

Deterrence, escalation and strategic stability

Rebuilding Australia's muscle memory

BEC SHRIMPTON

MAY 2024

Special Report

About the author

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Executive summary

To build an effective deterrence strategy, Australia needs urgently to improve its skills and understanding of deterrence, and raise the topic's profile in our public and policy discussions. Despite having previously been a global thought leader on nuclear weapons and deterrence half a century ago, Australia today doesn't have a strong grasp of the basics of modern deterrence.

Knowledge of and literacy in deterrence are vital for adapting and applying such concepts to meet today's extraordinarily complex, multidomain and multidimensional requirements. A lack of understanding of deterrence can critically undermine the ability to get strategy and policy right. The implications for Australia's national interests are urgent and serious. The limited debate in Australia about what good deterrence strategy looks like and its key components can't be advanced without better understanding of key terms and ideas that are fundamental to deterrence theory and practice.

There are, of course, obvious limits to what Australia can achieve alone. Our ability to integrate and combine our military capabilities with those of the US and other critical partners is fundamental to our ability to achieve our security objectives, but some of our partners are working more closely together on building deterrence strategies. We have some catching up to do.

This report explains what deterrence is and why it matters. It looks at Australian deterrence policy in practice and at deterrence efforts by some of our partners and allies and it highlights a number of gaps in Australia's strategic and deterrence planning.

The report makes a series of policy recommendations (see below) for government, and especially for the Department of Defence, to rebuild Australia's position as a thought leader on deterrence.

Policy recommendations for government and Defence

1. *Invest significantly and immediately in building necessary knowledge of and literacy in deterrence within Defence and the broader Australian national-security and foreign-policy community.*

- This should include interagency seminars, developing key reading lists for the policy and practitioner community, and greater emphasis in formal Defence and national-security professional education and training, including as a focus in exercises and war games at multiple levels.
- This should also include a stronger commitment to Defence and interagency engagement in strategic- and operational-level war games led by the US and involving, where possible, other key international partners.

2. *Support a stronger public debate to inform the Australian community of the 'why', the 'who', the 'what' and the 'how' of Australia's emerging deterrence strategy and posture.*

- Messaging and information to the public and the broader community should ensure that deterrence

as a driving concept for Australian defence planning and capability development is explained by ministers, officials and experts whenever possible. This should include making explicit links to Australia's deterrence strategy in narratives or statements about the ADF's exercises, key investments and activities.

3. *Engage more consistently and with clear purpose in deterrence dialogues, exercises, war games and planning across government and with key partners.*

- This needs to better leverage expertise and experience external to the government and bureaucracy, to inject depth, contestability, diversity and precision into deterrence policy- and strategy-making.
- This needs to occur in partnership with think tanks and academia, as well as with input from industry.
- It should also be undertaken both in Australia and—vitality—with key partners in the Indo-Pacific.
- Deterrence engagements nationally and internationally – aligned with Recommendations

1 and 3 – must actively inform assessments and planning for deterrence through explicit feedback mechanisms or channels. Data and insights from games and other engagements must be captured, analysed and integrated into planning processes to create effective learning loops.

4. *Invest in and consistently use the most effective and appropriate methodologies for developing robust deterrence strategy.*

- This should, for example, leverage the unique opportunities presented by war gaming and scenario exercises with a focus on high-level strategic–operational decision-makers and their interactions, as well as the working-level staffers who must develop advice and options for them.

The basics: what is deterrence?

Deterrence is a strategy that one actor uses to influence the decision-making calculus of another. It's inherently psychological and requires deep analytical capability. The core idea is to get inside the cost–benefit analysis of another actor to convince them *not* to do something. For example, Actor A deliberately seeks, through a combination of tools and measures (military, diplomatic, economic, informational, industrial, technological) to coerce or compel Actor B *not* to take a specific action, or to *cease* specific actions. Often, the actors are nation-states, but, both historically and today, non-state actors (including terrorist or other groups) are relevant in deterrence strategy.

