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Integrated deterrence is a new term in the defence lexicon, introduced by members of the Biden administration to describe a key concept in current U.S. National Security Strategy. For Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, integrated deterrence combines every military, economic, and political capability possessed by the United States and its allies in a purposeful way to deter major, albeit rather unspecified, “threats to the rules-based order.” Because the concept is broad in scope and nebulous, some observers have been quick to suggest that the term is just a slogan, a catch phrase used by policymakers trying to distinguish their approach to national defence from their predecessors, or even to set the stage for cutting defence spending. Indeed, there are always novel strategic concepts competing for attention; ideas such as cross-domain deterrence, nuclear-conventional integration, capabilities-based planning, deterrence through entanglement, and effects-based deterrence. Sooner or later, so the sceptics suggest, “integrated deterrence,” is bound to fall out of fashion, replaced by the next strategic concept de jour.

Despite uncertainties about the longevity of integrated deterrence, it is unwise to dismiss its relevance to the current and future strategic setting. The concept itself reflects today’s reality. Unlike in times past, the practice of deterrence today is not at
all “integrated” in the sense that there is a common agreement on what is to be deterred and how we might use our collective resources to do so. There is also little agreement on what needs to be integrated and which echelon of command, or which government institution should be placed in charge of the effort to conduct the integration. The need to synchronise nuclear and conventional deterrence is clear, but analysts seem perplexed about how to conduct this synchronisation. As one observer noted, nuclear-conventional integration “is new for the times we are in with the military force we have today.”

Yet, this situation is not entirely new. The United States has faced the need to reform fundamentally its whole-of-government approaches to national security several times in recent history. The most well-known episodes were the 1947 National Security Act that created the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act that called for greater jointness in military planning and operations; the post-Cold War restructuring following the demise of the Soviet Union; and the post-9/11 creation of the Office of National Intelligence and the Department of Homeland Security. Not all of these reforms focused on deterrence per se, but they all provide perspective on the level of effort required to integrate deterrence.

Unlike these past periods of reform and reassessment, however, the current challenge leaves unanswered the most pressing question of all, “What is our strategy”? Addressing this question could suggest a way to advance the process of integrating deterrence. Given the end of post-Cold War American hegemony, and the rise of nuclear peer powers that are challenging the existing international order, current U.S. national security policy is right to advocate for a new approach to deterrence. But the concept itself is not a strategy, which Colin Gray suggested is “the direction and use of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.” Instead, integrated deterrence is a method for dealing with challenges that require a strategy for its starting point; it is a call to identify the main players involved in deterrence; and it recognises the need to secure the consensual endorsement of the American people and their political representatives. Integrated deterrence remains an organising construct, not a strategy – and at this point it is still aspirational.

This article begins by explaining why deterrence is no longer integrated by identifying the technological, social, and environmental changes that produced this emergent demand for a fundamental assessment of the workings of deterrence today. This is not meant to suggest that the concept of deterrence itself, or the sophisticated body of theory surrounding it requires reinvention, or significant reassessment. Nor does it imply a need for some pedantic reassessment of first principles. Rather, the focus here is on applying existing theory to a new strategic setting. It surveys criteria suggested by various authors to guide the process of integration while explaining why some these ideas are unsuitable as a starting point for integrating deterrence. The article then identifies several themes that should be incorporated into a future deterrence strategy and concludes with some observations about where the task of integrating deterrence might commence.

**Deterrence is no longer integrated**

Analysts are sometimes quick to offer policy or strategic recommendations without first pausing to identify, let alone explain, the problem or issues addressed by their suggestions. Thus, observers might be forgiven for asking if deterrence was ever
integrated and what led to that past integration. For that matter, it also would be reasonable to ask about the causes of today’s uncertainty over what is needed for effective deterrence.

