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**Nuclear Confidence and Strategic Uncertainty:
Ally and Partner Reactions to China's Nuclear Modernization**

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The views expressed herein are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily represent the views of the of the Wilson Center or the United States Government.

Commissioners: I am honored to testify before you today, and I applaud your determination to understand how China’s nuclear modernization is viewed by our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.¹ I would like to offer some initial thoughts on this topic, and I look forward to our discussion. But before I begin, please note that these are my views alone, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Wilson Center or of the U.S. government.

U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific play very close attention to the complexities of the burgeoning competition between China and the United States. Yet, while our allies and partners have certainly taken notice of China’s nuclear modernization initiative, they interpret these developments quite differently than we do in Washington. As the United States seeks to revitalize its alliances and partnerships across the Indo-Pacific and maintain a credible deterrent against an increasingly ambitious and assertive China, we must provide a clear understanding of how China’s nuclear modernization affects the U.S. deterrent capability, and how our allies and partners view these developments.

Toward those ends, my testimony today will touch on three issues: (1) the state of the U.S.-China nuclear relationship; (2) allied and partner views of China’s nuclear modernization; and (3) my recommendations for U.S. policy given these assessments.

The State of U.S.-China Nuclear Relations

My assessment of how U.S. allies and partners view China’s nuclear modernization is fundamentally rooted in my understanding of U.S.-China nuclear dynamics. Overall, describing these remarkable investments as “nuclear modernization” understates the breadth of China’s activities on its nuclear capabilities. According to the Department of Defense, “China’s strategic ambitions, evolving view of the security landscape, and concerns over survivability are driving significant changes to the size, capabilities, and readiness of its nuclear forces.” The Pentagon has further assessed that China’s nuclear forces are in the process of significant modernization and diversification, are pursuing a credible “nuclear triad,” and that China’s nuclear warhead stockpile – estimated to be in the low 200s – is projected to at least double in size over the next decade. Beijing is developing new ICBMs, and the Pentagon assesses that “the number of the PRC’s land-based ICBMs capable of threatening the United States is expected to grow to roughly 200” by 2025. The PLA is also building more of the DF-26, a mobile, ground-launched IRBM capable of rapidly swapping between conventional and nuclear warheads.²

These developments seem to be aimed at fulfilling General Secretary Xi Jinping’s goals to “achieve a great rise in strategic capabilities” and making “breakthroughs ... in strategic deterrence capability.”³ Yet there is still a great deal we don’t know about China’s nuclear intentions and its desired end-states. The opacity that China has wrapped around its nuclear capabilities exacerbates these

¹ I will contain my remarks to Australia, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan.

² Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020*, (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020). <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>, p. viii-ix.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

uncertainties, forcing outside observers to assess China's approach to nuclear deterrence from its investments and the statements of its leaders.

Although the strategies and doctrine driving this modernization initiative remain unclear, the Department of Defense has assessed that China may intend "to increase the peacetime readiness of its nuclear forces by moving to a launch-on-warning (LOW) posture with an expanded silo-based force."⁴ While some may consider a LOW posture as consistent with Beijing's No First Use (NFU) policy, China's efforts to quantitatively and qualitatively improve its nuclear capabilities – combined with Russia's 2019 announcement of its intention to assist China in developing a missile attack warning system – strongly suggest that Beijing's approach to deterrence may in practice be edging away from NFU.⁵ However, it remains unlikely that China will ever officially abrogate its NFU commitment, preferring instead to maintain a degree of ambiguity surrounding questions of when exactly Beijing would use nuclear weapons. Regardless, I have never put a great deal of weight on China's NFU policy for several reasons, but primarily because I have never believed the NFU policy would actually constrain the decisions of a Chinese leader in a crisis more than would the logic of deterrence, and I would never base the security of the United States and our allies and partners on Beijing's fealty to a pledge.

Though certainly worrisome, these developments have not fundamentally altered the ability of the United States to deter China at the strategic level. While the United States has never officially acknowledged vulnerability to a Chinese nuclear strike, it has not attempted to deny Beijing a credible retaliatory capability since the DF-5 ICBM was first deployed in 1981.⁶ In fact, successive U.S. administrations have gone out of their way to reassure Beijing that the United States does not seek to undermine China's retaliatory capability and relies upon deterrence to protect against Chinese nuclear attack.⁷

⁴ Ibid, ix.

⁵ Dmitry Stefanovich, "Russia to Help China Develop an Early Warning System," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/russia-to-help-china-develop-an-early-warning-system/>; China Power Team, "How is China Modernizing Its Nuclear Forces?" *China Power*, December 10, 2019. <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁶ John William Lewis and Hua Di, "China's Ballistic Missile Programs: Technologies, Strategies, Goals," *International Security*, 17:2 (Fall 1992). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539167?seq=1>, p. 10.

⁷ According to the Congressional Research Service in 2015, "As a matter of policy, U.S. missile defenses are not intended to alter the balance of nuclear deterrence with the major nuclear-armed states, i.e. Russia and China."⁷⁷ The Trump administration suggested a similar approach in the U.S. *Missile Defense Review 2019*, which declares "While the United States relies on deterrence to protect against large and technically sophisticated Russian and Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile threats to the U.S. homeland, U.S. active missile defense can and must outpace existing and potential rogue state offensive missile capabilities." Although President Trump stated at the release of the *Missile Defense Review* that his goal was "to ensure we can detect and destroy any missile launched against the United States, anytime, anywhere and any place," it is notable that the report itself made no such claims and the Trump administration's defense budgets did not reflect that objective. Ian E. Rinehart, Steven A. Hildreth, and Susan V. Lawrence, "Ballistic Missile Defense in the Asia-Pacific Region: Cooperation and Opposition," Congressional Research Service R43116, April 3, 2015. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R43116.pdf>, p. 3; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *U.S. Missile Defense Review 2019*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2019. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jan/17/2002080666/-1/-1/1/2019-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF>, p. v; David Vergun, "Trump Pledges to Protect America From Any Enemy Missile," U.S. Department of Defense, January 17, 2019. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1734640/trump-pledges-to-protect-america-from-any-enemy-missile/>.

To this point, China's nuclear modernization initiatives will not significantly change this underlying reality. According to the *U.S. Missile Defense Review 2019*, "China can now potentially threaten the United States with about 125 nuclear missiles, some capable of employing multiple warheads, and its nuclear forces will increase in the coming years."⁸ By contrast, the United States had 3,822 nuclear weapons as of September 30, 2017 (the most recently declassified number).⁹ What's important here is that China's nuclear stockpile, even if it were to double as the Pentagon assesses, will still come nowhere close to rivaling that of the United States in total numbers. With a large, survivable, and effective nuclear triad that is being modernized, there should be no doubt in the credibility of U.S. nuclear capabilities or the deterrent they convey.

Despite the dramatic improvement expected in China's nuclear capabilities, they do not appear intended to undermine the U.S. deterrent or achieve some degree of parity in order to gain a first user advantage.¹⁰ Rather, Beijing seeks to enhance the survivability of its nuclear arsenal in order to maintain a credible retaliatory capability in response to Beijing's concerns about U.S. conventional long-range precision strike, cyber operations, and missile defenses.¹¹ Chinese scholars have described this as "catching up with the United States and Russia in terms of the technological development of strategic weapons," in the belief that "lagging behind [in technological development] would make [China] vulnerable to attack."¹² Moreover, as Chinese scholar Zhao Tong has noted, China's nuclear modernization program "has been developing under the assumption that China's nuclear forces should be able to ride out a first strike and maintain the ability to deliver a nuclear relation that is beyond the 'unacceptable level of damage.'"¹³ Developing a more survivable and effective nuclear force will make Beijing more confident in its ability to conduct an "assured retaliation" even after absorbing a first strike – and a LOW posture will not fundamentally change these calculations.

Beyond a more survivable retaliatory capability, the primary implication of China's nuclear modernization initiative for U.S. deterrence is that, in a nuclear exchange, the United States would be more likely to absorb an "unacceptable level of damage," but not to a degree that would eliminate Washington's ability to inflict a devastating retaliatory strike. Since the ability of the United States to

⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *U.S. Missile Defense Review 2019*, p. v.

⁹ Retired weapons awaiting dismantlement were not included in the totals. Steven Aftergood, "2017 Nuclear Stockpile Total Declassified," Federation of American Scientists, March 22, 2018. <https://fas.org/blogs/secrecy/2018/03/stockpile-2017/>.

¹⁰ Stephanie Lieggi, "Going Beyond the Stir: The Strategic Realities of China's No-First-Use Policy," NTI, January 1, 2005. <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/realities-chinas-no-first-use-policy/>.

