



Wilton Park



Image: Sergeant Tom Robinson RLC

Report

Rethinking deterrence and assurance

Western deterrence strategies: at an inflection point?

Wednesday 14 – Saturday 17 June 2017 | WP1545

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The meeting convened to:

Assess whether changes to the global security environment are of a sufficiently fundamental kind to alter core premises of Western deterrence strategies.

Identify the implications that follow for the cooperative efforts of the transatlantic community to strengthen and adapt deterrence to changing requirements.

Key points

The Opening Hypotheses

- A deterrence inflection point has been reached in major power relations, with their turn to a more adversarial character, and with the emergence of a nuclear-arming North Korea, with long-range missiles now capable of reaching the United States (and also Europe).
- According to former US Secretary of Defense Robert Work, Russia, China, and North Korea have all studied the strengths and weaknesses of the United States and its allies and put together concepts and capabilities aimed at negating the West's strengths and exploiting its weaknesses. As then US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter argued frequently in recent years, this means that the West "needs a new playbook" to deal with new deterrence challenges.
- This new playbook must comprehensively address the tools of deterrence available to the United States and its allies, including hard and soft power tools, nuclear and non-nuclear military means, and resilience in cyber space and outer space.
- The Western deterrence community must revisit basic questions about the future of nuclear deterrence (is it still possible to further reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons in Western deterrence strategies?) and of conventional deterrence (what can be done, with the so-called Third Offset or similar approaches, to address weaknesses of deterrence at the conventional level of war?). Equally importantly, how can allies maintain unity in the face of new pressures?

High-Level Summary Points

- There was general agreement that an inflection point has been reached, but less so about the nature of the inflection point and about its implications.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin's deep objections to the established security order and willingness to use force to challenge it have derailed Western efforts to build a more cooperative and constructive relationship with Russia. His broader objections to a global order that he sees as hostile to Russia's interests because of its dominance by the United States foreshadow broader challenges. Military

"The Western deterrence community must revisit basic questions about the future of nuclear deterrence"

flashpoints are a serious concern, unlike in the 1990s or 2000s.

- European participants in this meeting were less persuaded that North Korea's emerging nuclear status brings an inflection point for European security strategies, or that China presents a deterrence problem for Europe. Some conjectured about the ways in which developments in the Northeast Asian security environment might drive changes in the US strategic posture, such as a build-up of missile defences, that could have repercussions in Europe.
- There was a broad sense that the inflection point is not simply a function of developments in the external security environment. It also has something to do with changing domestic politics in the United States and Europe, the more nationalist and populist politics in some countries, and deepening questions about the future of the European project.
- Deterrence-focused policy debates are thriving in Brussels and in many European and Northeast Asian capitals, as in the United States. There are many areas of agreement—especially about the need to adapt and strengthen deterrence to meet emerging challenges. But there are also many areas of disagreement—especially about whether to put the emphasis on nuclear or non-nuclear means and about how to integrate deterrence tools so that the whole is more than simply the sum of the parts.
- But in many of these capitals, the nuclear deterrence community is losing or has lost the debate for public support. The nuclear weapons ban movement is in the political ascendancy. US allies under the nuclear umbrella in both Europe and Asia are under high and rising political pressure to relinquish their claims to US nuclear protection. More must be done to balance the debate.

“Competition between the United States, Russia, and China will have impact on most areas of international relations in the 21st century”

Major power relations

1. Competition between the United States, Russia, and China will have impact on most areas of international relations in the 21st century. The nature of this competition will vary depending upon how closely various issues touch the national interests of each country, but reflects a dynamic change relative to how international relations were structured in the post-Cold War period, when the United States largely dominated the global landscape.
2. Russia remains wary of Western intentions and President Putin sees US-led efforts to promote liberal democratic and economic values as a direct threat to Russia's future as he has tried to make it. Russian elites, concerned about the prospects of US-led regime changes or “colour revolutions,” view NATO as a direct threat. Under Putin's leadership, Russia can be expected to continue to work to erode, destabilise, and weaken post-war institutions in order to improve its standing on the world stage and secure its interests (as Putin understands them).
3. Russia may be in decline, economically and otherwise, but the security challenge it poses to the West is a long-term one, requiring a long-term Western strategy. That strategy must strengthen deterrence while also working toward other political priorities, including long-term reconciliation.
4. China, like Russia, does not view the US-led international order to be in its best interests. Unlike Russia, however, China does not seek to uproot the international order; rather, it seeks to reshape its rules to better suit its interests and facilitate its peaceful rise. While China has regional ambitions in Asia Pacific and Central Asia, it will likely take care not to create too much turbulence in the region to prevent destabilizing its bilateral relationship with the United States.
5. China may be on the rise in economic and other ways, but its weaknesses as much as its strengths may be a security problem for its neighbours. Its perceived vulnerabilities may lead it to act in ways that are provocative and lead to unwanted conflicts and