Why deterrence matters

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR) determined that Australia requires a holistic approach to deterrence across the military domains, that it needs the ability to hold at risk forces that might threaten Australia from distances beyond our immediate region, that nuclear risks require renewed focus on extended nuclear deterrence, and that deepening national resilience is central to effective deterrence.¹ Those judgements appropriately reflect the strategic circumstances that Australia faces, and they explicitly recognise that the existing policy of 'deterrence by denial' is not of itself complete or sufficient. Australia needs to adapt its deterrence strategic framework to meet today's threats.

Deterrence isn't a new idea. Its core tenets and early conceptions are evident in writings and traditions that date back as far as Sun Tzu² and Clausewitz.³ The Cold War proved fertile ground for extensive theoretical development and the practical application of deterrence. That period produced an important foundational set of policy and operational concepts, which focused on the gravest threat of nuclear war but also acknowledged a continuum or spectrum of conventional military and political deterrence capability and action.

Contemporary deterrence discourse still follows the threads laid down by the best-known Western deterrence theorists of the Cold War, but adapts their concepts for today's complex, multidomain and multidimensional era.⁴

But Australia, along with its allies and partners in deterrence, has a problem. As one of the US's leading thinkers, Austin Long, identified in 'Deterrence: from cold war to long war',⁵ deterrence as strategy wasn't a dominant theory or character in the approaches of many Western nations for decades after the Cold War.

The depth of knowledge and working understanding of deterrence among policymakers and practitioners across the Australian system don't match the concept's increasingly frequent invocation. Key terms are co-opted to mean whatever's convenient to the user at the time. Failing to understand the doctrinal and practical application of ideas such as escalation and de-escalation, for example, leads to oversimplification or even wrong-headed interpretations of their purpose (there's more discussion on escalation on page 10).

Conceptual confusion or the misuse of foundational deterrence terminology risks undermining attempts to develop a workable strategy. This is especially pertinent

when strategies need to intersect and integrate—as Australia’s certainly does—with key partners and allies. Using the same language and meaning the same things are critical. Today’s deterrence challenges require precision of thought, rigorous foundational analysis, and absolute clarity about objectives.

That’s especially important because the spectrum of today’s deterrence requirements spans irregular warfare

(including special and covert operations, political warfare and the ‘grey zone’) and conventional and nuclear capabilities. It also encompasses the ‘newer’ domains of space and cyberspace. Today’s emerging concepts for deterrence deliberately and explicitly integrate diplomatic, economic, information (including influence) and industry (technology) measures into tailored and ‘adversary-centric’ deterrence strategies.

Australian deterrence policy in practice: the Cold War period

Throughout the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was a key policy focus in Australia’s alliance relationship with the US. Successive governments from the 1950s to the 1990s built substantial expertise in this field.⁶ Frequent (at least annual) bilateral dialogue went deep with American colleagues on US (and allied) nuclear strategic doctrine, strategy, planning and posture. This was primarily driven by Australian ministers and officials recognising that they needed to fully understand developing nuclear capabilities, as well as American and broader allied strategic logic and planning related to the functions of the Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape defence facilities and their operations.

“The level of expertise that Australia was able to bring to the table won the respect of senior US officials.”

The Americans, for their part, appreciated the implications of those operations for Australian sovereignty. The level of expertise that Australia was able to bring to the table won the respect of senior US officials. Anecdotally, that encouraged major concessions on personnel at

the facilities (and extended to the posting of Australian personnel to sensitive US strategic sites), consultation mechanisms, and modes of facility operation. It also led to the Americans briefing Australian officials on extremely sensitive nuclear planning, especially throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s.

Deep expertise in strategic nuclear deterrence was developed in Australia primarily because senior ministers and senior Defence officials made it a specific priority. Outside of government, experts including Hedley Bull, JDB Miller, Coral Bell, Bob O’Neill, Desmond Ball and Rod Lyon (who remains a leading Australian authority) were all in the top ranks of global strategic intellectuals and discussants on these matters.

Few in Australia today realise that Australia’s relationship—including its technical and policy expertise with the nuclear bomb and nuclear issues—went so far as to consider the procurement and even development of indigenous nuclear weapons capability throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, before such ideas were summarily rejected and a nonproliferation and extended nuclear deterrence policy position was firmly embraced.