¹¹ See Wu Riqiang, "Living With Uncertainty: Modeling China's Nuclear Survivability," *International Security* 44:4 (2020): p. 84–118; Lora Saalman, "Prompt Global Strike: China and the Spear," Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2014. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14019?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents; Sanjana Gogna, "China's Nuclear Ambiguity and Risk of Deterrence Breakdown," *CAPS in Focus*, September 5, 2020. <http://capsindia.org/files/documents/db78ed2f-2f94-43d1-b41a-c88c51fd5c39.pdf>.

¹² Li Bin, "Differences between Chinese and U.S. Nuclear Thinking and Their Origins," in *Understanding Chinese Nuclear Thinking*, Li Bin and Tong Zhao, eds. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ChineseNuclearThinking_Final.pdf, p. 14.

¹³ Tong Zhao, "Modernizing Without Destabilizing: China's Nuclear Posture in a New Era," Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, August 25, 2020. <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/08/25/modernizing-without-destabilizing-china-s-nuclear-posture-in-new-era-pub-82454>.

inflict terrible destruction on China would not be substantially changed in this case, U.S. deterrence capabilities would not be substantially diminished by China's nuclear modernization.

However, some American analysts have about the potential for nuclear escalation in a U.S.-China crisis. They fear that China's improved ability to use nuclear weapons with precision and in the theater – rather than a massive countervalue strike on the American homeland – would potentially give Beijing options to credibly threaten nuclear use in situations other than the most dire. For example, these analysts fear that Beijing may threaten nuclear use against U.S. forces and bases in theater if the PLA's conventional forces had been largely defeated, or that China may attempt to rapidly seize territory and present the United States with a *fait accompli*, threatening nuclear use in order to quickly terminate the conflict before the United States and its allies can attempt to roll back China's territorial gains. They also fear that China's nuclear modernization may undermine the credibility of U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons first.¹⁴

Yet, while I agree that China's new nuclear capabilities provides Beijing with more options to consider, I am less concerned about the potential for them to drive Beijing to embrace nuclear coercion as a tool of its foreign policy - primarily because doing so would ignore the fundamental logic of deterrence. Despite the significant improvements underway in China's nuclear capability, they will still be no match for those of the United States – qualitatively or quantitatively. The United States will maintain nuclear escalation dominance across all rungs of the escalation ladder, which will undermine the credibility of any effort by Beijing to employ nuclear coercion or ignore threats by the United States.

American strategists are also concerned about the prospect of unintentional escalation. These fears are exacerbated by what Western analysts believe to be the collocation of China's nuclear and conventional missile forces, meaning that U.S. attacks on conventional military assets may actually hit nuclear assets, thereby potentially causing Beijing to believe that the United States is attempting to destroy China's retaliatory capability.¹⁵

China's nuclear strategists are more optimistic about the risks of nuclear escalation in any future crisis with the United States, primarily because they do not believe the stakes of such a confrontation would be sufficient for either side to risk nuclear escalation. They also see China's NFU policy as robust enough to provide a clear distinction between a conventional and a nuclear conflict but ambiguous enough to deter the United States from attacking China's nuclear arsenal with conventional capabilities. Chinese nuclear strategists are also more dismissive of the potential

¹⁴ Stephen Fruhling, Andrew O'Neil, and David Santoro, "Escalating Cooperation: Nuclear Deterrence and the U.S.-Australia Alliance," University of Sydney United States Studies Centre, November 7, 2019.

<https://www.uscc.edu.au/analysis/escalating-cooperation-nuclear-deterrence-and-the-us-australia-alliance>; Elbridge Colby, "If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2018.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-15/if-you-want-peace-prepare-nuclear-war>; Elbridge Colby, "Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: 'China's Offensive Missile Forces: Implications for the United States,'" U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 1, 2015. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Colby%20USCC%20Testimony%201%20April%202015.pdf>.

¹⁵ Fiona Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Why China Won't Abandon Its Nuclear Strategy of Assured Retaliation," Belfer Center, December 2015. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/why-china-wont-abandon-its-nuclear-strategy-assured-retaliation>.

for unintentional nuclear escalation than their American counterparts,¹⁶ and American researchers have found that Chinese experts were relatively confident about crisis stability.¹⁷

Despite these challenges, I view nuclear deterrence between Washington and Beijing as relatively stable and predictable, in that both sides are generally confident in their ability to effectively retaliate against a nuclear strike so as to obviate the benefits of nuclear first use. The larger and more capable Chinese nuclear force expected by the Department of Defense will likely reinforce Beijing's confidence in its own retaliatory capability while remaining far short of a force that would threaten to undermine U.S. nuclear deterrence capabilities – especially as the United States invests in the modernization of its own nuclear forces.

The Conventional Dimension

The primary challenge in the U.S.-China military dynamic lies not in the nuclear dimension, but rather in diminishing American conventional military advantages. As the PLA continues to refine and advance its conventional military capability, the United States faces increasing risks and potential costs in a conventional conflict with China – presumably in the defense of U.S. allies and its interests in the Indo-Pacific. Concerns about the potential for China to employ nuclear coercion under the logic of the stability-instability paradox or present the United States and its allies with a nuclear-backed *fait accompli* do not reflect a fundamental change in the U.S.-China nuclear dynamic, but rather are the result of the dramatic changes in the U.S.-China balance of conventional military power. China's nuclear forces have been sufficient to theoretically attempt to employ nuclear coercion or a *fait accompli* for years (Pakistan has attempted this approach with a much smaller and less sophisticated nuclear capability), but it has lacked the necessary conventional capability.

Yet, now that China's conventional military capabilities have improved and U.S. conventional military advantages have diminished, the United States may be forced to rely more on nuclear weapons to deter attacks on its allies and partners. Indeed, as I wrote with former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy Elbridge Colby in 2013:

Nuclear weapons may become more salient to U.S. strategy in the Asia-Pacific if the regional balance of conventional military power were to become unfavorable to U.S. interests. Such a dynamic would likely be intensified if China chose to use its growing military power to attempt to exclude the United States from the region, to shield North Korea from the consequences of its belligerence, to challenge the openness and stability of the global commons, or to take a more assertive approach to the resolution of territorial disputes.¹⁸

These dynamics have profound implications for U.S. allies and partners. While some are concerned about China's nuclear modernization, far more are focused on the implications of a relative decline

¹⁶ Cunningham and Fravel, “Why China Won’t Abandon Its Nuclear Strategy of Assured Retaliation.”

¹⁷ Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, “Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Strategy and U.S.-China Strategic Stability,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Fall 2015), pp. 7–50, doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00215.

¹⁸ Elbridge Colby and Abraham M. Denmark, “Nuclear Weapons and U.S.-China Relations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2013. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/130307_Colby_USChinaNuclear_Web.pdf, p. 3.

in American power and perceptions of diminished American resolve. In the minds of most allied and partner strategists, the implications of these dynamics are inextricably interwoven.

Allied and Partner Views of China's Nuclear Modernization

With the exception of India, U.S. allies and partners in East Asia generally view the significance of China's nuclear modernization through the lens of how it effects the ability and will of the United States to support its extended deterrence commitments. Broadly speaking, the perceived credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments rests on two pillars: capability (does the United States possess sufficient resources to credibility threaten the effective use of nuclear weapons against China to produce a deterrent effect?) and resolve (does the United States possess the political will to risk tremendous costs in the defense of its allies and partners?). China's nuclear modernization will not substantially undermine U.S. nuclear deterrence capabilities, but it does potentially raise the costs and risks associated with those commitments. It is therefore not U.S. *capabilities* that concern U.S. allies and partners, per se, but worries about the *resolve* of the United States to risk potentially devastating costs in the defense of an ally or partner.

Dependence upon any country for nuclear deterrence is inherently disquieting, because the true intentions of another country are ultimately unknowable, and predictions of how a country will act in a potential crisis are unreliable. Moreover, while an aggressor can be certain that a state will fight to defend itself – even to the point of risking nuclear annihilation to avoid foreign occupation – it may doubt that a state would fulfill a pledge to defend a distant ally from foreign aggression – especially if that defense would lead to its own destruction.

