

State of (Deterrence by) Denial

Great power competition is all the rage. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) both argue that the United States' central challenge is the reemergence of strategic competition with revisionist powers (China and, to a considerably more limited degree, Russia).¹ The Commission on the National Defense Strategy for the United States (NDS Commission)—a Congressionally-mandated, independent review of the NDS—applauds “the priority the NDS places on competition with China and Russia as the central dynamic in shaping and sizing U.S. military forces and in U.S. defense strategy more broadly.”² As former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster put it: “Geopolitics are back ... with a vengeance, after this holiday from history we took in the so-called post-Cold War period.”³

Great power competition can mean many things, from assuring economic reciprocity to avoiding nuclear war, but it boils down to the United States' ability to *deter* China and Russia from attacking the United States and our allies or established partners. For example, Washington does not want China to invade Taiwan, nor Russia to invade the Baltic states. Deterring China and Russia from doing such things, however, is difficult today due to the relative decrease in U.S. economic power and military capability.⁴ The era of U.S. military dominance—when the United States could count on controlling the air, land, sea, space, and cyberspace—is over.⁵ More capable adversaries plus declining American dominance add up to less favorable balances of power and less confident allies in key regions of the world.⁶

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In light of these challenges, the NDS calls for an underappreciated shift in American defense planning and execution. Rather than deterring adversaries through the promise of punishment after aggression, the NDS argues that the U.S. military must adopt a posture of deterrence by denial that focuses on denying adversary advances in the first place. Unfortunately, the Pentagon is moving slowly to implement this revolutionary change. In order to deter growing threats from revisionist great powers, policymakers must change their framework and approach defense decisions through a simple rubric: does this help or hinder a shift to deterrence by denial? Only by ruthlessly implementing this transformation can the United States secure its interests and those of its allies.

From Punishment to Denial

The shift from punishment to denial is grounded in unfavorable changes in the balance of power in key regions of the world. As China's and Russia's relative military power grows, the chances increase that they could decide that potential gains from conquest outweigh the risks. The most dangerous scenario is if these revisionist powers pursue a *fait accompli* strategy, whereby they rapidly seize territory and create anti-access area denial (A2/AD) facts on the ground.⁷ In a *fait accompli* strategy, the attacker moves "in a way that forces the defender's counterpunch to have to be so costly and risky as to seem not worth the benefit of reversing it."⁸ If the attacker can fight successfully or achieve its objective without taking grievous action, then it forces the defender to consider taking costly action to reverse the gains, and the defender may not have the time nor the spine to respond effectively.

These high-stakes gambits would be particularly effective against what most people associate with deterrence: punishment. Under deterrence by punishment, the United States threatens to respond to adversary aggression through the promise of punishment so painful that the attacker will recognize the cost of achieving their goal exceeds the value of the goal itself. Yet, given growing Chinese and Russian capabilities and the looming costs of a great power conflict, punishment may be unappealing for American policymakers. Under these circumstances, adversaries may conclude American deterrence is not credible—particularly if punishment would require the United States to escalate to the nuclear level.⁹

In contrast, the NSS and NDS signal a reemphasis on conventional deterrence by *denial*. Rather than threatening to respond to aggression after the fact, deterrence by denial seeks to deny, degrade, or delay the aggression in near real time. Denial capabilities—normally associated with conventional and subconventional ground, sea, and air capabilities as opposed to strategic nuclear capabilities—deter

by influencing an attacker's "estimate of the probability of gaining his objective."¹⁰ If successfully implemented, deterrence by denial convinces the attacker that their goals are unachievable through aggression.

The credibility of either form of deterrence lies in the mind of the target. During the Cold War, for example, the Soviet Union may have believed the United States could not prevent them from taking Western Europe (deterrence by denial), but they also likely believed the United States could and, at least under President Dwight Eisenhower, would destroy a good part of Russia if they tried (deterrence by punishment). In this case, deterrence by punishment was the more credible option.¹¹

Deterrence by denial, however, is the preferable option for the present day because it guards against deterrence failures and minimizes reliance on nuclear retaliation. As Glenn Snyder, a pioneer in the study of deterrence, argued in 1961, denial may be the more credible option—"if the deterrer has strong denial forces" [emphasis added]—because a "denial response is more likely than a reprisal action to promise a rational means of *defense* in case deterrence fails."¹² There are reasons to believe Snyder's argument is even more relevant today because the fear of nuclear weapon use, so prevalent in the Cold War, has faded, but the fear of nonnuclear conflict has increased in this age of precision-guided munitions and cyberattack capabilities.¹³ In other words, no aggressor would question the United States' capability to dole out punishment at the nuclear level, but whether a U.S. president would be willing to launch nuclear weapons is still an open question. Relying on punishment also puts the onus of escalation on the United States, with all the attendant international opprobrium, while denial shifts the burden of escalation on U.S. adversaries.

