

## Nuclear Brinkmanship in the Indo-Pacific: Taiwan, North Korea and Deterrence Failures

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*image: SciencesPo*

### Introduction

The concept of nuclear brinkmanship, a strategy of escalating threats and military posturing to the precipice of nuclear conflict, has re-emerged as a critical dynamic in contemporary international relations. This approach, which aims to coerce an opponent into concessions by demonstrating a willingness to push dangerous situations to their limits, risking actual nuclear confrontation, is deeply rooted in the Cold War era. During that period, superpowers engaged in high-stakes games of intimidation, for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis, where the threat of nuclear war ultimately

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compelled the Soviet Union to withdraw its missiles from Cuba.<sup>2</sup> The effectiveness of this brinkmanship strategy during the Cold War stemmed from the mutual fear of catastrophic nuclear war, a shared understanding that escalation would lead to Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), thereby compelling both sides to back down rather than face annihilation.

Today, the Indo-Pacific region stands at the crossroads of contemporary nuclear risk, where the shadow of brinkmanship looms large over two critical flashpoints: The Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. As China advances its ambitions in the Western Pacific and North Korea relentlessly extends its nuclear reach, the prospects for both regional stability and credible deterrence are put to the severest of tests.

## **Theoretical Foundations: Nuclear Deterrence and Brinkmanship**

Deterrence, in classical terms, is the use of threat to prevent adversary action. Deterrence theory, which posits that threats of force can prevent an adversary from taking undesirable actions by convincing them that the costs outweigh the benefits, faces profound contemporary challenges in this dynamic environment.<sup>3</sup> The Cold War established mutual assured destruction (MAD) as a cornerstone of strategic stability between superpowers. However, the central problem of deterrence, how to credibly threaten military action despite its inherent costs to the deterrer, is exacerbated by the. The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is witnessing a dangerous re-emergence of nuclear brinkmanship dynamics. Evolving nuclear capabilities and complex regional interactions, particularly concerning Taiwan and North Korea, are severely testing the efficacy of traditional deterrence frameworks, increasing the risks of miscalculation, inadvertent escalation, and potential deterrence failures.

The Indo-Pacific is home to four declared nuclear powers—China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea—and is heavily influenced by the extended deterrence posture of the United States. The manipulation of the "shared risk of war," as defined by Thomas Schelling's seminal work, *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960), posited that deterrence operates through credible threats of retaliation,

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<sup>2</sup> "Nuclear Brinkmanship - (European History - 1945 to Present) - Vocab, Definition, Explanations | Fiveable." 2025. Fiveable.me. 2025. <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/europe-since-1945/nuclear-brinkmanship>.

<sup>3</sup> CIRIS. "Deterrence Theory." Center for International Relations and International Security, CIRIS, 26 Oct. 2024, [www.ciris.info/learningcenter/deterrence-theory/](http://www.ciris.info/learningcenter/deterrence-theory/).

is now distributed across a far more complex network of relationships. This multipolar configuration complicates traditional models of deterrence, particularly as non-state and rogue actors become more prominent, and second-strike capabilities remain unevenly distributed.

## **The Taiwan Flashpoint: Deterrence Under Strain**

The relationship between Taiwan (formally the Republic of China, ROC) and mainland China (the People's Republic of China, PRC) is one of the most volatile and historically charged geopolitical flashpoints. Beijing views Taiwan as an inalienable part of its territory, more like a "breakaway province"—and consistently asserts its right to unify, by force if necessary. Taiwan, however, functions as a vibrant democracy, emphasizing peace, mutual benefit, and the upholding of democratic values. Despite profound political differences and ongoing tensions, significant economic ties bind the two entities, with Taiwan standing as a major investor in mainland China and cross-strait trade reaching substantial volumes (US\$165.97 billion in 2023).<sup>4</sup> Taiwan's current approach to cross-strait relations is articulated in President Lai Ching-te's "Four Pillars of Peace" action plan, introduced in May 2024. This plan prioritizes strengthened national defense, improved economic security, stable and principled cross-strait leadership, and values-based diplomacy. The overarching aim is to maintain the status quo—neither yielding to Beijing's demands nor provoking further aggression. However, China has consistently exerted political suppression and military coercion, unilaterally suspending official interactions and proposing the "one country, two systems" model for Taiwan, which Taipei views as a profound disruption to regional peace and stability.