**Integration during the Cold War**

Over the course of the Cold War, deterrence became far more integrated than it is today, although the Cold-War experience suggests that deterrence integration is a process, not some stable end-state. Deterrence was integrated along several key dimensions of strategy. First, what was to be deterred was identified: deterrance was primarily intended to stop the eruption of major conventional and nuclear war in a roughly bi-polar setting between the United States and its allies and the Soviets, Chinese, and Warsaw Pact. Second, so-called red lines were identified that would trigger the execution of deterrent threats under a set of specified circumstances. These included major attacks across the inner-German border, within the Korean peninsula, or against Japan, Australia, Israel, or other U.S. allies, or the American homeland. Execution of deterrent threats was nearly guaranteed under these circumstances, triggered by the failure of deterrence itself and the immediate clash of opposing conventional, or even nuclear-armed units. Third, nuclear-conventional integration, at least on the battlefield, was achieved by co-deploying nuclear and conventional weapons in Western Europe and less conspicuously in the Western Pacific. In the European theatre, this integration was codified in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s doctrine of flexible response. If the conventional battlefield situation in Europe deteriorated following a failure of deterrence, tactical nuclear weapons could, and probably would, have been introduced into the fight to deny the Warsaw Pact a quick conventional victory. In other words, nuclear weapons were deliberately provided to conventional units to create a risk of nuclear escalation to prevent the failure of deterrence in the first place. Fourth, deterrence was based on a whole of government effort that included diplomatic pressure, economic initiatives (such as export controls and economic isolation of the opponent), significant intelligence support, information operations, and social and political activities and narratives (soft power). Fifth, and most importantly, deterrence was nested within an overarching grand strategy of containment, which was attributed in its broad outlines to the American diplomat and historian George F. Kennan. Containment called for a sustained policy of political and military counterpressure to stop the spread of Soviet power, influence, and (Marxist-Leninist) ideology, which would eventually force the Kremlin to turn inward and reform or face collapse. Containment implied no final showdown with Moscow, just a gradual mellowing of Soviet communism until it one day changed quietly into some benign entity that would no longer threaten the interests of the United States and its allies. Similarly, the integrated deterrence of the Cold War never implied that active hostilities were necessary; successful deterrence, especially nuclear deterrence, might create some anxious moments, but it would eliminate great-power war as an instrument of statecraft. The containment-deterrence strategy also was politically attractive and self-sustaining, making it an acceptable justification for defence efforts across the vast system of Euro-Atlantic-Pacific alliances maintained by the United States.

While the containment-deterrence strategy laid the groundwork for integration, it was no panacea; Cold-War policymakers and strategists had to address a constantly changing
security landscape that produced a series of challenges to integration. Faced with de-colonisation and a rise of Soviet supported “wars of national liberation”; for example, the John F. Kennedy administration was forced to deal with a rise of threats on the periphery of the Cold War’s conventional and nuclear fronts. Conflicts in Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East followed throughout the second half of the twentieth century, all of which fell outside the policies underlying the integrated deterrence of the day. Similarly, regional conflicts involving U.S. allies and clients, such as Great Britain, Iran, or Pakistan; or the nuclear aspirations of others, e.g. Israel, Taiwan, France, and even Sweden, at times also threatened to destabilise the deterrence consensus. Nevertheless, strategists were not preoccupied by the need to “integrate” deterrence during the Cold War, which suggests that they shared a common threat perception. In addition, most U.S. government agencies, allies, and partners were working to make a commonly accepted deterrent posture and policy a reality. Integration was neither perfect, nor complete, but the exigencies of great power competition itself helped to create synchronised deterrent strategies across overlapping national, institutional, bureaucratic, and technical boundaries and diverse warfare domains.

Changes in the post-Cold War era

Disintegration of the Cold War deterrent consensus quickly followed the end of the Soviet empire. With the end of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the containment-deterrent strategy was rendered obsolete. Following the lightning-fast coalition victory in the first Gulf War there seemed to be few serious threats against which to plan. Violence and disorder did not disappear from the world, but none of these threats seemed to rise to the level to merit Washington’s attention. As Colin Gray noted, “what was missing from the 1990s was the serious engagement of a great power, especially the American superpower, with a major enemy. So superior was the United States to all other states on the standard indices of strategic power, that the potential appearance of a ‘peer competitor’ was not officially anticipated to recur for fifteen to twenty-five years”. Strategy soon became directed against all sorts of threats in no particular order, as “capabilities-based planning” was substituted for known adversaries, likely scenarios, and a general ordering of strategic priorities when it came to force acquisition, deployment, and even operational decisions. Introduced by the 2001 Quadrennial Defence Review, capabilities-based planning has been described as “intellectually lazy and simple to execute – instead of studying an adversary and dealing with the unique challenges inherent in fighting a specific enemy, it would instead ignore the necessity of accounting for culture, geographic and strategy aspects of any given opponent and concentrate on technology instead.” Capabilities-based planning was a non-strategy that failed to specify who one was fighting, where the fighting was occurring, and what the fuss was all about, that is, the political objectives to be achieved.

