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Prospects for Deterrence, Escalation, Coercion and War in the Indo-Pacific

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NPS NRP Executive Summary

Prospects for Deterrence, Coercion, Escalation and War in the Indo-Pacific

Period of Performance: 10/15/2021 – 10/21/2022

Report Date: 10/21/2022 | Project Number: NPS-22-N138-A

Naval Postgraduate School, National Security Affairs (NSA)



NAVAL RESEARCH PROGRAM
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

PROSPECTS FOR DETERRENCE, COERCION, ESCALATION AND WAR IN THE INDO-PACIFIC EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Summary

This project marks the second year that the PI and a team of researchers assess the prospects for war in the Indo-Pacific. The purpose of the assessment is to inform the Navy's strategy in this vital theater of operations. Drawing upon the theoretical literature, as well as analysis of contemporary geopolitics, this project examines how regional actors assess the prospects for war, specifically their attitudes towards deterrence and escalation management on the use of force at sea, and the implications for possible conflict with Indo-Pacific competitors. The study highlights the need for the Navy to unpack the geopolitical complexities of this region that are inextricably intertwined with the uncertainties of structuring a deterrent force that can help create a political environment to minimize the chances of regional war. This complex endeavor is more of an art than a science.

The findings in this study are germane to the development of America's maritime strategy throughout the region. The project finds that the Navy must develop a new set of assumptions to guide its approach to alliance management, regional partnerships, as well as the challenges posed by all-domain conflict across different warfare spectrums. All of these factors must figure into the Navy's long-range planning system that addresses fleet design, force structure, and weapons design across the warfare domains. Moreover, the Navy must reexamine and recast Cold War-era assumptions about deterrence based on strategic nuclear weapons to reflect the complexities of all-domain conflict in which it will be increasingly difficult to segregate the levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical). Finally, this project finds that the Navy must plan for uncertainties stemming from the introduction of advanced weapons technologies by regional states into the strategic environment.

Keywords: *deterrence, escalation ladder, maritime strategy, naval power, arms races, Indo-Pacific, coercion, nuclear weapons*

Background

After a hiatus of a little more than two decades, state-on-state competition at sea is again a central issue of international security. Today, the US-led maritime order and the freedom to use the ocean as a vast maneuver space to access different theaters stand contested. Nowhere is the urgency to meet state-on-state competition at sea stronger than in the Indo-Pacific region, where freedom of navigation is being challenged by regional states' continuous investments in military power and their renewed political will to use it. Yet, in the Indo-Pacific, naval power is a requirement for, and a propeller for further expansion of, a great variety of missions, encompassing widening constabulary and law-enforcement activities aimed at the management of maritime boundary delimitations and territorial disputes. These missions stand at what might be regarded as the low end of potential conflict scenarios, which range all the way up to open warfare on the high seas.

This study sits at the nexus of the central challenge facing the United States Navy in the 21st century. The Navy N3/N5 organization requires answers to the following questions as addressed in this report:

1. How can the Navy best posture itself to deter and, if necessary, fight a war in the Indo-Pacific's vast maritime domains?
2. How can the Navy best prepare itself for a maritime war at sea in the Indo-Pacific?
3. What role can the Navy play in building political and security partnerships to deter and, if necessary, fight a war in the Pacific?



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This study addresses these questions by drawing upon the security studies and international relations literature on the phenomena of deterrence, conflict escalation, coercive political strategies, and arms races. The research team drew upon this literature as a baseline to analyze the Navy's problem set in posturing itself across the domain. It then makes recommendations about steps the Navy should take to address the strategic environment.

Findings and Conclusions

This study finds that, first, the Indo-Pacific is in the midst of a region-wide naval arms race in which various states are acquiring advanced conventional and nuclear systems. Most of these systems are offensive. These emerging force structures across the region affect the military balance, which is a foundational component of the deterrence framework. Second, the study finds that China in particular appears intent on linking its growing military capabilities to a coercive political framework in which it is indirectly applying the threat of force to achieve its political objectives. Third, the study finds that regional states are all gradually embracing the idea of the "all domain" war in which the next conflict could involve cross-domain operations in cyber, space operations, and information/social media interactions, in addition to kinetic operations underwater, on the ocean's surface, and in the skies.

At the outset, the study suggested that the Navy needs to relearn some of the lessons from the Cold War when integrating conventional and nuclear weapons into its operational planning and when linking its force structure with ideas of wartime escalation management and nuclear deterrence. This study confirms that the Navy needs to dust off its Cold War-era approaches and consider such issues as (1) the appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional weapons carried aboard ships; (2) developing plans to integrate its systems for cross-domain operations to reflect the requirements of the "all domain" war; and (3) building political relationships with regional partners that include them in the planning process that addresses the range of potential conflict scenarios across the Indo-Pacific domain.

The literature on deterrence and nuclear weapons and their role in national security strategy is a good starting point for the Navy to develop a conceptual framework to apply naval power in this complex strategic environment. This can be done in part through education of the mid- and senior-level leaders facing these challenges. This conceptual framework can form the basis for exercises and experiments to flesh out the ideas as applied in different regional scenarios.

Recommendations for Further Research

A central finding of this study is that the Navy and the United States need much greater fidelity on the dynamics of deterrence across the vast Indo-Pacific region. Stated differently, given the complexities of the region's geopolitics, there is much that the Navy does not know about how deterrence does and does not work. The findings of this report suggest that the Navy investigate how to further operationalize strategies of deterrence across the various domains of conflict: land, sea, air, undersea, cyber, and information. This can be done through a series of table-top exercises and/or visits of research teams to key friends and allies across the area of operations to establish common understandings on these critical questions of deterrence, coercion, and potential escalation to all-out war across the region.

