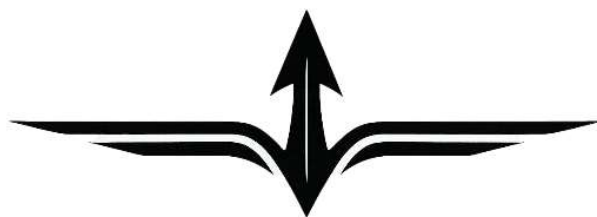


## **Chapter 5**



### **Holding the Line at Sea**

**SHYAM TEKWANI AND SAUMYA SAMPATH**

*“For in this modern world, the instruments of warfare are not solely for waging war. Far more importantly, they are the means for controlling peace.”<sup>2</sup>*

— Admiral Arleigh Burke

U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, 1961

#### **Strategic Waters, Global Stakes**

The Indo-Pacific is no longer a backdrop to global commerce; it is the strategic pivot on which prosperity turns. As Alfred Thayer Mahan observed, the object of sea power is command of the sea; prosperity follows in its wake.<sup>3</sup> Freedom of navigation through its waters is not a regional concern but a global imperative. Three

chokepoints define this leverage: the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Strait of Malacca.

The South China Sea is perhaps the most contested space on Earth. Often described as a “second Persian Gulf” for its vital role in global energy flows,<sup>4</sup> it serves as a conduit for an estimated \$3 trillion or more in annual global maritime trade, accounting for roughly one-quarter to one-third of global seaborne commerce.<sup>5</sup> Yet beyond the staggering figures lies a deeper contest over rules and norms. China’s expansive “nine-dash line” claims, rejected under international law,<sup>6</sup> gain traction through constant patrols, artificial island construction, and militarization of once-pristine reefs. The struggle is not only for territory, but for the right to define lawful order at sea.

The Taiwan Strait embodies the region’s most symbolic and systemic fault line. Only 180 kilometers wide at its narrowest, it separates a democratic island from an authoritarian mainland. More than one-fifth of global container traffic passes through these waters, a supply chain critical to the world’s technological infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> Taiwan’s semiconductor industry underwrites global innovation;<sup>8</sup> even a temporary blockade would ripple through every sector, from electronics to aerospace, triggering a worldwide economic shock.

Farther southwest, the Strait of Malacca serves as the Indo-Pacific’s indispensable artery. A narrow corridor between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, it carries roughly 30 percent of global trade<sup>9</sup> and is Asia’s primary energy chokepoint, transporting approximately 23.7 million barrels per day of oil in 2023 and serving as a key transit route for crude bound for China, Japan, and

South Korea.<sup>10</sup> At its tightest point, barely 2.7 kilometers across, it represents the world's most vulnerable bottleneck. Disruption here, whether by accident, piracy, or coercion, would instantly reroute commerce onto longer, costlier alternatives like the Sunda or Lombok Straits, thereby inflating costs and demonstrating how geography and strategy are inseparable.

A blockade or confrontation in any of these chokepoints would not merely send ripples; it would fracture global supply chains and destabilize markets from Rotterdam to Los Angeles. Yet these arteries are tightening. Expansive sovereignty claims, militarized outposts, and gray-zone coercion now crowd waters once governed by rules and restraint.<sup>11</sup> In such a contested space, deterrence can no longer rest on sheer naval tonnage. It must be layered, persistent, and adaptive—blending forward-deployed fleets, coast guard patrols, legal affirmation, and multilateral resolve.

This chapter argues that maritime deterrence in the Indo-Pacific must evolve from episodic demonstrations of force to a continuous, resilient architecture of presence. Effective deterrence must operate across the spectrum—from the hard power projection of carrier strike groups to the quiet diplomacy of white-hulled ships, from persistent surveillance to credible legal counter-narratives. The goal is not only to deny coercion, but to do so without tipping the region or the global economy into crisis.

