



Entangled Deterrence: China's Strategic Expansion and the New Strategic Reality

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Renewed investment in nuclear capabilities, including the RAF's return to the airborne nuclear role and the modernization and expansion of allied deterrent forces, reflects the reality that nuclear weapons have once again become central to international security. This renewed emphasis is taking place, however, in a strategic environment transformed by China's rapid nuclear expansion and the growing entanglement of conventional and nuclear operations, where adversary perceptions increasingly shape deterrence, escalation, and crisis stability.

Why This Conversation Matters Now: A More Complex Reality

To understand where we are going, we must first frame how we got here. For three decades, the prevailing assumption was that nuclear weapons would become increasingly less relevant. For many Air forces, nuclear deterrence gradually moved from the center of operational planning toward the periphery. Today it has returned to the center.

Today's environment is not a return to the Cold War; it is something considerably more complex. We have moved from a bipolar to a tripolar, and may eventually move to a multipolar, nuclear landscape.

This new era can be defined as one with entangled security dilemmas, where conventional military actions can be perceived as threats to a nation's strategic forces, thus risking nuclear escalation in a regional conflict.

Strategic stability is no longer guaranteed by simple arithmetic. It requires a sophisticated understanding of adversary perceptions, signaling, and doctrine. That is why rebuilding our collective “nuclear IQ” is not a luxury; it is an operational necessity for every commander in this room.

The challenge before us is not simply understanding the impact of more nuclear weapons. It is understanding how nuclear weapons are increasingly being integrated into conventional campaigns, alliance dynamics, and political coercion. That integration is fundamentally changing deterrence.

The Pacing Threat: China's Nuclear Breakout and Its Implications

Our challenge is not simply measuring Chinese capability. It is understanding the strategic logic that is driving it. What we are observing in China is not a routine modernization; it is the largest, fastest, and most opaque expansion of nuclear forces in the modern era.

But the most important change is not numerical. It is conceptual.

Beijing is changing what it believes nuclear weapons are for. For decades China's nuclear force existed primarily to guarantee retaliation after a nuclear attack. Today, Chinese military

writings increasingly describe nuclear forces as instruments that shape the conventional battlefield before the first shot is fired. The People's Liberation Army is fundamentally transforming its hardware, its posture, and its underlying strategic doctrine.

To understand the magnitude of this shift, we must look at where they came from. For decades, Beijing maintained a highly restrained, "minimal deterrence" posture. They kept a small number of liquid-fueled missiles off-alert, relying on a doctrine designed solely to ensure a second-strike retaliation. Today, that era is definitively over.

Driven by Xi Jinping's mandate to achieve "great power status" and build a world-class military by 2049, the PLA Rocket Force has shifted toward a robust, high-alert, "launch-on-warning" posture.

The visible evidence is considerable. We have tracked the construction of over 300 new solid-fuel missile silos across western China, a shift to solid fuels that drastically reduces their launch preparation time. Today it is a rapidly expanding arsenal, projected to be more than 1,000 by 2030, potentially with continued expansion after that.

We are seeing the rapid operationalization of a true nuclear triad: the fielding of the H-6N nuclear-capable bomber, and eventually the introduction of the H-20 nuclear capable stealth bomber, and a massive investment in their sea-based deterrent.

This naval expansion was emphatically demonstrated just this month, when the PLA Navy conducted a highly publicized ballistic missile launch from a naval vessel. This event was not just a technical test; it was a strategic signal. It demonstrates Beijing's growing confidence in its command and control, and its accelerating drive toward maintaining a continuous at-sea deterrent.

Furthermore, this triad is augmented by exotic technologies, including fractional orbital bombardment systems (FOBS), and hypersonic glide vehicles, both of which are designed specifically to evade allied missile defenses.

These capabilities are not being developed in isolation. Chinese strategists increasingly describe their purpose as achieving what they call "Strategic Counterbalance," using a survivable nuclear force to constrain allied strategic options while creating greater freedom of action for Chinese conventional operations, particularly in the Western Pacific.

The "Entangled Security Dilemma"

Why is Beijing doing this now? While it is partly about national prestige, it is primarily driven by profound Chinese insecurity. Chinese strategists pay close attention to democratic countries' advanced conventional precision-strike capabilities, our integrated air and missile defense systems, and our space-based sensors.