A degree of anxiety about U.S. credibility is therefore understandable, and has been a persistent feature of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence since it was first discussed in the early years of the Cold War. Western Europeans perpetually wondered if the United States would “sacrifice New York for Paris”¹⁹ by threatening nuclear use, and follow through with the threat if necessary, in a crisis with the Soviet Union. Indeed, European questions about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments constituted “the central concern of deterrence theory in the Cold War.”²⁰

Those that depend on U.S. extended deterrence commitment in the Indo-Pacific today are familiar with this discomfort. Yet, while these anxieties will never be solved, they can be managed with a mix of robust engagements between the United States and its allies, operations that signal resolve and

¹⁹ Interestingly, discussions of U.S.-China nuclear dynamics have used similar formulations. In 1996, former PLA Deputy Chief of the General Staff Xiong Guangkai told former U.S. Ambassador Chas W. Freeman by that China would consider using nuclear weapons in a Taiwan conflict, noting that “Americans should worry more about Los Angeles than Taipei.” This was likely not a specific threat to bomb Los Angeles, but rather a deterrent message referring to past instances of U.S. threats to use nuclear weapons against China. See Joseph Kahn, “Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bombs If U.S. Intrudes,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2005.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/15/washington/world/chinese-general-threatens-use-of-abombs-if-us-intrudes.html>; and Katherine Yester, “A Myth Is Born,” *Foreign Policy*, November 19, 2009. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/19/a-myth-is-born/>.

²⁰ Austin Long, *Deterrence From Cold War to Long War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2008). https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG636.pdf, p. 13; see also Beatrice Heuser, “Western Europe Between Soviet Threat and American Guarantee,” in Beatrice Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France, and the FRG* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997). https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057%2F9780230377622_1.

commitment, and investments in capabilities buttress the ability of the United States and its allied and partner military forces to accomplish their objectives. This is why the United States came to believe during the Cold War that its Western European allies must share an understanding of what would be done and the forces needed to maintain deterrence during a crisis, leading to the establishment of NATO's nuclear planning group (NPG).²¹

When considering the views of U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, it is incumbent on American policymakers, to distinguish between the normal and manageable levels of uncertainty that are inherent to all extended deterrent relationships, and concerns that reflect deeper, more ominous doubts about the credibility and reliability of the United States. During the Cold War, two U.S. allies in Asia reacted to profound concerns about U.S. abandonment by pursuing indigenous nuclear capabilities: the ROK's covert nuclear program launched in the wake of President Nixon's announcement of his doctrine with the statement that "America cannot...undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world," and Taiwan's clandestine nuclear weapons program initiated out of Taipei's (ultimately well-founded) fear that President Nixon's engagement with Beijing portended a shift of U.S. recognition to the PRC and the end of U.S. security commitments to the island.²²

Today, U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific are keenly attentive to the intricacies of U.S.-China competition, and their views of American credibility are similarly complex. While concerns about the reliability of the United States have certainly intensified in recent years, this has not been the result of China's nuclear modernization program or doubts about U.S. extended deterrence capabilities. Rather, ally and partner concerns about U.S. credibility reflect a deeper apprehension about changes to the relative balance of power and uncertainties about the long-term intentions and resolve of the United States to pay a heavy price in the defense of its allies and partners. Yet, if unaddressed, a significant improvement in China's nuclear capabilities could exacerbate these preexisting anxieties about the United States. The following review of allied and partner perceptions of Chinese nuclear modernization and U.S. credibility produces several conclusions in this regard.

For U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, nuclear dynamics between China and the United States do not receive significant public attention – especially compared to the prominent role that nuclear deterrence played during the Cold War. While competition between China and the United States has grown more intense in recent years, nuclear issues have not become a driving element of that competition relative to other issue areas. This is primarily because the nature of the U.S.-China competition – fueled by efforts on both sides to gain advantage in the relative distribution of comprehensive national power, and by incompatible visions for the future of the Indo-Pacific and the international order – is not existential. Unlike the Cold War, scenarios in which either China or the United States would seek to annihilate the other with nuclear weapons are vanishingly unlikely. Instead, when they do consider nuclear dynamics, allies and partners are concerned about the potential for nuclear escalation, and that China could strike them with nuclear weapons in order to destroy U.S. bases involved in a conflict, in an attempt to terminate a conflict on favorable terms, in

²¹ Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War*, p. 14-15.

²² Rebecca K. C. Hersman and Robert Peters, "Nuclear U-Turns: Learning From South Korean and Taiwanese Rollback," *Nonproliferation Review* 13:3 (November 2006). <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/133hersman.pdf>, p. 540-544; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972*, eds. Louis J. Smith and David H. Herschler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 60. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v01/d60>.

the belief that U.S. nuclear threats were not credible, in the fear that its nuclear forces were threatened, or as the result of an accidental or unauthorized launch.²³

Yet these are generally seen as unlikely and at most playing a limited role in likely military contingencies, meaning that a credible U.S. nuclear retaliatory capability is generally seen by allies and partners as sufficient – even considering China’s ongoing nuclear modernization initiatives. Though for different reasons and at various levels of prioritization, strategists in Canberra, New Delhi, Seoul, Taipei, and Tokyo (except when noted otherwise) share the following broad analyses of these issues:

- The risk of a nuclear conflict between China and the United States is generally viewed by U.S. allies and partners as very low, and the deterrent relationship is viewed as stable. Yet some scholars and strategists are concerned about possible nuclear escalation, especially in a crisis involving Taiwan.
- The significant advantages the United States enjoys over China in terms of raw nuclear capability means that concerns about U.S. extended deterrence capabilities are limited – even in the face of China’s nuclear modernization initiative.
- Absent dramatic changes to the nuclear balance or a collapse in confidence in American resolve, allied and partner will continue to seek U.S. extended deterrence commitments.
- With the exception of India, China’s nuclear modernization has not been the primary factor in driving allied and partner concerns about China or the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Rather, concerns have intensified as a result of deepening uncertainties regarding American resolve.
- Uncertainties about American resolve have intensified across the Indo-Pacific as a result of broader changes to the U.S.-China balance of power, perceptions of declining American economic power and vitality, concerns about the predictability and future direction of American domestic politics, inconsistent U.S. foreign and national security policies (especially regarding allies and partners), and persistent questions about the long-term intentions of the United States to support its allies and lead the international community.
- With the exception of India, each U.S. ally and partner in the Indo-Pacific is developing limited conventional counterforce and/or countervalue deterrent capabilities as a hedge against the possibility of abandonment by the United States.
- With the exception of India, no U.S. ally or partner in the Indo-Pacific is seriously considering the development of an indigenous nuclear capability at this time. Nevertheless, (with the exception of Taiwan) each country’s policy community is actively debating the possibility.

²³ As noted by Cunningham and Fravel, some Russian strategists have suggested that limited nuclear strikes could be used to coerce an opponent to end a conventional conflict, although Russia scholars dispute whether this concept of escalate to de-escalate has been incorporated into Russia’s nuclear doctrine. See Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “Russia’s Nuclear Strategy of Survival,” Stanford University, March 2019; and Olga Oliker, “Moscow’s Nuclear Enigma: What Is Russia’s Arsenal Really For?” *Foreign Affairs*, 97: 6 (November/December 2018), p. 52, 54. As cited in Fiona S. Cunningham, M. Taylor Fravel; Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation. *International Security* 2019; 44 (2): p. 61–109. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00359.

- With the exception of India, each U.S. ally and partner in the Indo-Pacific possesses some degree of a latent nuclear capability, and may pursue such a capability should confidence in U.S. extended deterrent commitments suffer an unlikely catastrophic collapse.
- The Taiwan Strait is generally seen as the most likely driver of a U.S.-China conflict, and is the most likely scenario to involve the use of nuclear weapons.
- To various degrees, East Asian allies and partners fear abandonment by the United States and entrapment into a U.S.-China conflict. Specifically, most fear that China may attack them and/or the U.S. military bases they host with conventional or nuclear weapons, or that they may be pulled into U.S.-China conflict without their prior approval.
- Reflecting anxieties about U.S. extended deterrence commitments, there has been rising interest in Tokyo and Seoul to establish NATO-like nuclear arrangements in order to play a more significant role in nuclear planning and operations.