### **Freedom of Navigation: The Principle of Presence**

Freedom of navigation is not a privilege; it is the keystone of the global trading system. Codified in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it guarantees that vessels of all

nations may transit international waters free from interference.<sup>12</sup> When that principle is challenged, the response must be visible and disciplined—and that is the purpose of Freedom of Navigation Operations, or FONOPs.<sup>13</sup>

Routinely conducted by the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard, these transits contest excessive maritime claims and reaffirm the legal foundation of the global commons. They are acts of affirmation, not provocation; a steady hand on the legal compass that keeps maritime order true. Their deterrent value lies less in the weapons they carry than in the discipline of their execution: published track lines, public notifications, and predictable cadence. Regular enough to prevent unlawful claims from hardening into precedent, yet restrained enough to avoid spectacle, each transit quietly reasserts that these waters belong to all, not one.

Washington is no longer alone in this effort. Australia, Japan, India, the United Kingdom, France, and Canada have joined in; a quiet but resolute chorus affirming a shared truth: international law does not belong to one nation; it binds them all. Yet presence alone is not enough. History offers proof that credible cooperation sustains maritime order. During the piracy surge of the early 2000s, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and later Thailand, launched the coordinated Malacca Strait Patrols,<sup>14</sup> demonstrating that collective vigilance could restore stability in one of the world's busiest sea lanes. Those patrols foreshadow today's model of integrated deterrence: visible, lawful, multilateral, and enduring. Yet even this architecture carries risk.

## The Calculus of Risk

Every transit casts a shadow. Beijing does not view FONOPs as a legal clarification, but as strategic provocations—a tool of containment aimed at constraining China’s rise.<sup>15</sup> This narrative clash turns routine passage into high-risk encounters. What one state considers a lawful right, others treat as an affront, heightening the danger that a single misstep could trigger a crisis. Some critics also question the long-term efficacy of FONOPs, arguing that they may harden Chinese resolve, prompt mirror deployments, and fuel a cycle of tactical brinkmanship.<sup>16</sup>

China’s strategy of “lawfare” compounds the challenge. Christian Wirth and Valentin Schatz observe that Beijing has at times instrumentalized select UNCLOS provisions as a “security–political shield” to justify expanded maritime jurisdiction.<sup>17</sup> By advancing its own interpretations of international law, Beijing shifts the contest from operational control at sea to one of narrative and legal legitimacy. As one Chinese analyst cited by Peter Dutton explained, while naval forces are one means of protecting maritime interests, “the primary means should be to rely on the law, on international law and internal legislation.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, the legal domain itself becomes a field of strategic competition, where interpretation shapes authority and legitimacy defines advantage.<sup>19</sup>

Numbers, too, shape perception. China’s coast guard and maritime militia operate in swarms, saturating disputed waters with constant, ambiguous pressure. Against that backdrop, even a well-executed FONOP can seem fleeting.

This is the paradox at the heart of maritime deterrence: to show strength without stumbling into confrontation. Yet without these operations, the vacuum deepens, claims expand, and silence becomes complicity. Deterrence by presence must therefore be persistent enough to reassure, calibrated enough to de-escalate, and credible enough to confront; anchored in law, backed by partnership, and sustained through steady resolve.

### **Countering Gray-Zone Coercion**

Nowhere is the erosion of maritime norms more visible than in the South China Sea. Here, China's approach is not decisive confrontation but gradual encroachment—reef by reef, patrol by patrol, narrative by narrative. Its maritime playbook is built on ambiguity, leveraging gray-zone tactics that operate in the space between war and peace.<sup>20</sup> White-hulled coast guard vessels shadow rival resupply missions. Maritime militia,<sup>21</sup> stripped of insignia but not intent, swarm contested reefs. Radar locks, water cannons, and ramming incidents are calibrated to assert control while staying just below the threshold of armed conflict. This is deterrence turned inside out: China's presence is not a shield against threats; it *is* the threat.

The Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, has borne the brunt of this pressure.<sup>22</sup> Chinese coast guard ships have repeatedly blocked and rammed Philippine resupply vessels near Second Thomas Shoal,<sup>23</sup> each encounter edging control closer to Beijing without triggering open conflict.

Japan faces similar tactics. In May 2025, a Chinese coast guard helicopter reportedly violated Japanese airspace near the Senkaku

Islands;<sup>24</sup> a rare aerial escalation in a zone already marked by persistent maritime shadowing. These are not isolated incidents but part of a sustained campaign to test red lines, fatigue resistance, and normalize expanded claims.

