



Rebuilding Credibility: Regional Perspectives

*A Conversation with Jon B. Alterman, Heather A. Conley,
and Michael J. Green moderated by Stephanie Sanok Kostro*

New realities within the international security environment—such as emerging threats from non-state adversaries—are causing U.S. officials to reevaluate how to use deterrence as a critical element of the nation’s defense strategy. Senior Fellow Stephanie Sanok Kostro sat down with Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Middle East Director Jon B. Alterman, Senior Vice President for Europe, Eurasia, and the Arctic and Europe Director Heather A. Conley, and Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair Michael J. Green to discuss regional perceptions and opportunities for improved U.S. deterrence.

Stephanie Sanok Kostro: How do governments in your region of study perceive the current U.S. approach to deterrence?

Heather A. Conley: U.S. deterrence in Europe is expressed through NATO’s Article 5 commitment that “an armed attack against one or more [ally] shall be considered an attack against them all.” In addition, any ally can convene Article 4 consultations when it feels threatened. There have been only four post–Cold War instances of such consultations: three invoked by Turkey over Iraq / Syria and one by Poland over the Ukraine crisis. Invocation of these articles sends strong messages to the world about NATO—to include American—security concerns.

Michael J. Green: Although U.S. deterrence has long underwritten Asian security, there are serious questions in Asian capitals about U.S. deterrence. Many states worry about China's growing military capabilities and its assertive actions in territorial disputes. Japan and South Korea also focus on North Korea's largely unimpeded uranium and plutonium weapons programs. Simultaneously, chaos in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine (as well as political dysfunction in Washington) elicits concern that the United States might "pivot" away from Asia or lack the willpower or resources to manage new security challenges.

Jon B. Alterman: There is a broad sense that U.S. deterrence is now less compelling, in part because of the Obama administration's perceived reluctance to use tools of influence and in part because of the Bush administration's inability to accomplish ambitious goals in the Middle East. While the region is fractured in many ways, there is virtual unanimity on one point: the Obama administration does not recognize pure evil when it sees it.

Also, the United States is trying to deter both Middle East state and non-state actors. States have assets to hold at risk, and rewards can be conferred. Non-state actors require a different set of tools and offer a different set of potential outcomes. U.S. tools are much better developed for the former.

Kostro: What are recent examples of successful U.S. deterrence efforts?

Alterman: While one might argue the United States is successfully deterring Iran from producing a nuclear weapon, the United States and its partners have failed to persuade Iran to end its nuclear program. Whether the current

violence in the Middle East represents the failure or success in U.S. deterrence efforts is unclear. The answer is probably a little of both.

Conley: Article 5 in some allies' minds equates to U.S. "boots on the ground." This is true in Poland and the Baltic states, which have lingering doubts whether some European countries would come to their aid if Russia invades. The most successful example was the recent deployment of 600 U.S. soldiers to the Baltic region and augmentation of U.S. forces in Poland following Russia's annexation of Crimea. It is also helpful that allies provided additional aircraft to NATO's Baltic air policing and based NATO's Multinational Corps-Northeast in Szczecin, Poland. Simply put, rhetoric is great, boots are required.

Green: The most obvious historical examples are deterrence of North Korea crossing the 38th Parallel and China crossing the Taiwan Strait. Today, some of the most difficult challenges are "gray zones," rather than black and white threats of invasion. China's

pressure on its neighbors in the East and South China Seas presents a serious challenge for many in the region. Despite the U.S. rebalance to Asia, U.S. policymakers do not appear to have a clear strategy for deterring such "gray zone" conflicts, and Asian states will find it difficult to deter revision of the status quo on their own. There have been successes in reassuring allies about deterrence, including new dialogues with Japan and Korea and visible deployments of tactical aircraft and nuclear-capable bombers after threatening moves by North Korea.

Kostro: How could the United States improve deterrence activities?

Conley: The United States and NATO must meet the challenge of modern deterrence, and they must rapidly adapt, including developing the

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tools to confront Russia's unconventional means to influence the battle space, such as energy restrictions or support for anti-Europe parties. NATO must also be able to focus on its east and southeast flanks, given growing concern that concurrent tests of American and European policies in Ukraine and Syria will fail.

Alterman: The United States needs to be clearer about its interests, more willing to take action to further its interests, and more effective in creating consequences it seeks to create. Allies and adversaries alike judge that the United States is so inwardly focused and wary of Middle Eastern entanglements that they can safely predict the limits of U.S. action.

Green: I agree. Clarity and consistency in U.S. declarations will be critical. Washington's discourse has left Asian experts confused about the core strategic assumptions that animate U.S. policy. Do U.S. policymakers seek a balance of power centered on U.S. allies? Or a concert of power centered on Beijing? Or a combination of both that depends on which official is speaking and what is happening in the world? U.S. allies, partners, and adversaries are watching U.S. statements and actions. They will respond accordingly. ►