In contrast to this casual approach to defence strategy and planning, nuclear and conventional forces were more deliberately de-coupled following the end of the Cold War, when the United States decided to remove tactical nuclear weapons from the battlefield and curtailed inclusion of nuclear weapons in routine contingency planning. Nearly twenty years later, President Barack Obama in his April 2009 Prague speech highlighted
conventional-nuclear disintegration by identifying nuclear disarmament as a long-term goal of U.S. foreign policy. While the concept of deterrence still served as the touchstone of U.S. defence policy, it experienced a steady decline in political and strategic salience, accelerated by the focus on counter-terror and counter-insurgency operations that preoccupied Washington between 11 September 2001 and the end of American military operations in Afghanistan in August 2021.

Why have concerns over deterrence returned?

As the publication of the Biden administration’s National Defence Strategy demonstrated, by the fall of 2022, events had transpired to increase the political and strategic salience of nuclear and conventional deterrence in the minds of policymakers in Washington. As various blue-ribbon commissions and studies have more recently demonstrated, this salience is growing as officials become increasingly concerned about today’s strategic and technical trends. Designating the moment when the issue of deterrence began to regain political and strategic salience is a bit arbitrary. Nevertheless, two developments created the perception that the time had again arrived to “integrate deterrence.”

The first development was the rise of great power competition, a turn of events whose timing was anticipated by Pentagon planners nearly twenty-five years earlier. One might point to the summer and fall of 2011 following the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan, as the moment when Washington’s fixation with the Global War on Terror was shattered. The realisation was dawning that the world was no longer one of unipolar American dominance as it had been for the previous two decades. The People’s Republic of China, empowered by years of explosive economic growth, had begun to devote increasing resources to its defence, space, and global economic and diplomatic engagement. Beijing also was becoming more assertive, especially across the Western Pacific. Vladimir Putin’s Russia, which was buoyed by profits from its oil exports, also began to reject the Western rules-based order, especially when it began to reassert its prerogatives in its near-abroad. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 clearly demonstrated Russian willingness to take action to regain prestige and territories lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed great power competition into great power proxy war. It remains to be seen if the evolving international security environment takes the form of a bi-polar, tri-polar, or a multi-polar setting; nevertheless, the world is witnessing the emergence of “hard” balance of power politics among nuclear-armed great powers.

The second development is the emergence of new domains of warfare, conflict, and competition in international affairs. At the forefront of these new warfare domains is cyber: the use of information age technologies to conduct espionage, surveillance, sabotage, precision strikes, information operations, and psychological operations in peace and war. Cyber-space was mostly confined to the realm of science fiction during the Cold War. Even during the 1990s, the weaponisation of cyber was still in its infancy, best understood by futurists and computer scientists. Today, the nature and character of the cyberwarfare domain, its unique characteristics that colour its operations, effects, and strategic contributions, is a hotly debated topic. There is a consensus, however, that cyber-warfare is a fixture in virtual reality and that scientists, engineers, and strategists are busily engaged in weaponisation of this new technological landscape.
Similarly, space is another warfare domain that is evolving rapidly as space-enabled reconnaissance, surveillance, targeting, and data transmission permeates all sorts of terrestrial military and commercial systems, and as offensive and defensive space operations become increasingly likely. Space assets played an important role in the Cold War, although their application was limited and largely controlled by defence establishments. For example, national technical means of verification (artificial reconnaissance and surveillance satellites) made strategic nuclear arms control possible. Nevertheless, today the space domain is no longer the sole purview of governments. Increasing and interactive commercial, scientific, and military space activities now make space crucial in myriad military, commercial, and societal applications. It is this “milieu of space activity” that highlights space’s potential as a warfare domain that will shape events both in the heavens and on the earth below.

Added to these emergent warfare domains are new technologies, including robotics, artificial intelligence, hyper sonics, quantum-computing, and nano-technologies, that hold out significant strategic potential. Robotics, for instance, may or may not evolve into a new warfare domain, although autonomous systems might be in the process of altering the character of conflict in other warfare domains. Still, a growing list of new technologies are being weaponised by several militaries and each of them could be the source of a disruptive innovation that can render important elements of existing forces ineffective and obsolete. The rate of this disruptive innovation continues to outpace the abilities of societies, governments, and militaries to respond to this accelerated change.

The return of great power competition and conflict now places a premium on restoring deterrence as the cornerstone of U.S. defence policy. The risk of great power war now highlights the centrality of deterrence when it comes to preserving the peace, while repeated nuclear threats issued by the Kremlin and Beijing’s nuclear buildup have increased the political and strategic salience of nuclear war, returning the long-forgotten art of nuclear-conventional integration to the forefront of strategic considerations. Deterrence in this environment also is more complicated than the bipolar Cold War setting for the reasons just discussed: three great powers have emerged, the number of warfare domains is increasing, and new technologies and weapons are becoming available at ever shorter intervals. How this all fits together remains to be determined; senior U.S. defence officials have issued a call to integrate deterrence to devise a way to assess these emergent strategic factors and technological developments and integrate them into an effective deterrent posture for the twenty-first century.