In such an environment, deterrence must be layered, flexible, and credible. The U.S. Navy provides unmatched conventional power; the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) brings a different advantage—law enforcement authority, civilian optics, and operational adaptability. The 2019 joint transit of the Taiwan Strait by USCGC *Bertholf* and USS *Curtis Wilbur* exemplified this balance, signaling unity without escalation.<sup>25</sup> Expanding the Coast Guard’s regional role enhances maritime domain awareness, builds partner capacity, and complicates adversary decision-making.

These habits of cooperation are taking root. Since 2023, the United States and the Philippines have conducted joint naval and coast guard patrols in the West Philippine Sea,<sup>26</sup> reaffirming treaty commitments through visible, operational cooperation rather than declaratory policy. Similar patterns are emerging elsewhere: Japan and Vietnam have significantly expanded maritime security cooperation, including capacity-building, equipment transfers, and regular defense consultations, reinforcing regional norms through sustained engagement and visibility, particularly in the Gulf of Tonkin and the South China Sea.<sup>27</sup> Yet this approach is not without risk. White hulls may project legitimacy, but they still fly the flag. Without credible naval backing, they risk appearing token; used too assertively, they risk escalation in disguise.

Still, in a theater defined by ambiguity, the Coast Guard’s dual identity—part guardian, part diplomat—makes it uniquely suited to

the task. It bridges the space between visible presence and strategic restraint, meeting gray-zone tactics with what might be called gray-zone resilience: lawful persistence, operational creativity, and narrative control.

Against a strategy built on ambiguity, the strategic edge belongs not to those who can merely mirror the gray-zone tactics, but to those who can master the dynamics of perception, tempo, and lawful persistence.

### **White Hulls and Lawful Resistance**

In the gray spaces between war and peace, coast guard cutters, “white hulls,” have become the front line of maritime deterrence. They embody restraint with resolve: less threatening than a warship, yet far more persuasive than a diplomatic note. Their law-enforcement mandate allows them to act where navies might escalate, and diplomats can only protest. In this way, they recast encounters not as clashes of power, but as contests of legitimacy, turning the language of law into a tool of deterrence.

The USCG has refined this art of calibrated presence. Its joint patrols, fisheries enforcement missions, and humanitarian operations reinforce the principle that the maritime commons are governed by rules, not might. Each deployment signals that America’s strength at sea rests not only on carrier decks but on constabulary credibility; the ability to act lawfully, visibly, and persistently.

The United States is not alone in leveraging this constabulary power. Japan’s Coast Guard, once primarily a domestic institution, has also transformed into a regional instrument of influence.

Confronted by persistent Chinese incursions near the Senkaku Islands, Tokyo has modernized its fleet and expanded its missions.<sup>28</sup> Through its Mobile Cooperation Team initiative, Japan now trains Southeast Asian maritime services in boarding procedures, law enforcement, and resource protection.<sup>29</sup> This emphasis on soft power with sharp edges builds regional capacity from within, allowing smaller nations to defend their waters through law and partnership rather than confrontation.

Yet the limits of white-hull operations are not weakness so much as the conditions that define their utility. Coast guards operate deliberately within the law, visibly, and with restraint; attributes that confer legitimacy in contested waters where escalation carries strategic costs. Their effectiveness lies not in mass or coercion, but in persistence, clarity of authority, and their ability to hold space without forcing confrontation. When integrated with credible naval power held in reserve, white hulls shift competition onto terrain where rules matter, coercion is exposed, and restraint sets the terms of deterrence rather than signaling weakness.

However, when national efforts link through shared information networks and coordinated patrols, deterrence multiplies. The expanding constellation of white hulls marks a profound shift in maritime strategy, one that gives America and its allies a distinct advantage in the gray zone: the ability to contest coercion with legitimacy, counter presence with persistence, and deter aggression without triggering escalation.

## **Island Chains and Forward Posture**

In the Indo-Pacific, geography is not passive; it is strategy made visible. The region's sweeping arc of island chains forms a layered architecture of defense and denial,<sup>30</sup> enabling the United States and its allies to monitor, constrain, and contest China's maritime reach. Each chain hosts forward outposts equipped with anti-access/area denial systems, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, as well as early-warning sensors. In peacetime, they signal vigilance; in crisis, they impose friction; in war, they shape tempo and terrain.