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<sup>4</sup> Bradley, Jennifer. 2024. "Preventing the Nuclear Jungle: Extended Deterrence, Assurance, and Nonproliferation." National Defense University Press. February 15, 2024. <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3679143/preventing-the-nuclear-jungle-extended-deterrence-assurance-and-nonproliferation/>.

How Chinese and Taiwanese forces compare			
		 China	 Taiwan
<b>Total active forces</b>		<b>2,035,000</b>	<b>169,000</b>
Ground forces		965,000	94,000
Navy		260,000	40,000
Air force		395,000	35,000
Reserves		510,000	1,657,000
Tanks		4,800	750
Aircraft		3,438+	531+
Submarines		59	4
Naval ships*		92	26
Artillery		9,752+	2,093

\*Only includes ships classified as principal surface combatants, such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and frigates

Image: The Military Balance 2023 IISS

## Modern Brinkmanship: China's Threats and the U.S. Response

The People's Republic of China has declared reunion with Taiwan a core national interest and maintains that the use of force, if necessary, is not off the table. China's military buildup and increasingly direct threats have alarming implications for stability. In any Taiwan scenario, nuclear threats—explicit or implicit—are likely. Beijing may “signal” its willingness to escalate to deter U.S. intervention, complicating American calculations. While China does not officially rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence in the Taiwan context, its ongoing nuclear modernization like construction of new missile silos, deployment of dual-capable missiles like the DF-26—suggests a shift toward "strategic ambiguity".<sup>5</sup> The integration of conventional and nuclear forces increases the risk of miscalculation.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2019. “History of Taiwan.” Government Portal of Republic of China, Taiwan, March. <https://doi.org/A03000000B>.



Image: AP

Deterrence in the Taiwan Strait increasingly suffers from:

**Conventional Military Imbalance:** China's rapid military modernization and ability to project power rapidly across the Strait create an unfavorable balance for Taiwan and put pressure on U.S. response times.<sup>6</sup>

**Extended Deterrence Dilemma:** The question remains: Would the U.S. truly risk nuclear escalation over Taiwan? Any uncertainty emboldens Beijing and sows doubts in Taipei.

Recent U.S. actions including ambiguous signals, changing economic priorities, and diminished credibility following crises elsewhere have contributed to perceptions of weakened deterrence. Any failure to deter aggression against Taiwan would have domino effects throughout the region and beyond, potentially rewriting the rulebook on great power interventions and alliance credibility.<sup>7</sup> For decades, Washington has relied on a policy of "strategic ambiguity" to deter both

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, James. 2024. "The next Taiwan Crisis Will (Almost) Certainly Involve Nuclear Threats." U.S. Naval Institute. March 1, 2024. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/march/next-taiwan-crisis-will-almost-certainly-involve-nuclear-threats>.

<sup>7</sup> Kristensen, Hans, Matt Korda, and Eliana Johns. 2023. "Nuclear Notebook: Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2023." Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 13, 2023. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-03/nuclear-notebook->

a unilateral Taiwanese declaration of independence and a Chinese invasion. However, recent U.S. actions—such as high-level visits to Taipei, arms sales, and the AUKUS pact—have been interpreted in Beijing as signs of creeping support for Taiwanese autonomy. Biden’s repeated public declarations that the U.S. would defend Taiwan militarily have further eroded the ambiguity that underpinned deterrence. As deterrence becomes more "tripwire" than shadowed threat, the space for diplomatic maneuver narrows. Although any conflict over Taiwan is likely to begin conventionally, the risk of horizontal escalation involving U.S. forward bases in Japan or Guam could invite nuclear retaliation. The recent Chinese white papers make it clear that in "existential circumstances," nuclear use is not off the table—particularly if Chinese sovereignty is perceived to be under direct threat.<sup>8</sup>

