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The END of Strategic Stability in the Asia-Pacific?

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Synopsis

With the expansion of Chinese power, and with nuclear strategy and deterrence again becoming relevant to the Asian great-power game, the US requires a wider range of options to bolster Extended Nuclear Deterrence (END). As such, Washington may have to seriously consider re-introducing tactical nuclear weapons into the Pacific.

Commentary

THE UNITED States' strategy of Extended Nuclear Deterrence (END) is not what it should be. This is, perhaps, not very surprising, given that the degree of threat is the most important driver of such capabilities. As Soviet power waned, there was less need to devote the time and energy to extended nuclear deterrent capabilities.

Accordingly, the US was able to reduce its forces and take a "holiday" from the demands of END against a peer competitor. With the expansion of Chinese power, and with nuclear strategy and deterrence again becoming relevant to the Asian great-power game, a wider range of options to deal with any potential conflict is necessary. As such, Washington may have to seriously consider re-nuclearising its military and re-introduce medium-range and tactical nuclear weapons into its Pacific force.

Advancing US strategic interests

America's superpower status depends on possessing a robust extended deterrent capability in order to advance its strategic interests, including providing for the security of its allies. Whilst the US has sufficient *strategic* nuclear forces on-hand, these need to be supplemented by smaller nuclear forces that broaden the ladder of conflict escalation. Such smaller US nuclear forces no longer exist in Asia, after President George H.W. Bush withdrew US tactical nuclear weapons from the region in the early 1990s. Today, the Asia-Pacific military balance is shifting, and a posture that does not allow for flexibility of response undermines the credibility of US END.

Extended nuclear deterrence, a seemingly simple task, is still difficult to achieve. It involves convincing a challenger that the consumer of END represents a vital interest to the defender; there should be no doubt that the "assuror" is resolute in protecting its potentially threatened friends and allies. The strength of END, however, rests first and foremost on its credibility - basic deterrence, second strike capabilities, assured destruction, first use (even if officially denied), targeting flexibility, etc. - and especially on its war-fighting abilities as they relate to the spectrum of strategic warfare, escalation control, and escalation dominance.

The ability and willingness to “fight” a nuclear war, or at least control both conventional and nuclear escalation, falls into that logic. As such, a certain level of conventional capabilities and, in particular, the *regional* deployment of tactical nuclear capabilities are needed to prevent an automatic escalation to the strategic nuclear level.

Need for credible US END posture

The growth of Chinese military power will require a credible US END posture to reassure its friends and allies, to prevent destabilising nuclear proliferation, and ameliorate the intense security competition in Asia. Chinese military thought suggests that Beijing does not see nuclear weapons as solely a small, minimal deterrent but as useable forces to be employed at the right time against the US. China is expanding its nuclear and missile forces, and these are increasingly capable of threatening Japan – including Okinawa - and Guam.

Recent reports also suggest China is on the verge of having a credible sea-based nuclear capability, with five submarines capable of launching JL-2 nuclear-armed missiles with a range of several thousand kilometres.

Whilst the numbers for 2013 are omitted from this year’s report, the assessment of the Defence Intelligence Agency is that China’s nuclear arsenal consists of roughly 50-75 ICBMs, including the silo-based DF-5, the road-mobile DF-31 and DF31-A, and the DF-3. As of 2012, China is said to have 75-100 Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs), 5-20 Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs), and 1000-2000 Ground-launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs).

Asia’s future resembling Europe’s past?

Consequently, if US END is to be credible, Asia’s future may yet need to resemble Europe’s past. As the front line of conflict gets closer to the consumers of extended deterrence, the supplier (i.e., the US) will also need to become more intimate. American deterrence looks a lot better if the US has physical valuables on one’s territory: troops, weapons, bases, facilities. Europe, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Thailand all understood this during the Cold War, and both the American and Australian governments acknowledge that deployed forces make an unambiguous statement about US commitment and priorities, and complicate the planning of any prospective belligerent in the region.

Beijing has, of course, one important advantage over Washington, and that is the fact that China is not a party to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Under the provisions of this treaty, the US cannot deploy ground-launched ballistic missiles with a range of 500 to 5000 kilometres. Given Russia’s own concerns about the possible military implications of rising powers in Asia, Washington and Moscow might be able to strike a deal to revise the provisions of the treaty so that it better reflects and helps deal with the emerging nuclear reality in the Asia-Pacific.

It would not, therefore, be unrealistic for the US and its Asian allies to seriously reconsider the possibility of forward deploying short-range nuclear forces in the region. The Armed Services Committee of the US House of Representatives actually raised this possibility last year. At the very least, Washington could redeploy tactical nuclear weapons systems aboard some of its attack submarines and aircraft carriers, without necessarily specifying which ones.

END as a concept and a policy is all very well when allies are not worried about their security. But unless the eagle has talons ready for when push comes to shove, then that security assurance isn’t really going to fly.

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