The First Island Chain stretches from Japan through the Ryukyus, Taiwan, the northern Philippines, and Borneo, forming both a shield and a springboard. It marks the outer boundary of China's near seas and the inner line of allied deterrence, vital to denying a Chinese naval breakout into the wider Pacific.

The Second Island Chain, running through the Bonin Islands, Guam, and the Northern Marianas, provides strategic depth. It anchors long-range strike platforms, undersea forces, and resilient command-and-control infrastructure.

The Third Island Chain, extending from the Aleutians through Hawaii to New Zealand, remains largely conceptual; yet it integrates the Pacific theater into the broader Indo-Atlantic security calculus, linking regional defense to global reach and redundancy.

These chains are not borders but platforms; operational foundations that shorten response times and make presence continuous rather than contingent.

Guam anchors the Second Island Chain<sup>31</sup> and remains a deterrent made durable.<sup>32</sup> As a sovereign U.S. territory, it hosts Andersen Air Force Base, with long-range bombers and rapid-deployment assets; Apra Harbor, supporting submarines, carriers, and expeditionary groups; and Camp Blaz, which embeds Marine Corps capabilities more deeply into the region.

Okinawa, perched on the edge of the First Island Chain, is the embodiment of forward presence. Kadena Air Base—the largest U.S. airfield in the Pacific—and the III Marine Expeditionary Force sit within range of every major East Asian flashpoint, from the Taiwan Strait to the northern South China Sea. Their visibility is deterrence: already there, already watching, already capable of acting.<sup>33</sup>

The Philippines has reemerged as a critical node in this network. Through the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), the United States has gained rotational access to a set of strategically located sites, including facilities in northern Luzon within range of the Bashi Channel and Taiwan’s southern approaches.<sup>34</sup> These locations, modest in footprint but significant in effect, support maritime domain awareness, joint training, raid reinforcement, and distributed logistics.

Recent U.S.–Philippines–Japan trilateral exercises around Luzon and the Bashi Channel demonstrated how dispersed access points can be integrated into a single, resilient operating web.<sup>35</sup> Each iteration refines logistics, communications, and coordination; capabilities that would anchor deterrence in the opening hours of a crisis and turn geography from backdrop into instrument.

Logistics is the spine of deterrence. Without the ability to fuel, repair, resupply, and rotate forces, forward posture becomes performance. Robust hubs in Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and emerging sites in Palau and Tinian reduce dependence on extended supply lines from Hawaii or the U.S. mainland. They enable flexible basing, rapid dispersal, and operational redundancy, transforming distance from vulnerability into advantage.

This architecture of deterrence depends not just on location, but on mobility, endurance, and integration: a radar station on Palawan, a refueling ship in Subic Bay, and a missile battery on Guam. Individually, they are pieces; together, they are a structure that complicates adversary planning, absorbs strategic shocks, and buys critical time for decision-makers.<sup>36</sup>

Yet geography alone does not deter. Presence must be animated by partnership. These island chains and forward hubs gain strategic meaning only when manned, maintained, and coordinated by allies and partners who share both risk and purpose. Geography supplies the stage; alliance gives it motion.

The next layer of that coordination lies at the world's chokepoints, where the arteries of global commerce intersect with the flashpoints of strategic rivalry. It is there, amid contested straits and crowded sea lanes, that deterrence must move from concept to consequence.

### **Alliances and Alignments for Deterrence**

No single nation can shoulder the weight of maritime deterrence across an ocean as vast as the Indo-Pacific. Multilateral frameworks are therefore not accessories to deterrence; they are their load-

bearing pillars. AUKUS, the Quad, and ASEAN-led mechanisms each serve distinct functions: capability, coordination, and legitimacy. Together, they form a layered architecture of deterrence that is both resilient and adaptive.