Therefore, the United States is better off blocking (i.e. denying) aggression at the conventional and subconventional level than by threatening to escalate to nuclear Armageddon. For deterrence by denial to work, however, the defender needs strong denial forces. This means the defender needs to understand where the attacker is seeking to strike.¹⁴ After all, how can the defender deny the attacker his objective if the defender does not know what the aggressor wants? Denial implies the defender can identify the battlefield before the battle begins, and posture forces and resources so as to detect aggression quickly enough to do something about it. This is similar to the U.S. strategy of strongpoint defense (defending only the vital industrial-military centers) during the Cold War, as opposed to perimeter defense which sought to resist all Soviet advances. The defender also needs a sense of what strategy the attacker intends to employ.¹⁵

Fortunately, our adversaries have not been subtle about their intentions. China intends to unify Taiwan with the mainland, by force if necessary, and dominate the First Island Chain (FIC), the strategically vital chain of islands off the Asian mainland running from Japan to the South China Sea.¹⁶ As the General

Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping, recently stated: “The motherland must be reunified ... [this is] the inevitable requirement of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation in the new era.”¹⁷ The Pacific Ocean may be big enough for China and America, as General Secretary Xi also likes to say, but Taiwan and the FIC are not.¹⁸ When it comes to Russia, the Kremlin “has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors.”¹⁹ Russia intends to maintain control over Crimea and consolidate its gains in Eastern Ukraine, while threatening the unity of the NATO alliance and the sovereignty of the Baltics.²⁰

Denying Reality

This understanding of Chinese and Russian intent begs three questions: First, does the United States have the forces necessary to deny China the ability to conquer Taiwan and dominate the FIC? Second, does the United States have the forces necessary to deny Russia the ability to seize and hold the Baltics and destabilize NATO? These may be the most dangerous courses of action for China and Russia rather than their most likely courses of action, but they are the best to plan against, because they are the most stressing plausible cases. They become more plausible the more the conventional and subconventional balance of power shifts in China’s and Russia’s favor. If China or Russia think they can seize and hold Taiwan or the Baltics at a reasonable cost, they are more likely to consider it. Both these questions are bound up with a third and more fundamental question: does the United States have the forces necessary to implement the NDS and conduct deterrence by denial vis-à-vis China and Russia?

Those answering yes to any of these three questions are in a state of denial. The balance seems to be shifting against the United States, and if the shift is not arrested, the country will confront an unpleasant choice to escalate to nuclear options or back down in the face of a *fait accompli*. In Taiwan, since the United States last effectively denied China during the 1996 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis (when President Clinton deployed a carrier battle group near Taiwan in response to China threatening Taiwan’s upcoming and first presidential elections, humiliating the Chinese Communist Party in the process), the balance of power has shifted dramatically, calling into question the United States’ ability to help Taiwan effectively defend itself.²¹ In the Baltics, recent wargaming reveals Russia could rapidly defeat NATO and reach Riga and Tallinn in less than 60 hours.²² In terms of overall regional prioritization, despite the NDS identifying China as the pacing threat, the Pentagon is still devoting considerable resources to the Middle East.²³

It may be too early to tell, but the most troubling finding of the NDS Commission is not that the United States is spending too little on defense, though it is, but rather that the Pentagon lacks operational art. Operational art is the ability to translate strategic or political goals into tactical action, or “the use of military forces to achieve strategic goals through the design, organization, integration, and conduct of strategies, campaigns, major operations, and battles.”²⁴ According to the NDS Commission, key DOD concepts like dynamic force employment “lack underlying analytics and maturity. For instance, the strategy does not explain the Department’s thinking on how the United States will deter threats in a second theater of operations . . . Although the NDS states that deterring adversaries is a key objective, there was little consensus among DOD leaders with whom we interacted on what deterrence means in practice, how escalation dynamics might play out, and *what it will cost to deter effectively.*”²⁵ [Emphasis added.]

The Department of Defense (DOD) does not have enough money, but it will never have enough if the Pentagon does not spend it correctly, *especially* when dealing with a massive power like China. DOD’s biggest problem is that it does not have the conceptual framework needed to ensure defense spending produces a denial capability. If the Pentagon cannot articulate how it intends to conduct deterrence by denial—which is likely a more difficult task for the Pentagon than deterrence by punishment²⁶—then it will be harder to make the political case to fund the military at higher levels. Without more mature concepts, the Pentagon will also have trouble prioritizing as well as managing inter-service rivalry.