Re-integrating deterrence without a blueprint

The issues described in the previous section received some early systematic consideration during a conference co-sponsored by Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and National Defence University in July 2017. During this meeting, three themes emerged that continue to reverberate in subsequent discussions of integrated deterrence. In addition, several basic concepts were used to describe the process of integration. For example, the “whole-is-greater-than-the-sum-of-its-parts” philosophy behind integration was defined as “leveraging the synergies among the various elements of the
deterrence toolkit to create stronger or more decisive effects than otherwise could be achieved.”29 The relationship between integration and deterrence across the spectrum of conflict also was specified as based on:

- an understanding of the relationships among different types of capability at the strategic and operational levels and how they can be leveraged to achieve objectives for crisis management (pre-conflict deterrence), intra-war deterrence, and the management of escalation risk. The ability, enabled by this understanding and expressed in plans, to execute actions that optimally apply some or all of these capability types in support of these objectives.30

Participants at this conference discussed integration as the synchronisation of deterrence strategies along the spectrum of conflict, especially in the realm of “gray zone” activities evidenced during the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, and an ongoing Chinese hybrid-warfare campaign in the western Pacific. The fact that it only took a few years for the target for deterrence integration to shift from the gray zone to nuclear-conventional integration in the realm of high-intensity conventional combat highlights the pace of change in today’s strategic setting, emphasising again that true deterrence integration would have to occur across the spectrum of conflict. Full spectrum synchronisation is a tall order; it spans from peace through gray zone activities through crises through low, medium, and high-intensity combat to nuclear war. Full spectrum synchronisation is a feat that was never achieved even during the heyday of deterrence integration during the Cold War.

That conference also produced a useful list of still-relevant “dimensions” along which deterrence integration might take place: offense and defence; nuclear and conventional, amongst allies in terms of strategies and capabilities, across the spectrum of conflict; and among “overt” deterrent capabilities and strategies made known to the opponent, and “covert” deterrent capabilities, which would be intended to deny an opponent the ability to plan against the full range of capabilities and strategies. Cyber-space and outer space were recognised as emerging domains of conflict, but it was also clear that the nature of these domains, especially whether deterrence is even possible in space and cyber-space, was an issue that required further study. The conferees recognised that they lacked the necessary empirical information and theoretical insights needed to begin to integrate operations in space and cyber-space with air, land, maritime, and nuclear operational domains. The emergence of new warfare domains is a defining characteristic of the techno-strategic setting that motivates today’s emphasis on the need to integrate deterrence.31

In the ensuing years, the number of dimensions requiring integration has increased as existing domains are parsed and new considerations and participants in the integrated deterrence project are identified, “producing a holistic approach to addressing our competitors across domains, across DoD components, and the U.S. Government, and with our allies and partners around the world.”32 Some observers focus on certain dimensions at the expense of others: integration with allies and partners;33 information dominance (intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance) and improved intelligence;34 cyber-space;35 air and missile defence;36 nuclear and conventional integration;37 and conventional and nuclear integration at sea.38 Frank Hoffmann, by contrast, has parsed deterrence along both the spectrum of conflict and the types and scope of government organisations involved: whole of government activities (diplomacy and development, strategic/nuclear
deterrence, homeland security, and joint warfighting), collective security (alliances), and a whole of military effort (offense-defence, nuclear-conventional, homeland defence, improved resilience). These uncertainties have reverberated in the literature on integrated deterrence as researchers try to identify exactly what needs to be integrated and how to best organise the problem to make deterrence easier to integrate. Adding to the challenge is the fact that the National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy, and Biden administration comments when those documents were released in late 2022 all implied that the Defense Department had the lead on integrated deterrence. Yet, as several analysts have pointed out, “integrated deterrence appears to be a mechanism to communicate that deterrence is distinct from the nuclear deterrent, and that an effective deterrence strategy should holistically communicate U.S. government intention to act in certain scenarios and parameters. An effective deterrence strategy utilises all aspects of national power, not just the military, to communicate intent.”