escalation. The prospect for nuclear war with China appears exceedingly remote, but any armed conflict with China would unfold under the nuclear shadow and in the context of ambiguity about its nuclear doctrine.

6. Given their shared reservations about the current international system, Russia and China will continue to cooperate to challenge US leadership in areas of strategic convenience. But they will primarily pursue their respective national interests. This dynamic will likely ensure that Russia and China remain individually-driven actors, not formal allies. These national interests do not always align and are likely to experience the most tension in Central Asia, where both China and Russia have geopolitical and economic ambitions.
7. Uncertainty in major power relations has been magnified by rising doubts about the fate of the European project. Brexit is but one example of a rising nationalism among many members of the European Union. Divisive tendencies have been reinforced by Moscow and aggravated by the mixed messages coming from Washington, D.C.
8. Uncertainty about the future US world role is also a major factor. US allies must again contend with fears of abandonment by the United States, as well as entanglement in American projects with which they may disagree. Political and economic division in the transatlantic and transpacific communities have an unpredictable but probably unhelpful impact on their deterrence credibility. Division may fuel the ambitions of potential armed challengers, who may interpret such division as a strong signal that allies will not act together to defend their interests.

“Cold War-vintage thinking about limited nuclear war is a poor guide to understanding how regional challengers might try to escalate their way out of failed conventional aggression.”

Deterrence and defence implications for NATO and US allies in Northeast Asia

9. A key implication of these shifts in the security environment is that limited nuclear war has become plausible in both Europe and Northeast Asia. Its actual likelihood cannot be known. A limited nuclear war would also be a war in cyber space, outer space, the sub-maritime environment, as well as on land. Cold War-vintage thinking about limited nuclear war is a poor guide to understanding how regional challengers might try to escalate their way out of failed conventional aggression.
10. To meet these new challenges, U.S. allies in Europe and Asia must adapt their security and military strategies. Many of the new capabilities Russia, China, and others are pursuing, like cyber weapons, counter-space capabilities, long-range precision strike weapons, and information operation tools, require the United States and its allies to revisit traditional concepts of deterrence and strategic stability to account for a more complex, dynamic, and ambiguous security environment.
11. The concluding thought in NATO’s 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review was that the alliance’s deterrence and defence posture would remain “fit for purpose” in a changing security environment. With Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine, NATO began the process of assessing changes in terms of just what “fit for purpose” meant, and adapting accordingly. It has put significant focus on improving its conventional deterrence posture and force readiness. The result is a conventional tripwire aimed at deterring conflict in the Baltics. While NATO members continue to work toward meeting their two-percent of gross domestic product military spending commitments, NATO will need to make difficult choices about the types of investments it will make to ensure European security, particularly in terms of high-end capabilities and infrastructure that would allow NATO forces to engage in high-intensity combat. These high-end capabilities will be critical to deterring Russian aggression and, if deterrence fails, defending in the non-permissive environment that Russia can create with its conventional precision strike, aerospace defence, and undersea capabilities.
12. Since 2014, there has been high and sustained interest inside NATO on Russian nuclear strategy and capabilities and on strengthening NATO’s nuclear sharing

arrangements. Since Russia is a nuclear-armed state, any conflict between it and NATO would operate under the nuclear shadow. While the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military doctrine and its military doctrine's role in decision-making is not completely understood, it is clear that Russia wants NATO to believe that it would be willing to use nuclear weapons in a conventional conflict, making conventional conflict the most likely route to nuclear war between NATO and Russia.