Deterrence in Australia today

If half a century ago Australia was a global thought leader on nuclear issues and deterrence, the muscle memory does exist for us to revive those traditions. The need to refocus on these issues now is not, as many would have it, wholly centred on concerns about the proliferation of nuclear weapons *per se* (although a worrying trend in nuclear capability and the potential for a breakout are clear). Today's focus on deterrence is necessary due to the growing complexity of the multidomain strategic and operational defence environment, broad and fast-paced technological developments in warfare and rapidly shifting geopolitical realities. Those all require a much more integrated or 'full spectrum' approach to deterrence as a primary means to avoid potentially catastrophic war(s).

Australian defence policy counterparts in the Republic of Korea and Japan began to participate in formal bilateral deterrence dialogues with the US more than a decade ago. The US recognised a need to develop regional depth and familiarity with nuclear and conventional deterrence strategy in order for partners to work more closely together to avoid or, if necessary, confront a regional crisis. The likelihood of misunderstanding or miscalculation was growing as China's behaviour became more assertive (and risky) and North Korea escalated its nuclear sabre-rattling. South Korea and Japan have benefited since then from their growing institutional knowledge and practical understanding of deterrence through active and regular participation in those US-led deterrence dialogues. They are, as a result, more advanced along the policy and practical learning curve than Australia. From a regional and a US perspective, Australia has some catching up to do.

Australian uniformed personnel on exchange or posted as liaison officers to US Strategic Command and other elements of Australia-US military cooperation have maintained a steady (if informal) engagement on strategic capabilities and approaches. However, a specific focus by senior policy officials on deterrence didn't exist until 2019, when bilateral policy talks with the US were first established via a 2 + 2 format (foreign affairs and defence officials). Called the Strategic Policy Dialogue, the talks are held at first assistant secretary level (SES Band 2) and include an explicit focus on deterrence.⁷

With a defence strategy that has not—in half a century—engaged with or been shaped by the core ideas of deterrence theory, Australia has lacked a driving imperative to interrogate the US's and other allies' evolving concepts for deterrence. That includes interrogating the actual extended deterrence arrangements on offer from the US or questioning existing information-sharing mechanisms and avenues for Australian input to US nuclear and missile defence policy. A change to that thinking is clearly required.

“Today's focus on deterrence is necessary due to the growing complexity of the multidomain strategic and operational defence environment.”

Australian policy has not, at the strategic level in Canberra, been alert to important conversations on integrated deterrence evolving in the US, driven primarily from US Strategic Command and from the Office of the Under-Secretary of Defense Policy, over the past 15 or so years. That partly explains why the focus on integrated deterrence of the 2023 US National Security Strategy and the US National Defense Strategy came as a surprise to Australia's defence establishment and wasn't well understood. Interactions between Australia and the US on specific policy and operations to do with deterrence hadn't been systematic, from the operational to the strategic level, but had largely occurred through subject-matter experts sharing research or tangential discussions through partner and allied exercises.

Until the DSR provided a necessary strategic-level course correction, deterrence as a core organising principle and framework for defence strategy and capability development had been conspicuous by its absence in Australia for decades.

Approaches to deterrence

There are two primary approaches to deterrence:

- *Denial*—where Actor A's key objective is to effectively deter Actor B by convincing B that it can't achieve its objectives, because A possesses sufficient capacity and intent—either alone or in cooperation with others—to prevent it from doing so
- *Punishment*—otherwise known as cost imposition, whereby deterrence is achieved by Actor A influencing the cost-benefit calculus of Actor B such that B chooses not to do something because (even if successful) it would result in an unacceptable loss, disadvantage or punishment.

Denial and punishment aren't entirely conceptually separate and distinct. Both deliberately force an opponent to engage with risk: risk that it will fail to achieve its objectives (denial), and risk that it will incur severe damage and unrecoverable disadvantage should it undertake or continue specific actions (punishment). As approaches, they offer useful ways to develop and consider different options within a strategy, both alone and in combination, and they can helpfully characterise and distinguish between actions in support of specific strategies of deterrence.