In an ideal world an overall “ends-ways-means” approach to devising adversary-specific campaigns using national and allied power would exist, and this strategy could be used to guide the process of integration. Planners would be equipped with a deterrence strategy that specified what is to be deterred, what capabilities are available for deterrence, and that provided some initial insight into how to combine capabilities in a way to make credible deterrence threats. Strategy would contain animating ideas and ranked objectives that could be used to synchronise various capabilities. However, because such a strategy does not exist (if it did, deterrence would be well on its way to becoming integrated) some analysts have suggested that high-level national and Defense Department strategy documents should emphasise the need for integration, creating a top-down demand signal for undertaking the work necessary to unpack the process of integrating deterrence. This would require the development of a set of working propositions concerning “thresholds and ‘redlines,’ proportionality and reciprocity, norms and the laws of armed conflict, deterrence messaging, attribution, horizontal escalation, and strategic stability.” Once these propositions were developed, they could then be “debated, tested and refined, and then formed into some type of ‘rule set’ that can support deliberate planning in peacetime and adaptive planning in crisis and conflict.”

The lack of such a strategy is the missing sine qua non of integrated deterrence. A clearly articulated deterrent strategy would serve as the basis for integrated deterrence, because integration will prove impossible without a recognised and validated strategy that specifies who and what are to be deterred, the political and military stakes in play, the nature of the deterrence strategy to be implemented (i.e. one based on denial, punishment, or retaliation), and the point on the conflict spectrum at which nuclear-conventional integration should occur. In other words, it is impossible to begin to integrate allied and whole of government efforts across all warfare domains and levels of conflict without some shared vision of what in fact is the purpose of the evolution in the first place. Nevertheless, trying to apply rules of thumb and sufficient cogitation to integrate deterrence by identifying principles that could be applied consistently to piece together various activities across various domains, agencies, levels of conflict, types of weapons, and so on is probably an insurmountable challenge without a guiding strategy. Integrated deterrence is not akin to fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that can be solved through superior...
spatial reasoning, trial and error, or patience. Instead, it is an effort to understand and harness the effects produced by myriad actions, undertaken by hundreds of actors, that interact to produce effective deterrent threats at the appropriate times against appropriate targets.

The need for strategy – and obstacles to creating one

Above all else, a national security strategy is a political act. It flows from a vision that describes what the United States wants, accompanied by a list of defence priorities. What are the goals embraced by Washington and allied capitals? What are their best-case outcomes? What are their preferred means of achieving those results? Integrated deterrence begins with a political statement, not unlike the containment-deterrence strategy of the Cold War, that presents in general terms long-term objectives and a rough outline of what actions are to be deterred. But deterrence only maintains the status quo, it cannot manifest a national vision of what America stands for, rather than what it simply wants to prevent. As a recent article put it, “Integrating deterrence … is necessary but insufficient.”43 Defence ministries and defence intellectuals cannot simply conjure up a strategy from thin air; instead, it must emerge as a political consensus among involved parties. Engaging the electorate in building this consensus is important because the citizens in a democracy are the source of energy behind national defence. They are a key component of the Clausewitzian trinity of the people, the government, and the armed forces that must participate in the making and execution of defence strategy. Building the political consensus behind national security strategy begins with a sustained dialogue among the American people, their defence establishment, and their elected officials.44

Today’s limited discussion about integrated deterrence ignores these political realities. Instead, officials adopt a technocratic approach to defence matters. For instance, when members of the Office of the Secretary of Defense introduced the notion of integrated deterrence in 2021, they described it as “the right mix of technology, operational concepts and capabilities – all woven together and networked in a way that is credible, flexible, and so formidable that it will give any adversary pause.”45 Little, if anything, was mentioned about the politics or strategy behind integrated deterrence. It also is not clear why elected officials have failed to engage in this political discussion about national defence. But as Hew Strachan and Ruth Harris note, the phenomenon is not limited to the United States. Defence issues in the United Kingdom have largely become an elite affair that takes place between civilian officials and the armed services.46 It is almost as if senior officials are deliberately keeping changing strategic realities off national political agendas.

Several reasons might be suggested why U.S. policymakers have ignored the political essence of integrated deterrence. There might be a reluctance to admit that the “unipolar moment” has faded into a distant memory, along with the permissive operational environment that allowed the relatively unfettered use of military force when the need arose.47 The fact that arms control has collapsed and the emphasis on disarmament in U.S. nuclear strategy seems woefully out of place might be too politically and psychologically unsettling for many officials (or academics, for that matter) to contemplate. The eruption of a major war in the heart of Europe, accompanied by an unprecedented series
of nuclear threats courtesy of the Kremlin, represents a shocking turn of events that has yet to be fully appreciated and assimilated within Western defence establishments. The political essence of integrated deterrence would reflect this dangerous turn in world affairs, but there seems to be little enthusiasm for sounding the strategic death knell for the “new world order.”