13. This nuclear dimension requires NATO to continue to reassess its nuclear deterrence posture, the survivability of NATO nuclear forces, NATO nuclear burden sharing arrangements, and the role of nuclear weapons in NATO defence planning and military exercises. This is no easy task for an alliance that makes nuclear decisions slowly and by consensus. Between the 2014 Wales and 2016 Warsaw summits, NATO made good progress in these areas and has addresses challenges in both the hardware and software of its nuclear deterrence posture. But significant questions remain about how a nuclear deterrent posture that was "fit for purpose" in the 2012 security environment can still be fit for purpose as Russia's strategies, capabilities, and ambitions further develop.
14. Looking ahead, NATO faces major decisions about how to further tailor the deterrence toolkit vis-à-vis Russia. Can more be done to strengthen NATO's nuclear posture as a response to Russia's violation of the Treaty on Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces, or will the burden fall on the three nuclear-armed allies? Should NATO's missile defence be tailored to negate the coercive effects of Russia's newly deployed cruise and ballistic missiles? Does NATO need to address gaps in its maritime posture, especially in the Arctic? How does it make progress on these difficult questions while maintaining alliance solidarity?
15. As NATO pursues diverse activities to strengthen conventional and nuclear deterrence, it faces a politically charged question about how best to integrate them. It has rejected the pursuit of a "continuum" or "spectrum" of nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence capabilities, on the argument that it does not want to follow Russia in trying to close the gap between the lowest yield nuclear weapons and the highest impact conventional weapons, or in fielding "a nuclear scalpel for every problem in Europe" (as some Russian figures boast). Instead, it has put the emphasis on achieving "coherence" in its overall strategy and posture. The precise meaning of such coherence is still in debate. At the very least, it implies that there are no significant gaps in the posture that might tempt Russia to aggression or escalation.
16. In Northeast Asia, the deterrence equation is more complex. South Korea is singularly focused on the North Korean threat (and on its hopes for future reconciliation). Japan is focused on both the North Korean threat and on the emerging threat from China. In meeting these challenges, it is important to recall that South Korea and Japan are allied with the United States but not each other—a fact that imposes significant limits on deterrence cooperation. Both Japan and South Korea already make significant contributions to the regional deterrence architecture and are working cooperatively with the United States to strengthen it, especially in the areas of missile defence and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance in the region. But like NATO allies, they must reassess their high-end capabilities and contributions to defence burden sharing in Asia. Given the domestic political considerations surrounding North Korean policy in South Korea and the constitutional barriers to a more assertive military posture for Japan, each nation faces an uphill battle in the procurement of additional conventional capabilities to reinforce deterrence and defence.

Diplomatic implications

17. While U.S. allies in Europe and Asia face different sets of challenges that will require various technical military capabilities to deter and defend against, the diplomatic dimensions of each region's threats are inescapable. Russia, North Korea, and China seek to exploit gaps in the relationship between the United States and its allies.

Alliance management and cohesion are critical to maintaining deterrence. This requires two-way understanding between the United States and its European and Asian allies of the domestic political challenges each faces, and active engagement to ensure that the political leadership in every allied country shares a similar understanding of the threats and options available to mitigate them.

18. One issue that will potentially strain the diplomatic relationship between the United States and its allies is the impending United Nations (UN) Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty. While the United States has convinced most of the countries within its alliance structures to oppose the Treaty, many allies have done so in the face of strong domestic support for the Treaty and opposition to nuclear weapons. It was felt that, to prevent disarmament movements from weakening deterrence and defence in the face of adversaries that are modernizing and expanding their nuclear forces, the United States and its allies should make the ethical, legal, and moral case for nuclear deterrence, while rejecting misleading claims or misperceptions spread by a contingent of ideologically zealous proponents of disarmament. The Ban Treaty primarily affects liberal democratic nuclear weapon states which are accountable to domestic constituencies, while Russia and China can largely ignore them given their autocratic regimes.

Conclusion

In prior years, this annual deterrence-focused event has identified the preservation of political cohesion and a rethinking conventional and nuclear deterrence postures as key objectives for NATO. It has also underlined the need to consider the integration of missile defence systems and emergent non-kinetic capabilities such as cyber deterrence, the importance of maintaining a comprehensive approach to security for all 28 member states, and communicating this commitment to friends and potential adversaries alike.

The events of the last year have not undermined the above analysis, but changes in U.S. and European domestic politics has heightened the need for effective public engagement. The wider deterrence conversation is vibrant in the capitals of Europe, the United States, and Northeast Asia, however the movement for a weapons ban in the UN and the politics of U.S. extended deterrence negatively impact public support for the nuclear deterrence strategy of the NATO Alliance. It will be important to maintain—and to lead—a balanced and nuanced debate in the future.

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