

# How Much Is Enough?

## U.S. Extended Deterrence in Northeast Asia and China's Rise

### BOTTOM LINES

- **EXTENDED DETERRENCE INVOLVES A COMPLICATED TRIANGLE.**  
 The defender must strive to make its threats credible to deter a potential aggressor, the ally must find policies that prevent the defender from abandoning it, and the rising power may attempt to divide the allies.
- **CHINA IS GREATLY ENHANCING ITS MILITARY CAPABILITIES.**  
 Although U.S. capabilities continue to be formidable, China is shifting the military balance at both the nuclear and regional levels, which is creating concern within and challenges for U.S. alliances.
- **EFFECTIVE EXTENDED DETERRENCE REMAINS POSSIBLE.**  
 Contrary to many dire predictions, the United States can continue to meet the military requirements of extended deterrence with respect to its allies in Northeast Asia, unless China turns out to be a very determined aggressor.
- **MEASURED REACTIONS ARE REQUIRED TO AVOID PROVOCATION.**  
 A danger in exaggerating the requirements of deterrence is that the United States will respond with overly ambitious military policies, which will unnecessarily threaten China and, consequently, prove self-defeating.

*By Mike M. Mochizuki*

#### **Extended Deterrence Involves A Complicated Triangle**

Assessing the requirements for effective extended deterrence—the ability of one country to deter attacks on its allies, not just itself—demands examining the perspective and calculations of three relevant actors: (1) the defender state that is providing extended deterrence, (2) the allies or quasi-allies that are the beneficiaries of extended deterrence, and (3) the potential challenger or aggressor that is the target of extended deterrence.

To make extended deterrence credible, the defender must not only have the military capabilities to inflict unacceptable costs on an aggressor and/or prevent the aggressor from achieving its objectives, but also demonstrate its stake in its allies' security. At the same time, the defender must calibrate its security commitment to its ally to prevent becoming entrapped in a military conflict that it would prefer to avoid and to reduce an ally's incentive to free or cheap ride on the defender's protection.

An ally can seek to prevent being abandoned by its security patron by contributing to the alliance and by suggesting that it has the option of defecting from the alliance. A potential challenger will calculate the costs and benefits of using force based on its assessment of the combined military capabilities of the defender and the defender's allies, and it may seek a military advantage by trying to drive a wedge between the defender and its allies. Insofar as the use of force entails risks, a challenger is more likely to engage in aggression to avert losses or avoid deterioration in its vital interests rather than to seek gains.

#### **China is Greatly Enhancing Its Military Capabilities**

Although China is unlikely to seek and achieve quantitative nuclear parity with the United States, it is modernizing its nuclear arsenal in order to have a more survivable second-strike capability, or an assured ability to respond to a nuclear attack with its own nuclear retaliation. The evolving strategic nuclear balance may make China feel more secure, since it could potentially deter a nuclear attack by the United States, but U.S. allies are concerned that this nuclear balance might weaken U.S. extended deterrence: it could lessen the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats to deter Chinese aggression involving non-nuclear forces. China is also acquiring air, naval, and missile capabilities that will put at risk U.S. military assets based in Northeast Asia and military forces that might approach China's peripheral waters and air space during a crisis. China's conventional buildup is also altering the conventional military balance between China and Taiwan—and even between China and Japan—increasingly in China's favor.

#### **Effective Extended Deterrence Remains Possible**

The United States and its Northeast Asian alliance network may be losing its military predominance vis a vis China in the region, but their collective military capability remains formidable. Extended deterrence can continue to be effective for the following reasons.

First, the Obama administration through its Asia "pivot" or "rebalance" policy has reinforced the U.S. security commitment to its regional allies. U.S. naval power is now more focused on the Asia-Pacific theater, and the realignment and upgrade of U.S. military assets in the region will enhance their survivability during a possible military conflict with China. For example, the United States is building up Guam as a naval

and air hub by home-porting three nuclear-powered attack submarines and hosting B-52 bombers armed with conventional air-launched cruise missiles, B-2 stealth bombers, and F-16 and F-22 fighter planes.