Operating in a denial paradigm, once DOD figures out what the enemy intends to do, it should be able to select which strongpoints to defend and determine which services and combat units are best suited to the task of denial. Another way of thinking about this is that the Pentagon needs to articulate how the United States can invest as much “tooth” as possible in what the NDS calls the “contact” and “blunt layers” of the Pentagon’s Global Operating Model. The contact layer is where the U.S. military can “compete more effectively below the level of armed conflict” and the blunt layer is designed to “delay, degrade, or deny adversary aggression.” If the contact force is the beat cop patrolling the world’s oceans and contested territories, keeping a watchful eye out for aggression, the blunt force is the SWAT team ready to provide rapid backup and firepower close to the scene of violence. In contrast, the “surge” and “homeland” layers are designed to “surge war-winning forces and manage conflict escalation; and defend the U.S. homeland.”²⁷ Although historically American power projection has trended toward large numbers of U.S.-based forces deployed from the surge and homeland layers, such as during the run up to the Gulf War, the blunt and contact layers are where most of the action should take place in a denial paradigm. Under denial, the goal is to confine the action and manage escalation below the level of outright conflict, and if war breaks out, deny the opponent the ability to

affect the *fait accompli*. For example, forces forward-deployed in the FIC should be able to deny China the ability to invade Taiwan rather than waiting for ships surged from San Diego to arrive and respond. Near-term defense investments should thus prioritize services and systems operating on the contact and blunt layers and operating under clear concepts for deterrence by denial.

This does not seem to be happening. Congress grew defense spending in FY18-FY19 by some \$165 billion, but Congress had to impose these increases on DOD after an initial paltry request from the Pentagon. This defense “rebuild” money has largely been spent on restoring readiness rather than adding force structure. Armed with the NDS, acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan promised the FY20 budget would be a “masterpiece.”²⁸ His masterpiece has now arrived to the tune of \$750 billion dollars, which almost satisfies the bare minimum of 3 percent real budget growth recommended by the NDS Commission.

The budget, however, contains a fatal flaw. The budget keeps base defense spending at the \$576 billion Budget Control Act (BCA) cap level, while putting \$174 billion into Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), nearly \$100 billion of which is explicitly marked as base budget requirements.²⁹ Practically speaking, during forthcoming budget deal negotiations, this means any defense spending above the BCA number but below the budget request will be framed as an “increase” rather than a cut. This will make it difficult for Congressional defense hawks to negotiate a path to the \$750 billion figure. As ugly as the OCO gimmick is, things actually get worse when looking beyond FY20. Under the Pentagon’s plan, defense spending would actually go down by \$4 billion in FY21 before slowly starting to grow in the outyears.³⁰ To put things in context, from FY20-22, this budget path underfunds the DOD by \$73 billion compared to the plan set out by Senator John McCain at the start of 2017.³¹

Consider the Navy. The Navy is arguably the priority force in the most important theater of operations: Indo-Pacific Command. The Navy-Marine Corps team plays a unique role in conducting deterrence by denial, particularly in the contact layer.³² Yet, the Navy’s FY20 shipbuilding budget represents an overall decrease of 1.5 percent from the previous year. While the Navy submitted a 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan along with its budget that reached 355 ships for the first time in more than two decades, much of this growth happens in the outyears—the Pentagon’s version of “the check is in the mail.” Despite reaching 355 ships roughly 20 years faster than the FY19 shipbuilding plan, the new document only adds one additional ship over its first five years compared to last year’s plan.³³ Even worse, as retired Naval officer Bryan McGrath has argued, three years into the Trump administration, the Navy’s projection for its fleet size in FY23 is 314 ships—only five more than the Obama administration’s FY23 goal during its final shipbuilding plan, a less than 2 percent increase.³⁴ As the People’s Liberation

Army Navy (PLAN) steadily pursues its plan of building 450 surface ships and 99 submarines by 2030, persistently reassuring allies and partners in the world's most contested maritime regions will become more difficult and require more U.S. ships. The Navy is growing, but not with the necessary sense of urgency.³⁵

The Navy is not only crucial to the NDS' vision of the contact layer, it also plays a key role in the blunt layer. In particular, the Navy's aircraft carriers can emerge from over the horizon and decisively shift the military balance of power in a given theater of operations. Yet, the Navy's original FY20 budget request sought to retire the U.S.S. *Harry S. Truman* two decades early. The *Truman*'s retirement would have shrunk the U.S. aircraft carrier force from 11 to 10 and failed to meet Congress and President Donald Trump's goal of maintaining 12 aircraft carriers.³⁶ The Navy argued retiring the *Truman* early was consistent with the NDS in that it would allow the Navy to free up resources to increase investments in next generation munitions and technologies. Yet these technologies will need platforms like carriers from which to be deployed.