Country Analyses

Australia

As a long-standing ally of the United States, Australia decided decades ago that its long-term security and interests would be best-served by aligning with the United States. Since the before the alliance officially began, Australia has been a loyal ally in support of American foreign policy objectives around the world – at times at great cost. Yet in recent years, the Australian foreign policy community has roiled with intensifying debates about the implications of a rising China and a United States whose long-term relative power and reliability has for some become more uncertain.²⁴

Australian strategists view China's nuclear modernization as an aspect of Beijing's broader military modernization and its expanding geopolitical power. Canberra's concerns about the credibility of the United States are not tied to China's nuclear capabilities, but rather are more about the United States itself. Specifically, observers in Australia see the United States as war-weary, economically and politically troubled, facing diminishing military advantages in comparison to the PRC, and employing an inconsistent approach to alliances across presidential administrations.²⁵

Australian perceptions of American reliability were damaged during the Trump administration, when strong disagreements between President Trump and Prime Minister Turnbull were made public and the Australian public viewed the President quite negatively. A 2020 Pew Poll found that 33 percent of Australians had a favorable view of the United States – the lowest figure in Australia since Pew

²⁴ Rory Medcalf, "The Great Australian China Debate: Issues and Implications for the United States and the World," (presentation, Sigur Center of Asian Studies, Elliot School of International Affairs, The George Washington University, September 10, 2020). <https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/news-events/podcasts/audio/13035/great-australian-china-debate-issues-and-implications-united-states>; The Economist, "Australia's Debate About China is Becoming Hot, Angry, and Shrieking," *The Economist*, May 8th, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/05/08/australias-debate-about-china-is-becoming-hot-angry-and-shrieking>;

²⁵ Thomas G. Mahnken, Ross Babbage, and Sugio Takahashi, "American, Australian, and Japanese Perspectives on a Changing Security Environment," Phillip Merrill Center for Strategic Studies, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, February 2016, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=795797>, p. 6.

began polling on this topic nearly two decades ago. Australians' confidence in President Trump was even lower at 23 percent.²⁶ As a leading foreign policy voice in Australia put it, "Today, Australians still look to America. But what they see makes them heartsick and worried."²⁷

Still, while debates about Australia's orientation toward China and the United States continue to roil, there is little sign that these concerns will lead to a significant shift in Australia's approach to China or to the alliance. Indeed, the Australia-China relationship has grown increasingly antagonistic in the face of Beijing's harsh reaction to Canberra's call for an investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and revelations about China's campaign to interfere in Australia's domestic politics.²⁸

Moreover, despite concerns about American power, interests, and resolve, Australia remains broadly confident in the reliability of U.S. extended commitments.²⁹ Yet, while Australia's recent boost in defense spending was generally viewed as a commitment to contribute more to the alliance in responding to growing Chinese military power,³⁰ others noted that Canberra's ambition for the Australian armed forces to "be able to hold potential adversaries' forces and infrastructure at risk from a greater distance, and therefore influence their calculus of costs involved in threatening Australian interests"³¹ was interpreted by some as an implicit hedge against the possibility that Australia may be forced "to deter China in limited conventional warfare on its own, without the United States."³²

Yet, Australian strategists know that, without the United States or their own nuclear weapons, such capabilities would have limited to no effect on China's calculations. Australia likely has the technical means to launch a nuclear weapons program, and Australia has the most uranium deposits in the world – roughly 28 percent of global uranium resources. Although debates on this issue have come and gone in Australia for decades, the most recent round reflects the issues being discussed today:

²⁶ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, "U.S. Image Plummet Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly," Pew Research Center, September 15, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.

²⁷ Michael Fullilove, "Australians Haven't Given Up On the United States – Yet," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/09/australians-havent-given-up-united-states-yet/>.

²⁸ Paul Karp and Helen Davison, "China Bristles at Australia's Call for Investigation Into Coronavirus Origin," *The Guardian*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/australia-defends-plan-to-investigate-china-over-covid-19-outbreak-as-row-deepens>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54458638>.

²⁹ The Australian Government's *2020 Defence Strategic Update* is replete with statements committing to a deepening alliance with the United States. Australian Government, Department of Defense, *2020 Defence Strategic Update & 2020 Force Structure Plan*, Australian Government, Department of Defense, July 1, 2020. <https://www1.defence.gov.au/strategy-policy/strategic-update-2020>.

³⁰ Steven Stashwick, "Australia to Boost Its Naval Arsenal to Counter China," *The Diplomat*, January 28, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/australia-to-boost-its-naval-arsenal-to-counter-china/>.

³¹ Australian Government, Department of Defense, *2020 Defence Strategic Update & 2020 Force Structure Plan*.

³² Van Jackson, "The Risks of Australia's Solo Deterrence Wager," *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/the-risks-of-australias-solo-deterrence-wager/>.

China's rising power and concerns about the United States.³³ Although these concerns are genuinely felt and seriously argued, they have not risen to the level where the indigenous development of nuclear weapons is being seriously considered by Australian leaders. Crossing that threshold would require a dramatic and explicit collapse of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment, and would force Canberra to reverse its stance on the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons – which it has championed for decades.

Interestingly, as described by a group of American and Australian scholars assessing the role of nuclear deterrence and the U.S.-Australia alliance, “While fears of abandonment often attract the most attention in public debate, apprehension about potential entrapment in America’s deterrence enterprise also runs deep in the thinking of Australian policymakers.”³⁴ Australian policymakers generally do not perceive threats to Australia that would elicit more explicit deterrence commitments from the United States, and they do not see the nuclear dimensions of a potential U.S.-China conflict as specific to Australia.³⁵

Ultimately, although Australia’s strategic environment has certainly grown more concerning, Canberra’s commitment to the U.S. alliance remains robust. Indeed, my sense is that China’s rapid growth in military power – and especially as Chinese ambitions and assertiveness extend closer to Australia’s periphery – will continue to clarify thinking in Canberra about the United States. While I understand the concerns some in Australia have about the United States, there is no doubt in my mind that America is still Australia’s best bet and will remain so for the foreseeable future. And I have no doubt that my Australian friends know that.

India

Unlike other U.S. allies and partners in the region, India does not view China’s nuclear modernization through the lens of its implications for U.S. security commitments. The lack of a commitment from the United States, as well as India’s own nuclear capability and competitive dynamic with China, means that New Delhi views nuclear issues with China as a direct challenge.

India faces two nuclear rivals in China and Pakistan. Yet, while Pakistan is broadly seen as India’s most immediate and pressing security challenge, India’s significant conventional military advantage focuses Indian concerns regarding Pakistan on terrorism and its relatively insecure nuclear stockpile.³⁶ Yet, China’s conventional military advantage over India is significant, and its nuclear capabilities are both larger and more sophisticated. Moreover, Indian experts generally see India’s nuclear relations with China as inherently stable, and those with Pakistan as inherently unstable.³⁷ As

³³ Rod Lyon, “Should Australia Build Its Own Nuclear Arsenal?” *The Strategist*, October 24, 2019. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/should-australia-build-its-own-nuclear-arsenal/>.

³⁴ Fruhling, O’Neill, and Santoro, “Escalating Cooperation: Nuclear Deterrence and the U.S.-Australia Alliance.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See Caleb Larson, “The Scary State of Pakistan’s Many Nuclear Weapons,” *The National Interest*, April 9, 2020. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/scary-state-pakistans-many-nuclear-weapons-142277>.

³⁷ Lora Saalman, “India’s No-First-Use Dilemma: Strategic Consistency or Ambiguity Towards China and Pakistan,” SIPRI, December 2, 2020. <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/indias-no-first-use-dilemma-strategic-consistency-or-ambiguity-towards-china-and-pakistan>.

the scholar Robert Farley notes, “This places India in the unusual position of needing to deter a more powerful nuclear adversary, while intimidating a weaker opponent.”³⁸

Yet, the India-China nuclear relationship has been stable, even as the broader relationship has grown increasingly antagonistic. This can be attributed to the limited size of both arsenals, the No-First-Use policies adopted by both sides (both of which are shrouded in uncertainty),³⁹ and the emphasis both sides place on assured retaliation in their nuclear strategy – minimizing concerns about first use advantages. Scholars assess that New Delhi’s nuclear strategy toward China is “countervalue assured retaliation,” meaning that India believes it can maintain deterrence with China by holding its economic and population centers at risk.⁴⁰ Yet, Indian experts are not entirely sanguine about nuclear dynamics with China. Some are especially concerned that China’s technological advances may drive Beijing to adjust its NFU policy,⁴¹ which they presumably would see as destabilizing.

As the India-China relationship has worsened, and the implications of China’s nuclear modernization have grown more apparent, China has become the primary driver of India’s nuclear planning and investment.⁴² New Delhi has already sought to develop nuclear missile submarines and developed longer-range missiles.⁴³ Most prominent among India’s new strategic capabilities has been the 2018 deployment of the road-mobile Agni-V ICBM, which boasts a range sufficient to hold China’s east coast at risk. India is also testing a nuclear-capable SLBM known as the K-4.⁴⁴ Should Indian strategists believe that further adjustments to their force structure are necessary to account for China’s nuclear modernization, there is a possibility they will expand their stockpile of nuclear weapons (debates about whether India should seek a rough nuclear parity with China are ongoing), and New Delhi may invest more in non-nuclear strategic capabilities such as cyber, electronic, and space weapons. India may also seek to emulate China’s use of dispersion, mobility, concealment, and co-location of conventional and nuclear-armed missiles.⁴⁵

When contemplating these options, Indian strategists will need to consider how Pakistan may react to a larger and more capable Indian nuclear capability. Indeed, Islamabad may view New Delhi’s

³⁸ Robert Farley, “India’s Mighty Nuclear-Weapons Program: Aimed at China and Pakistan?” *The National Interest*, January 3, 2015. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/indias-mighty-nuclear-weapons-program-aimed-china-pakistan-11956>.

