Nuclear Credibility and How to Deter China

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To demonstrate resolve, the United States must rely on both military and political tools. . . . Reduced reliance on nuclear weapons could signal that U.S. leadership lacks the stomach to uphold security commitments.

The 2023 bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission calls for a change to the United States’ nuclear deterrence policy, concluding “the fundamentals of America’s deterrence strategy remain sound, but the application of that strategy must change to address the 2027-2035 threat environment.” China’s nuclear buildup over the past decade was one of the drivers of the commission’s conclusion that the United States needs to make “adjustments” in U.S. nuclear capabilities to effectively deter Beijing. To be sure, capabilities are a crucial part of a deterrence strategy. But an equally important tool is the credibility of U.S. commitments. The United States needs to ensure demonstrating resolve is part of any deterrence strategy in the face of a determined and patient adversary.

Over the past decade, China has significantly expanded its strategic capabilities. The Department of Defense’s 2023 China military power report concluded, “Compared to the PLA’s [People’s Liberation Army] nuclear modernization efforts a decade ago, current efforts dwarf previous attempts in both scale and complexity.” Additionally, Chinese president Xi Jinping has ordered the military to prepare for an invasion of Taiwan by 2027, though Chinese leadership has since denied this.

Deterrence is a combination of capabilities, credibility, and communication. Successful deterrence requires understanding what an adversary values most and holding it at risk in order to impose an unacceptable cost. China’s nuclear expansion presents a new set of deterrence challenges in regard to targeting, posture, and allies.

The Strategic Posture Commission recommends “holding at risk key elements of their [Chinese and Russian] leadership, the security structure maintaining the leadership in power, their nuclear and conventional forces, and their war supporting industry.” Such action may require expanding or changing the makeup of the U.S. arsenal. Some experts, however, have argued that the United States simply needs the ability to “inflict catastrophic damage against both China and Russia.” On the surface, this approach
would seem to lack the tailoring necessary for effective deterrence and assumes a one-size-fits-all approach. For any targeting strategy, improved understanding of what adversaries value will be necessary.

The administration under U.S. president Joe Biden has yet to clarify a strategy for deterring two peer competitors, including China. There are at least two important points of debate about such a strategy, as captured in a recent CSIS report. The first point of debate is about the nuclear force posture and the required mix of capabilities. Some experts argue the United States will need to expand its nuclear arsenal, such as by uploading warheads, but will not need to match Russia and China in combined numbers. Others suggest the United States should shift investment away from nuclear weapons toward advanced conventional weapons and new technologies while also strengthening resilience in nuclear command and control.

A second area of debate is how to extend deterrence and assure U.S. allies. One side of the debate focuses on the value of capabilities, such as a new sea-launched cruise missile, in demonstrating commitment to allies, deterring regional aggression, and buttressing existing conventional capabilities. Others argue that allies should take on greater responsibility for their own security but through close consultation and communication with the United States, and that any U.S. deployments could provoke escalation.

But to see these debates as a binary between more or less capabilities misses important nuance about the political motives behind a deterrence strategy. Specifically, the debates miss a key question for U.S. political and military leaders: Does the United States have the resolve to defend its interests and allies? U.S. resolve has come into question in recent years following the failure to respond to Syrian chemical weapons attacks, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and ongoing debates about military aid to Ukraine.

Resolve is about both stakes and stomach. Seemingly, the stakes in a Taiwan crisis, for example, are greater for China than for the United States, just as they appear to be for Russia in the current war in Ukraine. At the same time, the consequences for U.S. global leadership and allies’ confidence in U.S. security guarantees hinge on the U.S. response to an attack on an ally or partner. But even in scenarios where the stakes are evenly matched, there is a question of whether or not the U.S. public has the stomach to commit to military intervention.

To demonstrate resolve, the United States must rely on both military and political tools. The aforementioned debate about the right mix of capabilities must account for how allies and adversaries alike could perceive a shift to conventional forces. Reduced reliance on nuclear weapons could signal that U.S. leadership lacks the stomach to uphold security commitments. This does not mean the United States should massively expand its arsenal; rather it can take steps to signal resolve, such as more unambiguous statements about commitment to allies’ security, exercising, and consultation. The Biden administration has already pursued some of these measures, but delays in budget approvals and lack of visibility for nuclear issues could undermine such efforts.

Resolve is also a political exercise. U.S. adversaries and allies know of U.S. domestic political polarization. Russian president Vladimir Putin seems to be content with a temporary stalemate in Ukraine while he waits in hopes of former U.S. president Donald Trump’s reelection. Xi may similarly be waiting for a change in administration that will see many of Biden’s regional initiatives overturned, such as AUKUS and the Nuclear Consultative Group dialogue with South Korea.

As the United States works to deter China, assure U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region, and demonstrate resolve vis-à-vis Beijing, it will need to ensure its efforts do not come at the cost of credibility with European allies. Security for Seoul should not come at the expense of credibility with Warsaw. Capabilities will play an important role in demonstrating resolve in both theaters, though U.S. domestic politics, ultimately, have become a problem for nuclear deterrence.