One approach (denial or punishment) may dominate in a specific deterrence strategy, but, when it comes to application, both elements are necessarily in play. Deterrence by denial isn't a synonym for conflict prevention. Both denial and punishment are coercive measures and in the military realm both involve or imply the use of force.

There's a need to have credible elements of both denial and punishment to achieve and deliver effective deterrence. Both are underpinned by three core requirements: capability, credibility and intent (will).

There's a further need to retain a connection between deterrence and war fighting. Effective deterrence strategies understand and account for the possibility that they'll fail and therefore have a level of interdependence with planning for war fighting. Within an active conflict, and in the competition phase, opportunities to re-establish deterrence where it has failed will present themselves. The relationship between deterrence and war fighting is complex, but they're necessarily intertwined.

Nuclear deterrence, extended deterrence, missile defence and strategic stability

Throughout the Cold War, as military technology developments produced nuclear weapons at a scale and destructive power that was beyond previous imagination, nuclear doctrine (including mutually assured destruction, assured retaliation, first and second strike and capability-based concepts such as the nuclear triad) dominated US deterrence strategy and practice. Extended deterrence (the nuclear umbrella) provided important reassurance to non-nuclear US allies that US nuclear weapons would be on the table, alongside conventional US military might, should they be threatened or attacked by a nuclear-armed or conventionally superior actor.

Extended nuclear deterrence was and remains a complex undertaking by the US and its partners, aimed at reassuring allies within the context of intense global nuclear superpower competition, regional proxy wars,

and preventing the horizontal proliferation of nuclear technologies and capabilities.

The US and the Soviet Union continuously competed for supremacy in quality, quantity, distance, delivery systems, yield, precision, detection and early warning, tracking and missile defence capabilities. Simultaneously, the two nuclear superpowers recognised a growing stability/instability paradox and the dangers of spiralling competition, so they established crisis-communications mechanisms, and their diplomats worked fiercely to negotiate arms-control agreements. Those were designed to limit how far nuclear weapons developments could go in both quantitative and qualitative terms, and to establish greater stability through agreed mutual reductions with inspection and verification regimes.

Missile defence or integrated air and missile defence (MD/IAMD) is inseparable from discussions of deterrence and strategic stability. As one actor's missile and strike capabilities grow, the incentive to develop and field systems to detect and defeat them grows too. The offence/defence competition is key in strategic stability. Consider the fast-paced technology-driven dynamics evident

in drone and counterdrone warfare in Ukraine today. As innovative technologies promise breakthroughs for earlier missile detection and defeat, including against new (hypersonic) threats and over greater distances, we should expect a similar dynamic in MD/IAMD, with deleterious effects on what's already a situation of deteriorating strategic stability.

What's required for effective deterrence?

Deterrence strategies for today's complex, multidomain and multidimensional challenges must be tailored. They can't hope to succeed unless they're grounded in deep analysis specific to the target of any deterrence strategy. Traditional intelligence assessments should be scaffolded by cultural, social, psychological and anthropological analyses. Deterrence strategies must therefore be 'adversary-centric'. It's impossible to develop a plausible deterrence strategy without clarity about whom you want to deter and, specifically, from what action or behaviour.

Accurate in-depth analysis of a potential aggressor or adversary—of their capabilities, motivations, drivers of leadership and political behaviour, and their intent—must be matched by accurate and realistic self-assessment. Analysis needs to avoid the trap of mirror-imaging, while also accounting for plausible adversary perceptions. Assumptions will always be a feature of security strategy and planning, but they must be rigorously tested and retested. War games and strategic-level scenario-based exercises are uniquely placed to inform evolving deterrence strategies and partnerships.

Communications mechanisms are essential. They're too often overlooked in strategy and underutilised in practice, but they play a significant role in deterrence. Communications can be private and subtle (even deniable), or public and bold. Strategic signalling and both direct and indirect communications must support the core requirements for effective deterrence: capability, credibility and intent.

Communication facilitates other aspects of deterrence that are also too often underappreciated: assurance and reassurance.