Second, anxiety about China's military buildup and assertiveness as well as concerns about North Korea's nuclear program are steering U.S. allies, especially Japan, to strengthen their defense forces and enhance defense cooperation with the United States. Japan is now concentrating more of its military assets on defending its southwest island chain—a mission that would complicate Chinese military planning, especially for a Taiwan conflict scenario. Although Taiwan is not a formal ally of the United States, U.S. arms sales to Taiwan will continue to help Taiwan maintain military capabilities to resist an attack or Chinese efforts to impose a blockade. Taiwan can also buttress deterrence by enhancing the survivability of its civilian and military infrastructure. Likely more important, the United States has implicitly warned China that it would defend Taiwan if China launches an unprovoked attack. Although South Korea is less worried than Japan and Taiwan about a potential Chinese threat, its concern about Pyongyang's nuclear program and bellicose behavior has encouraged Seoul to tighten the U.S.–ROK alliance, to bolster its ability to stop a North Korean invasion, and even to explore security cooperation with Japan. In short, despite China's military modernization, the United States—with the active help of its allies—will still have the capability to impose high costs and risks on China if it opted for military aggression.

Third, extended deterrence will continue to be effective because China remains a cautious and risk-averse power and its leaders want to focus on domestic challenges. Although China is a revisionist state in North-east Asia, since it seeks Taiwan's unification with the mainland and challenges Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands (called the Diaoyu Islands by China), which are under Japan's administrative control, Chinese leaders understand the military risks and international costs they would incur if they engaged in outright military aggression in pursuit of this revisionism. As long as Taipei refrains from pursuing de jure independence and closing off any possibility of a negotiated settlement, Beijing is unlikely to use force to compel Taiwan to unify with the mainland, even though Chinese leaders are unwilling to state explicitly that they will not use force against Taiwan for fear that such a declaration might encourage pro-independence groups in Taiwan.

Regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute, China initiated regular coast guard patrols into the territorial and contiguous waters of these islands after the Japanese government purchased three of them in September 2012, which Chinese leaders and the public interpreted as weakening China's position on sovereignty. Nevertheless, these small, uninhabited islands do not have enough strategic and economic value for China to risk a military conflict with Japan and possibly the United States by seizing this territory.

As for the Korean peninsula, China is primarily a status-quo power. It does not want another Korean War, and values North Korea as a buffer state. While Beijing could be doing more to persuade Pyongyang to abandon the pursuit of nuclear weapons, China certainly does not want to encourage North Korean aggression, and it may be willing to exert the necessary means to block a Pyongyang effort to unify the Korean

peninsula by force. Without China's support, a North Korean invasion of South Korea or a missile attack on Japan would be suicidal for the North Korean regime.

### **Measured Reactions Are Required to Avoid Provocation**

As long as China remains a cautious, risk-adverse power with limited revisionist aims, the United States and its allies should respond in a measured way to China's military buildup and assertiveness. The United States can maintain effective extended deterrence with respect to China by continuing to make aggression a high-risk and low-benefit proposition for Beijing leaders. This can be done without emphasizing possible offensive military strikes against China's homeland, which could present dangerous escalatory dynamics during a crisis as well as intensify the military competition between China on the one hand and the United States and its allies on the other.

But insofar as Chinese leaders may grow more risk- and cost-tolerant when confronting a dramatic deterioration in its vital interests or its sovereignty claims, successful deterrence also requires a degree of reassurance. Therefore, Washington and Tokyo need to reassure Beijing that they do not support Taiwanese moves toward de jure independence. Washington should also encourage Beijing and Tokyo to refrain from militarizing the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island dispute, to reduce tensions and put aside the sovereignty issue, and to promote cooperative approaches for developing and accessing the economic resources in the East China Sea. ♦

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