³⁹ Saalman, “India’s No-First-Use Dilemma: Strategic Consistency or Ambiguity Towards China and Pakistan.”

⁴⁰ Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, “India’s Counterforce Temptations,” *International Security*, 43:3 (Winter 2018/19), p. 7–52, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00340.

⁴¹ Saalman, “India’s No-First-Use Dilemma: Strategic Consistency or Ambiguity Towards China and Pakistan.”

⁴² Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, “Indian Nuclear Forces, 2018,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:6 (2018), p. 361-366. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2018.1533162>.

⁴³ Murali Krishnan, “Is India Turning Its Nuclear Focus Toward China?” *Deutsche Welle*, July 14, 2017. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-india-turning-its-nuclear-focus-toward-china/a-39698420>.

⁴⁴ Kelsey Davenport, “India Tests Submarine-Launched Missile,” *Arms Control Association*, March 2020. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-03/news/india-tests-submarine-launched-missile>.

⁴⁵ Kartik Bommakanti and Suyash Desai, “China’s Nuclear Ambiguity and Its Implications for India,” ORF Occasional Paper No. 309, April 2021, Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/chinas-nuclear-ambiguity-and-its-implications-for-india/>.

investments in nuclear weapons as threatening to their own deterrent, leading to a general expansion in the of nuclear weapons and the sophistication of their delivery systems across South Asia.

Indian strategists also worry about the possibility of a “collusive threat” between China and Pakistan, arguing that a combined Sino-Pakistani nuclear threat would make India’s nuclear arsenal insufficient, even if New Delhi increases its stockpile to match China’s.⁴⁶ India’s so-called “two front challenge” is a wicked problem for military planners in the Indian military, primarily due to resource constraints that force the Indian military to accept a certain degree of risk.⁴⁷ Considering China’s instrumental role in Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programs dating back to the 1970s,⁴⁸ and Beijing’s ongoing support of nuclear energy projects in Pakistan,⁴⁹ New Delhi’s concerns are reasonable – even though I am not aware of any credible evidence of any operational nuclear planning between the Pakistan military and the PLA.

Ultimately, the China-India-Pakistan strategic triangle is complex, messy, and disconcerting. Efforts to strengthen nuclear capabilities by one vertex has rippling effects for the other vertices – and rarely in a positive direction. The Council on Foreign Relations’ Daniel S. Markey described it well: “Nuclear competition in Southern Asia represents a classic conundrum of international relations: enormously high stakes, conflicting and entrenched interests, and at least in the near term, few realistic avenues for mitigating threats, much less addressing them in a more permanent way.”⁵⁰

Japan

As a treaty ally of the United States with a pacifist constitution that renounces the use of force and forswears maintaining “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential,” Japan’s dependence on the United States for extended deterrence is profound. Yet the role of nuclear weapons in maintaining U.S. extended deterrence commitments is also politically uncomfortable for Japanese leaders, due to the Japanese people’s understandable sensitivity regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

Tokyo views China as its most pressing long-term comprehensive security challenge, and it is deeply concerned about the implications of the PLA’s modernization for China’s intentions and for the will and ability of the United States to fulfill its extended deterrence commitments. Japanese experts

⁴⁶ Gurmeet Kanwal, “[India’s Nuclear Force Structure](#)”, *Regional Insight*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2016; as cited in https://www.orfonline.org/research/chinas-nuclear-ambiguity-and-its-implications-for-india/#_edn201.

⁴⁷ Sushant Singh, “The Challenges of a Two-Front War: India’s China-Pakistan Dilemma,” The Stimson Center, April 19, 2021. <https://www.stimson.org/2021/the-challenge-of-a-two-front-war-indias-china-pakistan-dilemma/>.

⁴⁸ John Dori and Richard Fisher, “The Strategic Implications of China’s Nuclear Aid to Pakistan,” The Heritage Foundation, June 16, 1998. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-strategic-implications-chinas-nuclear-aid-pakistan>; G. Parthasarathy, “Beware the China-Pakistan Nuclear Axis,” *The Hindu Business Line*, March 9, 2018. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/beware-the-china-pakistan-nuclear-axis/article22220540.ece1>.

⁴⁹ Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan’s China-Built Nuclear Reactor Starts Operation,” *Voice of America*, March 19, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistans-china-built-nuclear-reactor-starts-operation>.

⁵⁰ Eleanor Albert, “Southern Asia’s Nuclear Powers,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 9, 2015. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/southern-asias-nuclear-powers>.

broadly perceive an “asymmetry of vulnerability” in Asia, where China and North Korea have a credible nuclear strike posture in the region while Japan and South Korea lack any means to put them at risk. While they view the U.S. nuclear deterrent as an effective counterbalance to China’s regional advantage, they fear that the United States could be deterred from coming to Japan’s defense. In other words, some in Japan worry that the stability of the U.S.-China nuclear relationship could deter the United States from using nuclear weapons in the defense of Japan, thus incentivizing China’s conventional and gray-zone aggression.⁵¹

While it is clear that Tokyo has mixed views on the current state of the U.S.-China nuclear relationship, these concerns are more political than they are technical. While Japan is certainly not pleased by China’s nuclear modernization itself, its concerns are centered around the effect of those capabilities on U.S. resolve. Moreover, Japanese concerns about American resolve are based on a broad assessment of the U.S.-China dynamic, which clearly includes the role of conventional and “gray zone” conflict and tension in the shadow of nuclear deterrence. Specifically, Tokyo is displeased with the shortcomings of traditional nuclear deterrence to prevent China’s “gray zone” tactics that fall below the traditional threshold of extended deterrence commitments that could present a *fait accompli* forcing Japan and the United States to compel after the fact, rather than deter in advance.⁵² Further inflaming Japanese concerns about the reliability of U.S. extended deterrence commitments are its fears about the implications of North Korea’s improving nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, which some fear could allow the DPRK to attempt to use its nuclear capabilities to deter a U.S. intervention into a localized crisis with Japan.⁵³

Some in Japan also believe that diminishing U.S. conventional military advantages in the face of PLA modernization could drive the United States to rely more on nuclear deterrence.⁵⁴ It is therefore understandable that some in Japan have been concerned by past U.S. statements intending to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. extended deterrence or declaring that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter and respond to nuclear attack. If U.S. conventional advantages are receding in Asia, and the United States is reducing the role of nuclear weapons in its approach to deterrence, some in Japan perceive a gap that could be exploited to make Japan vulnerable.⁵⁵

⁵¹ This is in contrast to broad views across the United States, which see Japan’s defensive capabilities and the U.S.-Japan alliance as discouraging China from using force to resolve disputes in the East Chian Sea, therefore contributing to crisis stability. See: James L. Schoff and Li Bin, “A Precarious Triangle: U.S.-China Strategic Stability and Japan,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 7, 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/07/precarious-triangle-u.s.-china-strategic-stability-and-japan-pub-74628>.

⁵² See Sugio Takahashi, “Challenges to Extended Deterrence in the Japan-U.S. Alliance: From Gray Zone to Nuclear Deterrence,” *American, Australian, and Japanese Perspectives on a Changing Security Environment*, Johns Hopkins SAIS, February 2016, p. 58-87, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=795797>.

⁵³ See Brad Roberts, “Extended Deterrence and Strategic Stability in Northeast Asia,” *NIDS Visiting Scholar Paper Series*, No. 1, August 9, 2013, <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/visiting/pdf/01.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Michito Tsuruoka, “The NATO vs. East Asian Models of Extended Nuclear Deterrence? Seeking a Synergy Beyond Dichotomy,” National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, June 30, 2016. <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-nato-vs-east-asian-models-of-extended-nuclear-deterrence-seeking-a-synergy-beyond-dichotomy/>.

⁵⁵ Masa Takubo, “The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Japan, the U.S., and ‘Sole Purpose,’” Arms Control Association, accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009-11/role-nuclear-weapons-japan-us-sole-purpose>.