Assurance (directed at a rival) offers the adversary a way to back down or take a different approach with the promise that an implied or directly threatened punishment won't

eventuate, or that restraint will be exercised. An assurance in one domain may deter action in another. Assurances may also be achieved through changing force posture, including the development and locations of specific capabilities (including defensive systems) perceived to increase the vulnerability or negate the capability of an adversary.

Reassurance (directed at allies and partners) relates to how the more powerful and credible partner in a coalition or extended deterrence arrangement maintains cohesion and cooperation within partnerships and alliances. It's enhanced by policy dialogue, planning and capability development under a specific deterrence framework. Effective reassurance of allies can serve important nonproliferation objectives. Robust dialogue and combined planning can also assist in strengthening interoperability, joint effects, efficiencies of scale and collective multidomain deterrence (and war-fighting capability).

In summary, effective integrated deterrence needs:

- a consistent and workable understanding of deterrence theory and practice across the national-security community, connected to the central ideas and concepts of our allies and partners
- effective processes to develop, test, communicate and cooperate on deterrence strategy across national and international lines (including industrial and technological aspects)
- clear and precisely articulated strategic and operational objectives that define whom we're seeking to deter and from what, supported by a cascading set of plans and planning mechanisms to provide whole-of-nation coherence and designed to support effective preparedness.

Escalation dynamics

‘Escalation’ has become a dirty word. This isn’t assisted by the all too limited idea (and accompanying visual) of a vertical ‘escalation ladder’. The complexity of the deterrence challenge today requires more sophisticated and multidimensional concepts. Think instead of an escalation lattice that allows for vertical, horizontal and lateral escalation. Brad Roberts describes these terms eloquently for modern application.⁸

“Escalation doesn’t immediately imply a negative outcome.”

Escalation and de-escalation simply imply moves, be they forward, backward, sideways, upwards or down, possibly using all the measures available in the modern deterrence toolkit. The more options that are developed and considered across the military, diplomatic, economic, information, influence, industry and technology sectors, the more sophisticated and calibrated actions that are designed to escalate or de-escalate can be. Escalation doesn’t immediately imply a negative outcome. An escalation can enhance or diminish stability and security. It’s entirely possible to ‘escalate to de-escalate’. Failing to respond adequately to provocation and malicious

behaviour can encourage more aggressive actors to escalate further (weakening deterrence). The outcome of actions can only really be known once they’re taken and, if deterrence succeeds, that outcome will often be difficult to perceive or to prove.

Escalation dynamics are intricately linked to discussions of ‘red lines’ and ambiguity. This is a contested area of policy and robustly debated. Public and declared red lines must be backed by the capability, credibility and willingness to enforce them. That, at least, seems obvious. Red lines can be most usefully applied and tested in war games and exercises, where there’s the capacity to adjust and work through plausible responses.

Ambiguity can be effectively employed for negotiating ‘off-ramps’, especially in private diplomacy and communications. It’s a useful strategic tool as long as it doesn’t lead to a perception of a lack of conviction or policy intent. For deterrence purposes, red lines should relate to immovable policy positions, while ambiguity provides room to manoeuvre and seeks to introduce doubt into an adversary’s decision-making calculus to undermine confidence and reduce the likelihood of an unwanted action.

Conclusion

Partners and allies are often talked about as strategic advantages and as force multipliers. Australia’s ability to integrate and combine our military capabilities with those of the US and other critical partners is fundamental to our ability to achieve our security objectives. The US’s concept of integrated deterrence in both its National Security Strategy⁹ and National Defense Strategy¹⁰ explicitly includes whole-of-government, whole-of-system elements (including industry) and international partners.

Critically, for Australia, deterrence today requires both a strong grounding in the theory and practice of traditional deterrence concepts and the ability to adapt them to account for our more complex, multidomain and

multidimensional geostrategic reality. Our strategy for deterrence must be clear about whom it is trying to deter and from what—and, crucially, it must think holistically about Australian conventional capabilities, and beyond military capabilities, to integrate political, diplomatic and economic tools. It requires thinking about Australia’s national capabilities and planning and how best to use resources across the whole of government. That must be supported by a consistent effort to explain to the Australian people why deterrence is the most appropriate strategy for Australia’s defence and security, how it best protects the Australian people and our way of life, and what the government is doing to implement it.