They do not see these as defensive. What we often describe as conventional deterrence, Beijing increasingly interprets as potential strategic disarmament. They view them as a direct threat, capable of executing a decapitating first strike against China's nuclear command and control. Their conclusion is straightforward: if survivability is uncertain, then force expansion becomes a strategic necessity.

However, in doing so, they are deliberately blurring the lines between conventional and nuclear forces. The PLA is heavily fielding dual-capable theater systems, like the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, which can swap conventional and nuclear warheads.

This is only exacerbated by the PLA's development of conventionally armed intercontinental ballistic missiles. If you are sitting in #10, or 1600, or in any of our capitals, and

you receive notice of just eight inbound ICBMs, and you don't know if the payload is nuclear or conventional, what is your response. I tell you, I don't want to be making that decision.

Now reverse the perspective. Imagine sitting in the Central Military Commission trying to determine whether inbound F-35s are carrying conventional weapons or nuclear weapons. The result is that almost every major conventional movement now carries potential strategic meaning. Conventional and nuclear signaling are becoming inseparable.

Casting the Nuclear Shadow

Ultimately, this nuclear expansion is highly operational. Beijing is designing a force to cast a nuclear shadow over the conventional battlefield.

In a regional contingency, most notably a crisis over Taiwan or the South China Sea, China's goal is to possess a nuclear arsenal so formidable and survivable that it paralyzes democratic political will. They intend to use the threat of strategic escalation to deter the U.S. and our allies from intervening conventionally.

They want to weaken our alliances through nuclear coercion. Their objective is not necessarily to fight a nuclear war. It is to convince Washington that nuclear escalation is no longer a usable option in support of conventional intervention. In Chinese terms, nuclear weapons become the shield behind which conventional operations can proceed.

The Democratic Response and Adversary Perception

This brings us to the core question: How does our pacing threat perceive an increase in democratic nuclear capability, such as the RAF's return to the airborne nuclear role with the F-35A?

If Beijing increasingly views nuclear capability as an enabler of conventional coercion, then restoring the RAF's airborne nuclear role within NATO is not about matching China warhead for warhead. It is about denying Beijing confidence that nuclear coercion can separate allies.

Publicly, Beijing's diplomatic corps will predictably condemn these moves, framing them as "provocative" actions that fuel a "Cold War mentality." But strategically, we know from reading PLA texts that the Chinese leadership and strategists place great weight on credible, visible, and integrated military capability. Chinese military writings consistently emphasize respect for coherent escalation management. Their concern is not simply democratic military capability. It is that capability combined with alliance cohesion.

If they believe they can isolate a conflict or coerce an individual European or Indo-Pacific nation through nuclear bullying, they will be emboldened.

Conversely, when allies demonstrate a seamless, unified escalation ladder, backed by advanced fifth-generation platforms like the F-35A, it complicates Beijing's strategic calculus. It signals that our alliances are tightly integrated from the tactical edge of conventional air superiority all the way up to strategic deterrence. It proves that we refuse to be coerced.

The Unique Role of Air & Space Power

This brings us to the indispensable role of air and space forces. In this era of entangled deterrence, airpower provides visible signaling, flexible response options, and tangible alliance assurance in ways other domains cannot. Unlike a silo or a submarine, the movement of aircraft communicates intent. The deployment of a fifth-generation fighter to an allied runway reassures partners and deters adversaries in real-time.

Airpower provides leaders with a dialable means of managing crisis stability and signaling resolve. This flexibility is our asymmetric advantage. Airpower, and as our adversaries integrate space into their nuclear kill chains, our space power, remains uniquely suited to strategic signaling because it is visible, scalable, and reversible.

Conclusion

There is one final thought. The most important question before us is not whether nuclear deterrence has returned. It has. The defining question is whether our institutions, our people, and our alliances are adapting quickly enough to meet a strategic environment in which conventional operations, space capabilities, cyber operations, and nuclear forces are increasingly intertwined. No single nation can answer that question alone.

Ultimately, our adversaries study more than our aircraft and our missiles. They study our cohesion, our resolve, and our willingness to act together.

In the end, credible deterrence is not measured by what we possess. It is measured by what our adversaries believe we are prepared to do together.

The answer will be found in how effectively we think *together*, train *together*, and deter *together*.

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