Yet at the same time, Japanese public opinion has been consistently opposed to the existence, let alone use, of nuclear weapons. A survey of Japanese public opinion conducted in August 2019 found support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at 75 percent. Tokyo's decision to not ratify the treaty was harshly criticized by several pro-disarmament groups and atomic bomb survivors.⁵⁶ This pointed to a fundamental dilemma in Japan's approach to nuclear weapons, which was described in 2009 by then-Foreign Minister Okada thusly: "Hitherto, the Japanese government has said to the U.S., 'We don't want you to declare no first use because it will weaken nuclear deterrence.' However, it cannot be said to be consistent to call for nuclear abolition, while requesting the first use of nuclear weapons for yourself."⁵⁷

Ultimately, Japan's security depends upon American nuclear weapons. Yet as the only country to be struck by atomic weapons, the Japanese people are deeply uncomfortable with the prospect of building weapons that caused such profound suffering within the past century. While a debate about developing a Japanese nuclear weapon has become far less taboo in Japanese policy circles than it once was, the domestic politics surrounding the issue have not substantially changed.

Thus, my sense is that the possibility of Japan developing its own nuclear weapon is very remote. I expect a move in this direction by Tokyo would require both a dramatic collapse in confidence in the U.S. extended deterrence commitment, as well as the emergence of a dire security threat to Japan. Yet, this is not to say that Japanese concerns about U.S. extended deterrence should be ignored. Much to the contrary – concerns in Tokyo about American resolve in the face of building Chinese pressure reflect great concern about the sustainability and reliability of American power.

The Republic of Korea

Unlike other U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, China does not loom as the most pressing nuclear challenge to the Republic of Korea (ROK). Instead, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is by far Seoul's preeminent nuclear challenge – even though Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities are far inferior to the Chinese nuclear capability in every measurable way and geography makes both a persistent challenge for South Korean strategists.

It may surprise some observers, but South Korea's preferred position between China and the United States has traditionally been to hedge between the two and, when possible, accommodate both Washington's and Beijing's preferences.⁵⁸ Yet, this does not reflect a naiveté about China's interests or an affinity for Beijing. Quite the contrary, surveys of the South Korean people consistently report positive views of the United States and support for the U.S.-ROK Alliance. For example, a mid-2020 survey by the Asan Institute in Seoul found overwhelming support for the United States (73.2

⁵⁶ Thisanka Siripala, "Japan's Dilemma Over Nuclear Disarmament," *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/japans-dilemma-over-nuclear-disarmament/>.

⁵⁷ Katsuya Okada, Remarks at "Atarashii Jidai no Nichibei Kankei" [Japan-U.S. relationship in a new era], Kyoto, October 18, 2009. As cited and translated in Takubo, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons: Japan, the U.S., and 'Sole Purpose.'"

⁵⁸ Victor Cha, "Collateral Damage: What U.S.-China Competition Means for Korea," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 10, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/collateral-damage-what-us-china-competition-means-korea>.

percent) over China (15.7 percent), while another survey found that 66 percent of Koreans perceive a threat from China.⁵⁹

Seoul's caution regarding Beijing is driven by cold realpolitik calculations: China is the ROK's largest trading partner, meaning that South Korea's economic destiny is at least partly tied to the PRC. Moreover, the sheer scale of Chinese power as well as its geographic proximity to the Korean peninsula and the critical role it plays in any diplomacy with North Korea means that Seoul cannot afford to antagonize Beijing. Seoul's situation was perhaps best described to me by a South Korean scholar, who once explained to me, "we prefer to work with America, but we have to live with China."

Korean strategists have also monitored China's military modernization with growing concern. Yet, this concern has not been focused on China's nuclear capabilities per se, but rather it has been concerned with the broader modernization of the PLA writ large. If anything, South Korean strategists have been concerned by Beijing's decision to maintain a large contingent of ground forces in its Northern Theater Command headquartered in Shenyang (less than 250 miles away from China's border with North Korea), as well as high-profile exercises conducted by the PLA Navy off of the Korean Peninsula in late-2016 and mid-2017. They recognize that the PLA can therefore intervene quickly into the Korean peninsula with land, sea, and air forces – presenting a significant potential challenge with which the ROK military may need to contend.⁶⁰

Thus, as tension between China and the United States has intensified, the ROK's position between the two has grown increasingly narrow and progressively uncomfortable. As the Korean scholar J. James Kim noted, one survey from 2020 found that nearly 35 percent of South Koreans see U.S.-China competition as a "threat to South Korea's national interest," and more than 60 percent prefer a more "balanced approach."⁶¹

South Korea's use of hedging to navigate the complexities of U.S.-China competition also extends to Seoul's approach to deterrence writ large.⁶² Yet, it would be a mistake to interpret South Korea's hedging as an indication of plans to end its alliance with the United States. Rather, Seoul seeks to

⁵⁹ J. James Kim, "The U.S.-China Competition in South Korean Public Eyes," Asan Institute, August 25, 2020, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-u-s-china-competition-in-south-korean-public-eyes/>; Victor Cha, "Collateral Damage: What U.S.-China Competition Means for Korea," *C.S.I.S.*, Released on October 10, 2019.

⁶⁰ Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto, *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 2020. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Korea_Net_Assesment_2020.pdf, p. 59.

⁶¹ Sea Young Kim and Sook Jong Lee, "South Korean Perception of the United States and China: United States, a More Favorable Partner than China," *Issue Briefing*, EAI, July 21, 2020. See also Cha, "Collateral Damage: What U.S.-China Competition Means for Korea,"; Ji Young Lee, "South Korea's Strategic Nondecision and Sino-U.S. Competition," in *Strategic Asia 2020*, NBR, January 21, 2020. <https://www.nbr.org/publication/south-koreas-strategic-nondecision-and-sino-u-s-competition/>; as cited in J. James Kim, "The U.S.-China Competition in South Korean Public Eyes," *Asan Institute*, August 25, 2020, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-u-s-china-competition-in-south-korean-public-eyes/>.

⁶² For an excellent analysis of these dynamics, see: Ian Bowers, Henrik Stalhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security*, 45:3 (2021), p. 7-39. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/45/3/7/95269/Conventional-Counterforce-Dilemmas-South-Korea-s>.

bolster its independent deterrence capabilities as a hedge against potential abandonment by the United States.

South Korean concerns of U.S. abandonment have been exacerbated by North Korea's progress in fielding an ICBM that can credibly hold the American homeland at risk, raising the possibility that Pyongyang may attempt to decouple the alliance or act more provocatively in the belief that no one would dare instigate a conflict with a nuclear North Korea – what political scientists call the “stability-instability paradox.”⁶³ Thus, the Trump administration's unilateral threats to attack North Korea with “fire and fury” in 2017, President Trump's statements calling for the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Korea, and his administration's demands for exorbitant cost-sharing payments further inflamed South Korean concerns about the reliability of the United States.⁶⁴

To address these concerns, Seoul has sought to both enhance cooperation with the United States on issues of missile defense and deterrence, while at the same time gradually building an independent conventional counterforce and countervalue capability.⁶⁵ While this independent deterrent is primarily oriented toward North Korea, it is likely that Seoul's strategists also have China in mind as a potential adversary to be deterred. As the scholars Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim have noted, “Although Seoul could not hope to defeat China in a conventional conflict, the potential utility of its advanced conventional capabilities for high-impact precision strikes provides Seoul with a limited deterrence by punishment capability.”⁶⁶

Yet, despite these concerns, China's nuclear modernization initiative does not seem to have made a particular impact on how ROK strategists view China or the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Even when discussing the possibility of Chinese and U.S. involvement in another conflict on the Korean peninsula, strategists have generally seen the possibility of a U.S.-China nuclear exchange to be quite distant. Indeed, I would note that the possibility was not raised during this Commission's April 2018 roundtable on China's role in North Korea contingencies.⁶⁷ Even the possibility that China may consider offering a nuclear extended deterrence commitment to North Korea as part of an exchange to denuclearize the DPRK – as implausible as it is – has generally been dismissed by scholars as unlikely to be of interest for either Beijing or Pyongyang.⁶⁸

⁶³ See: Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang, “Nuclear Stability, Conventional Instability: North Korea and the Lessons From Pakistan,” *War on the Rocks*, November 20, 2017. <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/nuclear-stability-conventional-instability-north-korea-lessons-pakistan/>.

⁶⁴ Clint Work, “Beyond North Korea: Fractures in the US–South Korea Alliance,” *The Diplomat*, February 11, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/beyond-north-korea-fractures-in-the-us-south-korea-alliance/>.

⁶⁵ Bowers and Hiim, “Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula,” p. 19.

⁶⁶ Bowers and Hiim, “Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula.”; see also Brad Glosserman and S. Paul Choi, “Don't Lose Sight of Under-the-Hood Changes to South Korea's Defense Posture,” *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/dont-lose-sight-of-under-the-hood-changes-to-south-koreas-defense-posture/>.