Notes

- 1 Defence Department, *National defence: Defence Strategic Review 2023*, Australian Government, Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, [online](#).
- 2 Sun Tzu, *The art of war*, trans. Lionel Giles, 1910, [online](#).
- 3 Sibylle Scheipers et al., *On small war: Carl von Clausewitz and people's war*, Oxford Academic Books, 2018.
- 4 They include Bernard Brodie ('The anatomy of deterrence', research memorandum, Project RAND, US Air Force, RAND Corporation, 23 July 1958, [online](#)) and Thomas Schelling (*The strategy of conflict*, Harvard University Press, 1960). For background on Schelling's work, see Tami Davis Biddle, 'Coercion theory: a basic introduction for practitioners', *Texas National Security Review*, Spring 2020, 3(2):94–109, [online](#). A key leading expert, highly influential in US, European and Indo-Pacific deterrence strategy and policy is Brad Roberts (*The case for US nuclear weapons in the 21st century*, Stanford Security Studies, 2015). His continuing contributions are among the most important to study as deterrence assumes conceptual primacy in Australia—a development also evident in the emerging strategy of our key partners and allies (see 'A modern look at deterrence with Brad Roberts', podcast with Bec Shrimpton, *Policy, Guns, and Money*, ASPI, Canberra, 29 September 2023, [online](#)).
- 5 Austin Long, 'Deterrence: from cold war to long war—lessons from six decades of RAND research', RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2008, [online](#).
- 6 This section of the report is informed by exchanges with various former Australian officials in February and March 2024.
- 7 Office of the Spokesperson, '2024 US–Australia Strategic Policy Dialogue', State Department, US Government, 28 February 2024, [online](#).
- 8 Roberts, *The case for US nuclear weapons in the 21st century*.
- 9 National Security Strategy, The White House, Washington DC, 12 October 2022, [online](#).
- 10 Department of Defense, 'DOD announces release of 2023 Strategy for Operations in the Information Environment', news release, US Government, 17 November 2023, [online](#).

Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
DSR	Defence Strategic Review
MD/IAMD	missile defence / integrated air and missile defence

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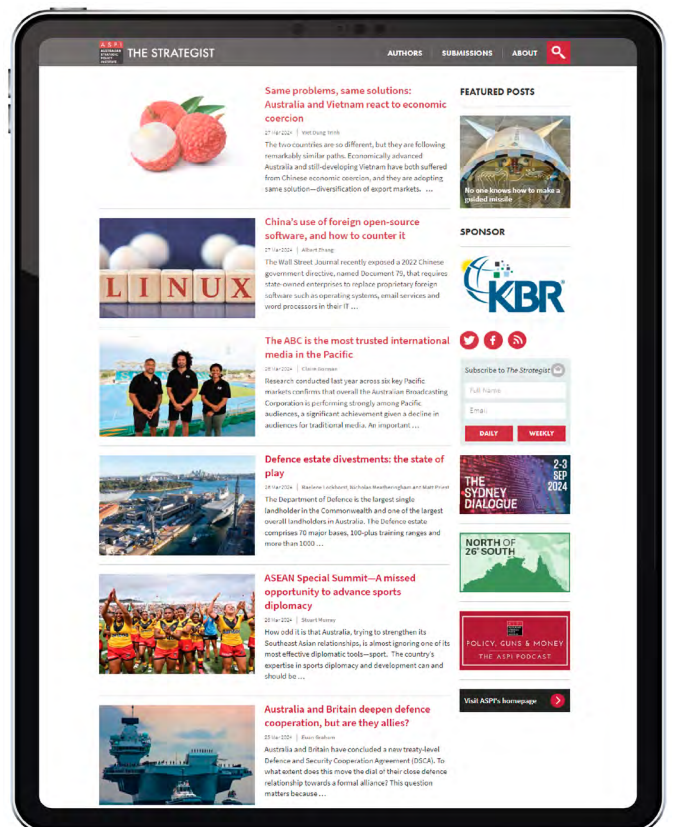


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