While the Trump administration reversed the Navy's decision after encountering significant political pressure, the *Truman* incident demonstrates the Navy has not made a consistent case for carriers as integral to deterrence by denial, particularly in the blunt layer. After all, the challenges faced by aircraft carriers today are less about the carrier itself and more about the currently limited range of its airwing. The solution to the increasing range of anti-carrier missiles is to develop long-range manned and unmanned carrier-based aircraft. These aircraft must be able to both strike targets at sufficient distance to keep carriers shielded and provide ready combat power in the blunt layer to support the forward contact layer. Unfortunately, despite growing adversary capabilities, the Navy has proven resistant to developing unmanned long-range strike platforms to replace at least a portion of its manned fighter aircraft with more limited range.³⁷

Another example of how the services are failing to adapt to the NDS is sealift and airlift capacity. Though denying China along the FIC will require more forward-based logistics and forward-deployed ground forces, sealift and airlift are vital to supporting forward-based and forward-deployed forces in key theaters in the contact and blunt layers. It is hard for a defender to deter an adversary that believes the defender cannot sustain a fight. In the absence of regular resupply and reinforcement, forces in theater will eventually be cut off and isolated in the event of a conflict. At the same time, unlike recent conflicts that have allowed the United States to concentrate logistical efforts well in advance of the start of hostilities, a great power conflict may start with comparatively little warning—putting additional strain on the logistics force as the United States scrambles to react. In light of these strategic changes, it stands to reason that sea and airlift requirements would increase in order to enable a forward-postured deterrence by denial strategy. Yet the Pentagon's requirements for strategic

airlift, DOD-controlled sealift, and aerial refueling tankers have all remained constant since 2013. DOD's requirement for commercial sealift (in the form of voluntary intermodal sealift agreements and allied capacity) has actually decreased from 4.5 million square feet of roll on/roll off capacity in 2013 to 3.9 million in 2019.³⁸

Returning to Reality

In light of this challenge, defense hawks are right to suggest that the United States needs to sustain increases in defense spending over the next decade, but the problem runs deeper. Total defense spending is a secondary question. The first and more important question is whether the Pentagon is spending money on the right things. Thus far, systems geared toward deterrence by punishment in the surge and homeland layers, particularly nuclear weapons, have dominated the FY20 defense debate. These are important, but implementing the NDS will require a greater near-term focus on fielding denial capabilities for the blunt and contact layers in the FIC and the Baltics. If the military cannot conduct deterrence by denial in the global strongpoints, then it cannot implement the NDS. If the military cannot conduct deterrence by denial, it will instead be compelled to consider unpalatable options such as nuclear punishment or defeat when faced with a *fait accompli*.

Therefore, rather than arguing for buying more of everything, lawmakers must first ask: how will this weapon system allow the United States to deny China the ability to dominate the South China Sea or invade Taiwan, or deny Russia the ability to invade the Baltics? This also means the DOD must rethink traditional definitions of "readiness," moving beyond measuring plane parts and days at sea toward more useful metrics such as U.S. and allied lethality in the blunt and contact layers, or surge capacity within the defense industrial base.³⁹ Since deterrence by denial ultimately rests on the defender's ability to defeat the enemy's invasion, appropriate metrics would also assess the rate at which U.S. and allied forces can damage, destroy, delay, and disrupt the attacking force. In other words, planners must ask the question: are U.S. forces ready to find, identify, target, and kill key elements of the attacking force?⁴⁰ These metrics must be framed within the context of new, innovative and effective operational concepts. Ultimately, the only measure of readiness that matters is whether the military is ready to implement the NDS. More specifically, policymakers must ask whether the military is ready to conduct deterrence by denial against China and Russia.