⁶⁷ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, “Roundtable on China's Role in North Korea's Contingencies,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 12, 2018. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/Hearing%20Transcript%20-%20April%2012,%202018.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Brian J. Kim, “What If China Offered a Nuclear Shield to North Korea?” *The National Interest*, December 30, 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/what-if-china-offered-nuclear-shield-north-korea-109461>; Monet Stokes,

Thus, as with other allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, specific efforts to respond to China's nuclear modernization are unlikely to have a significant impact on the ROK's perception of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Instead, reassurance would be more effective if it were to reinforce Korean perceptions of American will and resolve.

Taiwan

For decades, U.S. deterrence against Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait has been supported by a carefully articulated ambiguity surrounding Taiwan's status, as well as the willingness of the United States to defend Taiwan from attack. Although the United States does not formally recognize Taiwan, the unofficial U.S.-Taiwan relationship – as defined by the three U.S.-China Joint Communiqués and the Taiwan Relations Act – has allowed for the development of a robust relationship. While Taiwan is not an ally of the United States, and therefore does not enjoy the protection of explicit U.S. extended deterrence commitments, strategists in Taipei recognize that the United States plays a critical role in deterring Beijing from attempting to use force to unify the island into the People's Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, the *Taiwan Relations Act* declares that it is the policy of the United States “to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”⁶⁹

The U.S.-China nuclear relationship therefore has great salience for Taiwan's security interests. Yet, while strategists in Taiwan are keenly aware of China's rapidly improving military capabilities – conventional and nuclear – and are concerned about the shifting conventional balance of power between China and the United States, its options are far more limited than Japan or Australia. Geographically, economically, and politically, Taiwan is far more vulnerable to being isolated by the PRC than any other country. Moreover, the cross-Strait military balance is heavily weighted against Taiwan. According to the Department of Defense, Taiwan's ground force of 88,000 is far smaller than the 412,000 the PRC has stationed in its Eastern and Southern Theaters, let alone the 1,030,000 soldiers across the entire PLA. Taiwan's navy and air force are similarly dramatically outmatched, meaning that Taiwan's options to deter mainland China are quite limited.

Since Taiwan halted its indigenous nuclear program during the 1980s,⁷⁰ Taiwan's only credible option to deter aggression from mainland China has been to build as robust a relationship with the United States as possible. Although changes in the U.S.-China military balance have certainly been concerning for Taiwan, the lack of options for Taipei has meant that there is little credible debate in

“North Korea Doesn't Trust China to Protect It,” *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/25/north-korea-china-nuclear-umbrella-denuclearization-kim-jong-un/>; Fei Su, “China's Potential Role as Security Guarantor for North Korea,” 38 North, October 24, 2018. <https://www.38north.org/2018/10/fsu102418/>.

⁶⁹ American Institute in Taiwan, “Taiwan Relations Act (Public Law 96-8, 22 U.S.C. 3301 et seq.),” accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.ait.org.tw/our-relationship/policy-history/key-u-s-foreign-policy-documents-region/taiwan-relations-act/>.

⁷⁰ Kyle Mizokami, “China's Greatest Nightmare: Taiwan Armed with Nuclear Weapons,” *The National Interest*, September 12, 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-greatest-nightmare-taiwan-armed-nuclear-weapons-80041>.

Taiwan about its relationship with – and dependence upon – the United States. Even though China’s nuclear capability is set to expand and improve rapidly, reliance upon the United States to deter conflict with the mainland is unlikely to change.

Addressing Ally and Partner Concerns

Clearly, the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments is under pressure in the Indo-Pacific. This is a challenge Washington should take seriously. Yet, while the challenges are significant, they are not insurmountable. However, to address and deal with a problem, we must first understand its cause.

While China’s nuclear modernization is indeed concerning, it will not threaten U.S. extended deterrence capabilities for the foreseeable future. The nuclear modernization investments being made by the United States – including in the FY2022 budget that devotes over \$10 billion to the B-21, Columbia-class SSBN, and the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent – will ensure the capability of the U.S. nuclear deterrent for decades to come.⁷¹

Yet, this is not the issue in the minds of U.S. allies and partners. It would be a mistake to view ally and partner uncertainties about the reliability of U.S. extended deterrent commitments as stemming from a shortfall in U.S. nuclear capabilities. Since allied and partner anxieties about American credibility are primarily political and stem from broader considerations of the regional balance of power and American resolve, improvements to U.S. nuclear and missile defense capabilities will not by themselves be effective in addressing their concerns. While some of the issues our allies and partners point to – such as the direction of our politics and the future of our economy – are beyond the scope of this hearing, I would like to address three initiatives that could positively impact allied and partner views of the U.S. extended deterrence commitment.

1: Maintain U.S. and Allied Conventional Military Advantages

Though a discussion on reestablishing American conventional advantages over China is far too broad and complex for the purposes of this hearing, I wanted to offer some thoughts on its relevance to this discussion.

According to then-Commander of Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson in March 2021, “The greatest danger we face in the Indo-Pacific region is the erosion of conventional deterrence vis-à-vis China. Without a valid and convincing conventional deterrent, China will be emboldened.”⁷² Reestablishing expectations that the United States will maintain its conventional military advantages in the defense of its allies and partners would have a dramatic effect in improving confidence in American nuclear capabilities. Indeed, maintaining the credibility of U.S. conventional deterrence would significantly reduce the risk of conflict in general, and nuclear use in particular.

⁷¹ Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, “The Department of Defense Releases the President’s Fiscal Year 2022 Defense Budget,” U.S. Department of Defense, May 28, 2021.

<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2638711/the-department-of-defense-releases-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2022-defense-budg/>.

⁷² Lara Seligman and Connor O’Brien, “Austin wants to pivot to China. But can he pay for it?” *Politico*, 3/3/2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/03/lloyd-austin-china-pentagon-473405>.

Though it may seem counterintuitive at first, the perceptions of U.S. allies and partners about American credibility and the potential for Chinese nuclear coercion are framed most prominently by their comprehensive understanding of the overall balance of military power between China and the United States. Fears of a Chinese *fait accompli* backed up by threats of nuclear use, and concerns that the United States may not be willing to use nuclear weapons to overcome a conventional disadvantage, are both driven primarily by expectations that U.S. conventional advantages in the Indo-Pacific will continue to deteriorate. Proposals to maintain a “direct defense” posture in the Western Pacific, which would involve shaping the joint force to be capable of fighting and winning a limited conventional war and “offset” Chinese advantages in proximity and mass, should be considered.⁷³

Importantly, allied fears of a Chinese *fait accompli* have not been primarily discussed in the context of nuclear deterrence, but rather out of fears of Chinese gray zone pressure on disputed islands in the East and South China Seas – in other words, in the context of conventional deterrence.⁷⁴ In response to these gray zone challenges, the 2010 U.S.-Japan National Defense Program Guidelines introduced the concept of “dynamic deterrence.” Intended to complement traditional deterrence against high-end threats by establishing continuous steady-state ISR in disputed areas, this approach sought to “sensitize a challenger (e.g., China) to the notion that they are always being watched, and there are no physical gaps or ‘windows of opportunity’” for a *fait accompli*.⁷⁵

The more effectively the United States and its allies and partners can prevail at the conventional level and prevent a Chinese *fait accompli*, any Chinese attempt at nuclear coercion will be that much less credible. Considering their reasonable concerns, it is clear that the United States and its allies and partners should inject considerations of nuclear deterrence into these concepts.

2: Increase Risk Tolerance

For over a decade, East Asia has witnessed repeated instances of Chinese coercion and “gray zone” tactics that seek to gradually advance Chinese interests using tactics that are tailored to not provoke a military retaliation. These activities also serve to determine American and allied and partner

⁷³ Colby, “Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: ‘China’s Offensive Missile Forces: Implications for the United States.’”; Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China’s Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection,” *International Security*, 38:4 (Spring 2014): p. 115-149; David Ochmanek, *Sustaining U.S. Leadership in the Asia-Pacific Region: Why a Strategy of Direct Defense Against Antiaircraft and Area Denial Threats is Desirable and Feasible*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE142/RAND_PE142.pdf; and James B. Thomas and Evan B. Montgomery, “Developing a Strategy for a Long-Term Sino-American Competition,” in *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, ed. Thomas Mahnken, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 257-274.

⁷⁴ Sugio Takahashi, “Rebuilding Deterrence: Post-2015 Defense Guidelines Challenges Facing the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” Project 2049 Institute, May 2015. https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Takahashi_2015_Defense_Guidelines_Challenges_US_Japan_Alliance.pdf; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09512748.2018.1513551>.