AUKUS delivers the sharpest edge.<sup>37</sup> Anchored in deep strategic trust among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it marries near-term presences with long-term integration of force structure. Australia's future nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines promise unmatched stealth, endurance, and persistence; deterrence that endures beneath the surface. Rotational U.S. and UK deployments to Australian ports harden interoperability, ensuring that allied forces can act together under stress, not just exercise in peacetime. Yet AUKUS is more than a transfer of platforms; it is a transfer of trust. By sharing nuclear propulsion technology, among the most closely held capabilities, the United States binds Australia into its strategic ecosystem for generations to come. Beyond the undersea domain, AUKUS's second pillar drives innovation in autonomy, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum systems, and cyber defenses,<sup>38</sup> creating a distributed, intelligent deterrent network spanning the sea, space, and cyber domains.

Where AUKUS strengthens capability, the Quad synchronizes action.<sup>39</sup> The United States, Japan, India, and Australia have deliberately shaped it not as a formal alliance, but as a flexible platform for practical cooperation.<sup>40</sup> Its initiatives link maritime domain awareness systems,<sup>41</sup> counter illegal fishing,<sup>42</sup> and deliver humanitarian relief; operations that demonstrate resolve without provocation.<sup>43</sup> The Quad's quiet strength lies in habit: shared exercises, information exchanges, and coordinated patrols that

normalize collective responsibility. For smaller states, this framework provides strategic breathing room; space to resist coercion without the political costs of formal alignment.

ASEAN remains the indispensable stabilizer.<sup>44</sup> Its convening architecture—the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting-Plus, and the Outlook on the Indo-Pacific—keeps diplomatic channels open even as great-power rivalry intensifies. In a region wary of blocs and binaries, ASEAN lends legitimacy to multilateral cooperation, grounding hard power in consensus-based diplomacy.

The strategic imperative, then, is integration without friction. AUKUS acts as the capability accelerator, the Quad acts as the coordinator and capacity builder, and ASEAN acts as the diplomatic stabilizer.<sup>45</sup> Aligned in purpose, they create a deterrent posture that is hard enough to deter aggression, agile enough to manage crises, and inclusive enough to sustain legitimacy.

In this fusion of capability, coordination, and consensus lies America’s most durable strategic edge, a networked deterrence posture that no single adversary can easily outflank, and no partner need face alone.

### **Southeast Asian Agency and Constraints**

Maritime deterrence in Southeast Asia is shaped less by carrier groups than by the daily calculations of smaller states; those closest to the contested waters and most exposed to the friction of great-power rivalry. Here, deterrence is not doctrine but lived practice: a constant negotiation between economic dependence and strategic autonomy, sovereignty, and survival.

For the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, the South China Sea is not a distant flashpoint but a working space—vital to livelihoods, national identity, and security. China looms as both their largest trading partner and most persistent maritime challenger, forcing capitals to weigh economic gravity against political coercion.

The Philippines and Vietnam sit at the sharpest edge of this pressure. Manila, backed by its Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, has expanded American rotational access under EDCA, signaling alignment but not surrendering caution.<sup>46</sup> Vietnam, drawing on a long tradition of resisting foreign dominance, engages selectively with U.S. and Japanese security initiatives while guarding its strategic autonomy.<sup>47</sup> Its deterrence lies in quiet resilience—steadily modernizing defenses, asserting rights through law, and avoiding formal alliances that would limit maneuver.

Malaysia and Brunei, facing less direct confrontation and deeper economic interdependence with Beijing, pursue diplomacy as a form of deterrence. They advance their claims through legal channels, ASEAN dialogue, and calibrated silence when needed, maintaining ambiguity that asserts rights without crossing China's red lines.<sup>48</sup>

Indonesia, though not a formal claimant, sees Chinese activity around the Natuna Islands as a creeping encroachment. Jakarta projects itself as a non-aligned maritime power, modernizing its coast guard, expanding naval infrastructure, and exercising with partners across a wide spectrum. Its strategy is not confrontation but

insulation—ensuring that no single power defines Indonesia’s maritime future.<sup>49</sup>

These variations reflect geography, asymmetry, and domestic calculus more than ideology. While the Quad and AUKUS emphasize high-end capability, most Southeast Asian states define deterrence in softer, layered terms: legal recourse, regional unity, diplomatic cover, and development support. For many, the greater danger is not conflict but compulsion; the risk of being forced to choose sides in a rivalry they did not create.

In this context, strategic ambiguity is not indecision; it is a form of adaptation. Hedging preserves maneuver space, allowing states to draw strength from multiple partners without being absorbed into a single camp. ASEAN’s inclusive, consensus-based forums, though often slow, still offer a vital buffer against bloc politics, preventing the region from becoming a proxy battlefield.

