and adversaries employ coercive pressure across every domain. Under these conditions, deterrence must be understood as a multidimensional

undertaking—one that integrates capability, credibility, partner contribution, and disciplined escalation management.

In practical terms, deterrence can be expressed in the simple yet demanding equation: $D = C^3$. Deterrence equals *Capability* multiplied by *Credibility* multiplied by *Communication*. Weakness in any one of these factors degrades the whole.⁴⁶

This chapter has outlined the logic of such an approach. Competitive multipolarity reshapes incentives, behaviors, and risk calculations across the region. The United States and China will remain the most consequential actors, but the strategic choices of regional powers—from India and Japan to Australia, South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—will heavily influence whether the Indo-Pacific remains open to commerce, secure against coercion, and resistant to domination. Deterrence must, therefore, operate not only through U.S. posture but through cooperation with capable partners to assume greater responsibility for their own security.

Effective deterrence in this century requires coherence: alignment between what the United States declares, how it acts, and how those actions are reinforced through the behavior of its partners. Strategic signaling must be steady rather than theatrical, credible rather than opaque, and grounded in capabilities that adversaries cannot discount. At the same time, deterrence must incorporate viable off-ramps and disciplined escalation-control mechanisms. These features reflect strategic maturity in a multi-domain, nuclear-armed environment.

Beyond the military instrument, deterrence increasingly depends on shaping the economic, technological, informational, and

industrial terrain of competition. Export controls, secure supply chains, cyber defense, space security, proliferated command-and-control networks, and alignment on critical technologies now contribute as much to favorable outcomes as forward-deployed forces. These tools raise the cost of coercion, complicate adversary decision-making, reassure capable partners, and preserve the initiative in crisis, all while maintaining clear pathways to de-escalate without conceding core interests.

The chapters that follow build on this foundation. They examine how deterrence is applied through force posture, maritime security, nuclear stability, economic statecraft, industrial capacity, technological advantage, and multi-domain operations. Together, they offer a framework for sustaining a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, the world's most consequential region.

The central judgment is clear: deterrence is not merely a tool of American policy in the Indo-Pacific; it is the structure by which all other tools must be arranged. Its success will shape not only the future of regional order but also the stability of the international system in the Indo-Pacific Century.

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