⁷⁵ Takahashi, “Rebuilding Deterrence: Post-2015 Defense Guidelines Challenges Facing the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” p. 4.

resolve, described as “a combination of assertive diplomacy and small but bold military actions to test the outer reaches of American power and in particular the resilience of frontier allies.”⁷⁶ In recent years, Beijing has used this approach to increase pressure on Japan in the East China Sea, advance Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea against the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and intensify pressure on Taiwan. Yet Beijing’s actions have also been adaptive to specific conditions, flexible to broader strategic trends, and opportunistic to perceptions of weakness or distraction in its adversaries.⁷⁷ While accidents certainly happen from time to time, the number and regularity of these incidents make it clear that these are not the reckless gambles they may initially appear to be. Rather, they are premeditated probes seeking to identify weakness and opportunities. In multiple instances, Beijing has continued to push when it perceives that its actions are unlikely to cause a significant response. But when Chinese assertiveness has been met with counterpressure,⁷⁸ Beijing’s response has not been predictably escalatory.⁷⁹

As the established power in the Indo-Pacific that is usually on the strategic defensive (such as defending alliance commitments, preserving a rules-based order, or maintaining regional stability), the United States often finds itself in a position seeking to avoid incidents created by Chinese provocations. Yet, while prudent in the short-term, it has the potential to be interpreted by allies and partners that are already worried about American resolve that the United States can be intimidated. Indeed, as a scholar from the Philippines once expressed to me when discussing China’s aggressiveness near the Scarborough Shoal: “How can we trust you to defend us when you’re intimidated by a few fishing boats?”

The United States has an opportunity to be tactically active in response to pressure from China, which would send a signal of resolve to U.S. allies, partners, and adversaries alike. Establishing a steady pace of presence operations by the U.S. Navy – including regular freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and transits of the Taiwan Strait – have sent a message that the United States will stick to its principles and not be intimidated.

But the United States can do more to rapidly respond to Chinese provocations against an ally or partner with a commensurate action that highlights U.S. commitments while signaling a willingness to upset Beijing. For example, operating within the guidelines of their own policies, the United States and its allies and partners should pre-plan peaceful military operations – such as multilateral exercises or combined maritime and air patrols – that can be executed quickly in response to a Chinese provocation. Similarly, American diplomats and economic officials should work with their ally and partner counterparts to prepare agreements and initiatives that can be announced in response to an effort by Beijing to coerce or pressure an ally or partner. This approach could also apply to my second recommendation, taking deliberate steps toward establishing a more robust framework for allied cooperation on deterrence.

⁷⁶ A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, “Predators On The Frontier,” *The American Interest*, 11:5 (February 12, 2016). <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/02/12/predators-on-the-frontier/>.

⁷⁷ Abraham M. Denmark, Charles Edel, and Siddharth Mohandas, “Same As It Ever Was: China’s Pandemic Opportunism On Its Periphery,” *War on the Rocks*, April 16, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/same-as-it-ever-was-chinas-pandemic-opportunism-on-its-periphery/>.

⁷⁸ Charles Edel, “Limiting Chinese Aggression: A Strategy of Counter-Pressure,” *The American Interest*, 13:5, February 9, 2018. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/02/09/limiting-chinese-aggression-strategy-counter-pressure/>.

⁷⁹ <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/same-as-it-ever-was-chinas-pandemic-opportunism-on-its-periphery/>.

3) Enhance Allied Deterrence Cooperation

As the conventional military balance evolves, China's nuclear modernization continues, and questions about America's political and economic future persist, Washington should recognize that its old approach to deterrence and reassurance is insufficient. Allies are investing in more independent strike capabilities (largely in response to the trends described above), yet continue to view the United States as their only option to credibly deter aggression and maintain a rules-based international order.

The United States should accelerate efforts empower its allies and partners to contribute more to regional conventional deterrence by establishing regular multilateral engagements examining conventional deterrence, and exploring possible revisions to joint regional force posture and distributed concepts of operations to account for emerging threats and opportunities.⁸⁰ A key area that will require deep consultations between the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies and partners will be the introduction of conventional American ground-based intermediate-range missiles – potentially including both cruise and ballistic missiles.⁸¹

While the United States tends to group these two types of missiles together because they were both previously prohibited by the INF Treaty, I expect allies and partners will react more positively to proposals to deploy ground-based intermediate-range cruise missiles than to ballistic missiles, primarily because of their escalatory implications. Specifically, allies and partners would be more likely to consider mobile anti-ship cruise missiles largely because their narrow target set have less potential to be seen as undermining China's nuclear deterrent, whereas the deployment of ballistic missiles could be seen as escalatory.⁸² While such discussions would be difficult, I expect the development and employment of these capabilities by the U.S. military will demonstrate their tremendous potential value, and allies and partners will gradually warm to the prospect of accepting them for forward deployment.

Concurrently, the United States should consider a significant upgrade to engaging and reassuring its Indo-Pacific allies on regional nuclear deterrence. While the United States has established separate Extended Deterrence Dialogues with Japan and the ROK, Washington should broaden these dialogues both geographically and substantively, turning them into a high-level mechanism for the United States and its allies to discuss deterrence and identify ways ahead. While some have proposed

⁸⁰ For more on a U.S. strategy to empower Indo-Pacific allies and partners, see Abraham M. Denmark, *U.S. Strategy in the Asian Century: Empowering Allies and Partners* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), 2020.

⁸¹ Hope Hodge Seck, "Marine Corps Invests in Drone Truck-Based Ship-Killer Missile as it Ditches Some MRAPs," *Military.com*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/05/28/marine-corps-invests-drone-truck-based-ship-killer-missile-it-ditches-some-mraps.html>; Joseph Trevithick, "The Marines' New Unmanned Ship Killing Missile Launcher Truck Breaks Cover," *The Drive*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/40390/the-marines-new-unmanned-ship-killing-missile-launcher-truck-breaks-cover>; Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos, "U.S. Tests Second Medium-Range Missile," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-01/news/us-tests-second-medium-range-missile>.

⁸² Rupert Schulenburg, "Deploying U.S. Intermediate-Range Missiles in the Asia-Pacific: Will Allies Cooperate?" *Foreign Affairs Review*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairsreview.com/home/deploying-us-intermediate-range-missiles-in-the-asia-pacific-will-allies-cooperate>.

copying NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG),⁸³ the greatly different histories and political contexts of Europe and Asia mean that such an arrangement would be inappropriate for the Indo-Pacific, and unlikely to succeed. Rather than a large and active formal mechanism like the NPG, the United States should work with Australia, Japan, and the ROK to establish a Secretary-level Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue that augments existing bilateral deterrence dialogues and provides a venue for the allies to openly discuss their concerns and consult on initiatives to buttress conventional and nuclear deterrence without inflaming regional allergies surrounding collective self-defense and regional institutionalization.

Conclusion

The past twenty years have witnessed massive changes in the Indo-Pacific's balance of power and regional views of the United States. China's economy had grown more than five-fold and its estimated defense spending had grown nearly six-fold, while U.S. growth in both categories had been far slower.⁸⁴ Moreover, over the same period, allies and partners have seen a succession of events that have negatively impacted perceptions of American power, capability, reliability, and competence. These factors have raised questions in the minds of allies, partners, and adversaries alike about America's commitment and ability to lead the international community.

Despite all these challenges, however, U.S. allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific have remained committed to sustaining a robust relationship with the United States. This speaks to their fundamental (and, I believe, justified) confidence in the United States, and also reflects the deep anxieties that have been fueled by China's rising power and aggression. Yet they have also concluded that they must seriously consider the possibility that the United States may not be willing to come to their defense, and have begun to hedge accordingly.

This is the context to best understand how U.S. allies and partners view China's nuclear modernization – an aspect of a broader trend in need of arresting. While China's nuclear modernization is certainly concerning, its practical effects on the ability of the United States to deter China are rather limited. Yet a China with a larger and more sophisticated nuclear force contributes to broader concerns among our allies and partners about the implications of a shifting regional balance of power.

For the United States to revitalize allied confidence in its extended deterrence commitments in the Indo-Pacific, Washington should therefore explore opportunities to rebuild American power relative to that of China, reinforce its conventional military advantages, and revitalize its alliances and partnerships to be better suited for the challenges we will face in a more competitive and geopolitically vital Indo-Pacific.

⁸³ For an excellent analysis of the NATO and East Asian models of external deterrence, see <http://www.theasianforum.org/the-nato-vs-east-asian-models-of-extended-nuclear-deterrence-seeking-a-synergy-beyond-dichotomy/#3>.

⁸⁴ Economic data reflects GDP measured by PPP in current international \$.
[https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?end=2019&locations=CN&start=2000](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?end=2019&locations=CN&start=2000;);
<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.