The trend, however, is toward flexible minilateralism:<sup>50</sup> smaller constellations of cooperation that sidestep paralysis. Initiatives like the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum enable willing members to deepen coordination below the threshold of unanimity,<sup>51</sup> thereby fostering practical interoperability in search and rescue, counter-IUU fishing, and maritime safety.<sup>52</sup> Over time, these task-oriented mechanisms may form the connective tissue of a more resilient regional security architecture.

For Southeast Asia, strategic autonomy is not a rejection of partnerships but a demand for dignity within them. The success of maritime deterrence here will hinge as much on trust, perception, and inclusion as on submarines or sorties. Deterrence must defend against coercion while preserving agency, because in the Indo-

Pacific, stability is not sustained by dominance, but by the legitimacy of choice.

### **Risks, Resilience, and Technological Disruption**

Even the strongest deterrent is brittle at the seams. It can fracture not only under attack but also under its own weight, through misread signals, operational fatigue, creeping escalation, or the slow erosion of vigilance. Beneath the surface of steady presence lies persistent risk, demanding constant adaptation.

#### *Risk of Miscalculation and Escalation*

In the Indo-Pacific's congested sea lanes, proximity is not power; it is peril. Warships, coast guards, maritime militias, and commercial vessels operate within sight of each other, sometimes within meters. Intentions blur. Red lines shift. A sudden turn, a radar lock, a laser dazzle, a jammed signal, these are not hypotheticals but recurring events, each one a miscalculation away from crisis.

Gray-zone tactics exploit this uncertainty. Their purpose is not victory but pressure: a ramming that tests resolve, a water cannon that probes restraint, a disinformation surge that clouds decision-making. Deterrence depends on clear signaling, yet when communication channels are thin and nationalism thick, even prudence can be mistaken for weakness.

Guardrails, like hotlines, agreed-upon protocols, and codes of unplanned encounters, exist, but they are partial and fragile. Most bind navies, not coast guards or militias. In a theater defined by asymmetric stakes and political volatility, the danger is not merely

collision; it is escalation born of emotion, misperception, or necessity.

### *Sustainability of Presence and Resources*

Deterrence is not a moment; it is a rhythm, and that rhythm must endure. The Indo-Pacific's scale and tempo are punishing. Persistent patrols, exercises, forward deployments, and multilateral engagements consume ships, flight hours, crews, fuel, and political will.

For the United States and its allies, the questions are strategic: Can stretched fleets maintain tempo across global theaters? Can budgets fund both modernization and omnipresence? Will domestic support hold for commitments far from home? For smaller partners, the strain is sharper still: a single frigate may represent a major deployment. Maintenance cycles, training pipelines, and political bandwidth all set limits on how far a flag can fly forward.

Without careful planning, absence invites challenge. Episodic gaps create opportunities for coercion; a single breakdown without redundancy can rupture credibility. Deterrence, like alliance, frays quietly until it fails, suddenly.

### *The Cyber-Information Nexus*

Maritime deterrence now extends not only to the sea but also to code and cognition. Adversaries exploit digital seams, spoofing GPS, hacking port systems, corrupting data links, and weaponizing rumor. A cyber strike on a logistics hub can delay a carrier group; a deepfake "incident" can inflame public opinion before facts emerge.

A fabricated satellite image, timed to a crisis, can tip a standoff toward escalation.

Such non-kinetic intrusions corrode the predictability on which deterrence depends. They blur signals, distort perception, and slow decision cycles. In an environment where narrative precedes fact, control of information becomes a form of coercion as potent as force.

Resilience, therefore, demands more than armored hulls. It requires hardened networks, cross-domain awareness, and rehearsed playbooks for digital and cognitive attacks. The same vigilance applied to sea lanes must now extend to the data and communication arteries that run beneath and across them. At the Indo-Pacific's chokepoints, disruption may come not from gunfire but through malware or manipulation. The line between physical and digital security has vanished. Deterrence must operate seamlessly across both domains, anchored in transparency, speed, and shared situational awareness.