Andrew Bacevich suggests that this strategic vacuum is created by a hesitation to review America’s vision of its role since World War Two as the indispensable power or global policeman, a view which is baked into the psyche of its leadership. Such thinking results in a continued desire to pursue military options rather than reconsider the United States’ place in the world, and its realistic responsibilities and capabilities. Referring to the assumption that the world needs U.S. leadership in the 2022 National Security Strategy, he writes that “This word salad offers something for everyone but is devoid of specificity and cannot serve as a basis for a coherent policy. Marketed as a statement of strategy, it instead testifies to the absence of strategy.” Putting the point more directly, former National Security Advisors Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski were already warning in 2008 that “The world is changing in fundamental ways … and our traditional models for understanding America’s role don’t work very well.”

In addition, the Biden call for integrated deterrence lacks a “presidential forcing function.” It appears to be primarily thought of as an approach designed and led by DOD, without higher level guidance to unify an interagency perspective or require parallel commitments by the key cabinet departments to support the mission of integrating deterrence. If this is truly meant to be a whole of government approach, there needs to be a “lead integrator” who can make it happen.

The notion that U.S. and other Western polities are primed to undertake a calm and considered political debate about national and international defence priorities and that political elites are accustomed to this sort of thing is not supported by recent events. Instead, political debate, at least in the American context, deteriorates immediately into partisan political acrimony as each side assesses and then uses every possible issue to “mobilise their base.” The availability of varied media streams, each customised to match the individual preferences of the receiver, makes it virtually impossible to create a common understanding of the developing threat, regardless of its actual severity. The immediate politicisation of the COVID-19 pandemic for partisan benefit is a case in point. The fact that the current international setting is becoming increasingly complex and dangerous increases the possibility that this topic will spark counter-productive partisan political mayhem if it is introduced deliberately as an issue on the U.S. national agenda. Officials are reluctant to discuss the political dimensions of integrated deterrence because of the inherent uncertainty about where the votes lie when it comes to dealing with growing great power competition.

The concept of integrated deterrence might simply reflect the technocratic bias of the U.S. defence establishment, a reflection of the impulse to transform a profoundly political deterrent strategy into a matter of better organisation, creative planning, and tactical fine-tuning. After all, because the scope of integrated deterrence is so comprehensive, identifying its political basis and articulating its underlying deterrent objectives are far beyond the purview of the U.S. Department of Defense. Integrated deterrence might
reflect the application of the computer network metaphor, the “Internet of Things” if you like, to deterrence by suggesting that it is possible to link different components together in ways that work better than others. This approach leaves the opponent and politics out of the deterrence picture, which might account for the short shrift given to strategy in ongoing discussions of integrated deterrence.

Requirements for an integrated deterrence strategy

New presidential administrations typically publish a formal national security strategy early in their term that lays out their defence goals and plans. The Biden administration was no different, publishing its strategy in October 2022. A core element of this “strategy” was integrated deterrence.53 This was simultaneously a new concept and a traditional idea, one that captures the holistic approach to deterrence that has embodied U.S. government actions to provide for American security since the beginning of the nuclear age. Yet, it raised as many questions as it answered. What does the administration mean by integrated? How does this integration occur? Who is the lead integrator? Where does the process of integration begin?

We are not able to offer an integrated deterrence strategy for a global coalition of democracies to preserve the peace, to reduce the risk of a fait accompli, and to guarantee that diplomacy, shared norms and principles, and democratic institutions will guide change in international affairs. Nevertheless, we can suggest five themes that may serve as starting points for the process of integration. First, with trends pointing to the emergence of three peer competitors armed with significant nuclear arsenals, strategy should begin by addressing this multipolar setting. This new tripolar deterrence situation also presents the need to deter two very different types of states. China is a rising power, while Russia is a declining power – though perhaps made even more dangerous and unpredictable as a result. Deterrence may need to be expanded in its understanding to not only prevent the outbreak of nuclear conflict, but to pursue “managed strategic competition” with China. Joseph Nye suggests the United States should see its relationship with Beijing as one of co-operative rivalry rather than treating China as an implacable foe.54 No matter how one decides to characterise the tenor of today’s great power competition, the world is no longer unipolar.

The second theme, avoiding nuclear war, is becoming increasingly salient, which itself explains why the issue of integrated deterrence has emerged on Washington’s policy agenda. But here, the details remain opaque. To what extent are all government agencies involved in day-to-day deterrence? And what does deterrence mean in the modern world of cyber and space domains, or regarding hypersonic weapons? How does the lack of arms control agreements that dampen arms races or other activities effect strategic stability? Virtually all deterrence theory is drawn from a bi-polar setting, which in retrospect, and in theory, appears much easier in terms of understanding the stakes of the game and determining what was necessary to prevent war.55 This was the era of assured destruction, secure second-strike capabilities, a triad of nuclear forces, and tacit rules between the two antagonists regarding what was permissible and what pushed relations a bit too far.56 That is no longer the case today.