The good news is that DOD does not have to start from scratch to find the concepts necessary to connect the goals of the NDS to the actual things it should spend money on to connect ends and means. For example, defense analyst Andrew Krepinevich, in his concept of "archipelagic defense," shows with

specificity how denial can be done in the FIC and at what cost.⁴¹ A congressionally-mandated review of the Navy conducted by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in 2017 provided a detailed plan for restructuring the entire fleet in order to enhance deterrence by denial.⁴² A group of young, warrior-scholar Marine and Navy officers is challenging their services to rethink fundamental planning and procurement assumptions, such as the Marine Corps' focus on conducting the two traditional Marine Expeditionary Brigade joint forcible entry operations.⁴³

The Trump administration's recent decision to pull out of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty also opens up new possibilities. Currently, China's large INF-noncompliant missile force gives the People's Liberation Army (PLA) the ability to inflict prompt destruction at extended ranges and thereby use its strategic depth to great advantage.⁴⁴ Freed from INF restrictions, the United States can redress this imbalance by deploying conventional missile systems such as the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) at formerly INF-noncompliant ranges, dispersed in combat units throughout the FIC.⁴⁵ Consider that a current Marine artillery regiment equipped with M777 howitzers has an effective range of just under 20 miles (upgrades may soon double this to 40 miles). Deployed from locations like Okinawa, such range limitations make this artillery functionally useless when it comes to deterrence by denial. Far more useful would be transforming at least parts of Marine artillery regiments with intermediate-range conventional missiles to be able to move constantly, holding a greater number of Chinese targets at risk, and complicating enemy targeting.⁴⁶

While Guam, as a U.S. territory, would be a logical first deployment for the Pentagon to begin fielding these weapons, placing them on foreign soil may be easier than many imagine. For example, Japan already allows the United States to store Tomahawk and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSMs) for use with forward-deployed forces.⁴⁷ The Japanese government already allows the Marines to forward-deploy and train with the Marine Corps' High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) at bases such as Camp Fuji.⁴⁸ In other words, fielding INF-noncompliant capabilities on allied territory is possible and strategically valuable. This will take time, but it is critical that the U.S. military start working through these steps now, with a sense of urgency. The Marine Corp's emerging Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) concept is a good start, but it needs to go further and focus on how to put capabilities in place persistently rather than moving them in place *after* a crisis begins.

Another potential step that prioritizes forward presence and distributed lethality would be employing capabilities like LRASM on smaller ships, both manned and unmanned.⁴⁹ These small and highly maneuverable combatants could play a key role loitering near strategic chokepoints and conducting sea denial. A greater number of smaller ships would also create more command opportunities

for junior officers. This would enhance the United States' greatest competitive advantage over China and Russia: the quality of our service members. American service members benefit from an innovative and adaptive culture that empowers individuals and delegates authority. As Air Force Lieutenant Colonel David Blair has argued, these advantages give rise to the ability to adapt more readily to unfamiliar environments. The result, as Blair puts it, is that "A Generals' war belongs to the Chinese General Staff, but a Captains' war, or even better, a Sergeants' war belongs to us."⁵⁰ The United States can thus outcompete China and Russia by devolving authority and lethality to the lowest possible levels, and relying on superior training and improvisational skills to thrive in chaotic environments.⁵¹ Despite the focus on the technological side of today's great power competition, what may prove decisive is the ability to survive when cut off from technology.

Holding the Line

Former Defense Secretary and NDS architect Jim Mattis repeatedly said when arguing for more defense spending that "America can afford survival."⁵² He was right. On the current course, however, survival is all the United States will get—survival combined with a corresponding surrender of its primacy.⁵³

In order to restore U.S. primacy and win in a world of great power competition with two revisionist great power rivals, the United States must deter China and Russia by fielding conventional and subconventional capabilities specifically designed to deny them their objectives if they choose the course of aggression. In other words, the U.S. military must implement the NDS. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan recently testified to Congress that implementing the NDS is the Pentagon's "most critical mission."⁵⁴ Until DOD effectuates the shift toward deterrence by denial with greater alacrity and conceptual creativity, it will fail to accomplish that mission.

It will not be enough to fix the readiness crisis or rebuild the military in its past image. The NSS and NDS are calling for a reorientation of how, where, and in what priority the United States projects military power. Therefore, the United States not only needs a larger military, it also needs a larger *and different kind* of military, one better suited to the specific purpose of conducting deterrence by denial. This in turn requires new operational concepts, new readiness metrics, and new lethal capabilities from our allies and partners, not just more of the same. This secondary effect of great power competition may be a great competition for power within the Pentagon, but funneling more funds into the status quo will result in failure. Figuring out and funding deterrence by denial in the strongpoints is the only path to success.

For those who think this is too radical, too hard, or too incongruous with political realities, consider that the NSS and NDS are still fundamentally defensive strategies.⁵⁵ Enemies of the United States want to upend the status quo by taking territory and destroying its alliance structure. The United States merely seeks to maintain its position of primacy, sustain its alliance structure, and preserve favorable balances of power in key regions of the world. This is not to say the task ahead is easy, but it is simple: hold the line.

Notes

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