### *Economic Security Trade-offs*

For many Indo-Pacific nations, deterrence is not just a matter of sovereignty but solvency. China is both the primary maritime challenger and the dominant trading partner, investor, and creditor. Security measures that appear to threaten that lifeline face resistance, even when their security logic is sound.

The dilemma is clear: how to sustain deterrence without forcing zero-sum choices. If alignment imposes economic pain, states will hedge; if deterrence feels like disruption, it will lose legitimacy. U.S. and allied strategy must therefore combine protection with

opportunity through infrastructure investment, resilient supply chains, digital connectivity, and diversified trade so that deterrence is not merely tolerated but actively embraced.

### *Adaptation to Emerging Technologies*

Technology is transforming the maritime domain faster than strategy can adapt. Hypersonic weapons compress warning time. Autonomous systems extend reach but complicate control. AI-enabled targeting, satellite swarms, and massed drones make the battlespace more distributed, multi-domain, and morally uncharted.

Such tools can strengthen deterrence by improving surveillance, denying access, and accelerating response, yet they also increase the risk of unintended escalation. Who is accountable when an unmanned platform misfires? What is proportionate when an algorithm predicts a fleeting strike window? How do you deter an adversary from delegating critical decisions to code?

This technological flux is why, even in an age of automation, the human fundamentals of deterrence remain paramount. Admiral Stephen Koehler, former Commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet,<sup>53</sup> captures this reality: deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, he notes, “is a day-to-day campaign, not a momentary gesture,” grounded in persistent presence, credible capability, and networked partnerships. His words reflect Geoffrey Till’s notion of the post-modern navy, a force whose effectiveness rests as much on cooperation and communication as on combat power.<sup>54</sup>

Deterrence thrives on clarity; emerging technologies compress time and blur judgment, inviting escalation by automation. The future of maritime deterrence must therefore adapt not only to new

tools but to new thresholds, ensuring human decision points, embedding fail-safes, exercising man-machine teams, and establishing practical norms among partners and competitors alike. Only then can innovation widen the margin of stability rather than narrow it.

### **Conclusion: Toward a Resilient Maritime Order**

The Indo-Pacific is where the future of the maritime order will be contested. It is a domain of vast ambition and fragile consensus, where deterrence must function not only through fleets but through narrative, signal, and structure. Episodic shows of force are no longer enough. What endures is a deterrent architecture built on three reinforcing pillars: persistent presence, networked partnerships, and narrative perception.

Presence is the first pillar. It must be continuous rather than theatrical, steady rather than escalatory. Naval forces project credibility; coast guards confer legitimacy. Geography amplifies this logic, as the region's island chains become living lines of defense and denial. Presence is sustained by logistics: forward positions in Guam, Okinawa, and the Philippines that act as the logistical lungs of deterrence and are empowered by awareness. Maritime domain awareness, driven by satellites, AI, and unmanned systems, turns posture into perception and visibility into a deterrent effect.

Partnership is the second pillar. No single nation can preserve this order alone. Multilateralism is not an accessory; it is the operating system of maritime deterrence. AUKUS contributes high-end capability;<sup>55</sup> the Quad synchronizes capacity-building; ASEAN

provides diplomatic oxygen in a region wary of binary alignments. Yet for this architecture to endure, it must offer both participation and protection. When smaller states are empowered to help shape the rules, inclusion fosters ownership, ownership builds legitimacy, and legitimacy sustains deterrence.

Perception is the third pillar. The contest for the maritime commons is as cognitive as physical. In an age of hybrid and cross-domain coercion, control of the narrative and clarity of the signal are strategic assets. Cyber resilience, disciplined information practices, and economic foresight now weigh as heavily as fleets and aircraft. Deterrence is not just the management of force; it is the management of meaning.

Ultimately, deterrence will be judged not by the scale of the arsenal but by the speed of response and the clarity of resolve. It is not the pause before conflict; it is the daily, deliberate labor of peace. As Alfred Thayer Mahan observed, control of the maritime commons has always been the foundation of prosperity and power. In the twenty-first century, that control rests not on domination, but on the indivisible strength of presence, partnership, and perception; the enduring pillars that hold the line at sea.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> The authors are solely responsible for the views expressed in this publication, which do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of War, or the U.S. government.
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