In the past, anything involving deterrence or strategic issues for the U.S.-Soviet relationship would typically be referred to Strategic Air Command, and later U.S.
Strategic Command (STRATCOM), in Omaha, Nebraska. But that command no longer owns all strategic issues. In today’s world, strategic can mean any number of things in multiple domains, involving modern technologies and soft power tools that STRATCOM is ill-equipped to handle. Simply calling something strategic today no longer implies that it has a nuclear dimension. In other words, the third theme of the new strategy involves cataloguing and assessing the deterrent effects and synergies of non-traditional capabilities. For instance, diplomatic overtures by the Executive Branch, including the White House and the State Department, may carry strategic significance. Economic sanctions have been increasingly used in a strategic manner in recent years to punish international transgressions by states. The rules of the road in space operations are still being developed by the space-faring nations, as is also true in the cyber and information domains. Even the military is finding that the character of modern combat is being affected by new weapons and effects that may blur the traditional firebreak between conventional and nuclear weapons. Conventional weapons have been useful in achieving strategic effects in multiple conflicts since the 1990s. Has this negated the role of nuclear weapons on the battlefield? Indeed, is there no longer a category of non-strategic, or tactical nuclear weapons? Would any use of a nuclear weapon be a strategic event?

What this third theme implies is that it is no longer sufficient for a nation-state to have separate strategies for conventional and nuclear weapons. The “new triad” unveiled in President George W. Bush’s 2001 Nuclear Posture Review combined all strategic strike capabilities, both nuclear and conventional, into one category. The purpose was to increase the effectiveness and credibility of non-nuclear options for escalation management. The document was critiqued for doing so, with critics claiming that this lowered the threshold for nuclear use and created a seamless web of military capabilities that might not stop when the time came to consider nuclear use. From one perspective that was exactly the point: some believed that such ambiguity enhanced deterrence against an implacable foe, forcing the adversary to think carefully about the possible negative consequences of any action. But another point of view was that the new triad, and President Barack Obama’s 2013 Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy, both tried to emphasise non-nuclear strike capabilities to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. In fact, several presidents since Bush have emphasised that the new triad does not necessarily lower the nuclear threshold. Obama and Biden both emphasised the desire to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in their national security documents, which is facilitated by the new triad (in reality, if not in name). While neither moved the United States to a no-first use or even sole-purpose policy for nuclear weapons, they both declared that nuclear forces will only be considered in the most extreme circumstances.

A fourth theme is that integrated deterrence will push the U.S. military to incorporate emerging technologies and new operational concepts continuously into the force, as it faces waves of technology that are overwhelming efforts to “weaponise” these opportunities. A host of technologies could be potentially weaponised and integrated into the deterrent, although as Colin Gray noted, it is difficult to assess their real utility without the only test that matters, the test of battle. New operational concepts may include, for example, the capability to carry out “deterrence by detection” in the realm of information dominance. A strategy to integrate deterrence also will have to be on the alert for the “technological downside,” by constantly scanning the horizon for innovations that threaten the survivability of the secure second-strike nuclear force.
Traditionally survival has been enhanced either via hiding (as ballistic nuclear submarines do) or hardening (as in ICBM missile silos). But as new technologies, big data, and potentially artificial intelligence team up to make the oceans more transparent and weapons more accurate, both approaches may be under assault.63

The fifth potential theme for the new strategy injects a note of caution into the effort to enlarge and synchronise the capabilities and operations that are integrated into deterrence. Enhanced capabilities clearly aid defence planners, allowing them to select from a larger set of weapons and operational approaches to create new effects that previously required nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, dangers may arise from blurring the lines between conventional and nuclear weapons. For years the United States has shown concern over the efforts by China and Russia to intermingle their nuclear and conventional systems, which could lead to misperceptions and miscalculations at any point across the spectrum of conflict. Similarly, the growth of dual-use systems such as command and control satellites that do double duty for conventional operations and nuclear warning invite uncertainty as to the adversary’s goals if one of those satellites and associated command and control networks were attacked.64 As the United States moves further towards conventional-nuclear integration, as well as the concept of integrated deterrence, the risk of escalation may increase.65 To mitigate these sorts of risks, defence planners should begin to consider creating various fora for arms control and confidence-building measures the better to manage the inherent risk of misperception, miscalculation, and escalation that are likely to accompany the integration of new weapons and operations into an integrated deterrent.

The way ahead

Integrated deterrence is a process that harnesses the dialectical and amplifying interactions of myriad capabilities and initiatives of the side making deterrent threats and the outcomes produced when those threats are recognised by an opponent. The fact that some of this action will take place within warfare domains that are not completely understood or are themselves undergoing various types of technological transformation highlights that integrated deterrence is a process of continuous assessment and adjustment. Unlike a jigsaw puzzle, integrated deterrence can never be “solved.”

An overall “ends-ways-means” approach to devising tailored adversary-specific campaigns using national and allied power is needed to guide the process of integration. Without a deterrence strategy that specifies what is to be deterred and what capabilities are available for deterrence, planners cannot begin to assess how capabilities, organisations, and allies can co-ordinate their activities to create credible deterrent threats. Strategy also provides some initial insight into how to combine capabilities to bolster deterrence. Strategy would contain animating ideas that would guide the process of integration and ranked objectives that could be used to direct efforts to make sure priorities were addressed first.

The United States needs a more clearly defined strategy to guide its nomenclature and thinking about what truly is a strategic threat, what constitutes a strategic response, and what deterrent threats should be posed along specific points of the spectrum of conflict. Today, most observers believe that the Defense Department remains the lead agency for
integrated deterrence. Nevertheless, as one analyst wrote, “Nobody is laboring under the misconception that the DoD believes it is, will, or should be the strategy lead on diplomatic activity, trade policy, or economic sanctions.” That said, it is common sense to assume that DOD would seek to develop co-ordinated strategies that avoid or at least minimise negative interactions amongst various systems, operations, and activities when it comes to deterrence. The emphasis in the National Defence Strategy on the military concept of “campaigning,” i.e. “the conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military activities to achieve strategy-aligned objectives over time,” would attest to this view. DOD knows how to campaign, and recognises that it requires co-ordination and co-operation across commands and across the whole of government. Bureaucratic infighting over the issue of which agency will get to lead policy synchronisation, however, might just be getting under way. In October 2023, for instance, a U.S. State Department report noted that “given the centrality of Department of State capabilities to both diplomacy and communication with other countries, the Department should play an important interagency role in all aspects of deterrence policy, including those in which it is not the lead agency.”

One way to resolve the question of lead integrator may be to create a position within the National Security Council of a Senior Director for Integrated Deterrence, or DID. Creation of a DID would eliminate the need to designate a lead agency for deterrence integration, something that would probably occur during a crisis when circumstances forced the Pentagon and its National Military Command Centre, the State Department, and STRATCOM Headquarters to co-ordinate their activities the better to deter war. The DID would have the advantage of being in the White House, close to the president, and could use the power of the president to draw various agencies, programmes, and systems together in constructive ways to achieve deterrent objectives. Since nearly all major issues today seem to gravitate to the White House for resolution, the creation of a DID would reduce the need to rely on ad hoc inter-service and inter-agency discussions to co-ordinate activities.

NSC leadership could promote and direct interagency efforts toward the success of integrated deterrence as one element of a larger national strategy once it is in place. Nevertheless, the DID will need a clearly articulated deterrent strategy to facilitate the process of integration. The current National Security Strategy does not provide such clarity.

Integrated deterrence is an important contribution to U.S. thinking about the new world that it faces. But to be a useable concept for the application of deterrence in that world, there must be an actual strategy behind it. That is the missing piece. The integration of deterrence responsibilities is not going to happen on its own. The United States must develop a strategy that explains the who, what, why, and how of its national interests, and ask the whole of government, the whole nation, and its allies and partners to contribute to achieving those shared goals. Only strategy can transform integrated deterrence from a catch phrase to a reality.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed here are those of the authors alone and do not represent the views of any government, government agency, commercial firm, or other group.
Notes


10. X (George Kennan), ‘On the Sources of Soviet Conduct’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1946.


30. Ibid.


40. Kathleen McInnis, “‘Integrated Deterrence’ is not so Bad’, CSIS, 27 October 2022.

41. ‘Exploring the Requirements of Integrated Deterrence’.

42. Ibid.


51. Ferenzi and Jones.


62. For example, see Rebecca Hersman and Rega Younis, ‘The Adversary gets a Vote: Advanced Situational Awareness and Implications for Integrated Deterrence in an Era of Great Power Competition’, CSIS, September 2021.
65. For more on this concern, see Mount and Vaddi, p. 4.
67. Ibid.
68. 2022 National Defence Strategy.

**Disclosure statement**

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