## **The North Korean Nuclear Puzzle: Brinkmanship as Strategy**

North Korea’s nuclear strategy is a textbook case of brinkmanship. Since its first nuclear test in 2006, Pyongyang has leveraged its growing arsenal to extract diplomatic concessions, secure regime survival, and deter perceived U.S. aggression. Under Kim Jong-un, missile tests have become more frequent and sophisticated, including the testing of solid-fuel ICBMs (2023) and tactical nuclear warheads.<sup>9</sup> North Korea's relentless nuclear development poses a serious and multifaceted threat to peace and security across the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, and the broader international community. Its continuous development and testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles create an environment of heightened tension and instability, compelling neighboring countries to reassess their own defense postures and potentially contributing to a regional arms race. The unprecedented frequency of missile provocations, with over 100 ballistic missile launches since 2022, further amplifies these security concerns. On an inter-Korean level, the nuclear ambitions have significantly deteriorated relations, marked by severe incidents such as the 2010 Cheonan attack and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

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chinese-nuclear-weapons-2023/.

<sup>8</sup> Brands, Hal. "Deterrence in Taiwan Is Failing." Foreign Policy, 8 Sept. 2023, [foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/08/us-military-deterrence-china-taiwan-war-east-asia/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/08/us-military-deterrence-china-taiwan-war-east-asia/).

<sup>9</sup> "Deterrence, Diplomacy and the Risk of Conflict over Taiwan." 2024. IISS. 2024.

<https://www.iiss.org/publications/adelphi/2024/deterrence-diplomacy-and-the-risk-of-conflict-over-taiwan/>.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un walks in front of an intercontinental ballistic missile in March, 2022 Image: REUTERS

North Korea's nuclear program is not merely a passive deterrent but a multi-faceted tool of coercion and bargaining. While the arsenal undoubtedly provides "deterrence benefits" and serves as a guarantor of "strategic autonomy" for the regime, its aggressive doctrine of "preemptive and offensive nuclear strike" and the use of "selective transparency" in its public displays indicate a strategy that extends beyond simple deterrence.<sup>10</sup> North Korea is not just reacting to external threats but proactively utilizing its nuclear status to shape regional dynamics, extract concessions, and potentially embolden lower-level aggression, effectively using its nuclear capability as a "shield" for non-nuclear lethal attacks. This proactive, coercive dimension adds a layer of complexity to deterrence efforts, as Pyongyang seeks to manipulate the risk of escalation for its strategic gains.

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<sup>10</sup> "Releases." 2025. U.S. Department of Defense. 2025. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/2023/Indo-Pacific-Strategy-Report/>.



North Korea's demonstration of "successful" nuclear brinkmanship has undermined nonproliferation norms. Its string of violations, withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and development of ICBMs capable of reaching U.S. territory pose a broader threat to the global order.<sup>11</sup> The psychological effect is profound: If North Korea can repeatedly challenge international will and survive, so might others.

## **The Stability-Instability Paradox on the Korean Peninsula**

The concept of the stability-instability paradox, originating from the Cold War, is increasingly applied to the Korean Peninsula. This paradox suggests that while nuclear weapons may deter large-scale, existential conflicts (strategic stability), they can paradoxically embolden states to conduct lower-level provocations and conventional aggression, believing that the risk of escalation to nuclear war is too high for either side to initiate. Scholars use this framework to describe Pyongyang's increased willingness to tolerate risk and engage in provocations "under the cover of nuclear weapons".

North Korea's past risky behavior, such as the 2010 sinking of the ROK corvette Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, occurred even when its nuclear capabilities were rudimentary, indicating a pre-existing high tolerance for risk. However, the maturation of its nuclear arsenal might now provide a perceived "shield" against significant retaliation for such actions. While recent provocations have largely been confined to weapons tests, cyberattacks, and limited artillery exchanges, accompanied by increased incendiary rhetoric, these are viewed as deterrence signaling rather than direct offensive actions aimed at altering the status quo. The shift towards cyber activities as a "non-kinetic route to aggravate adversaries" without triggering a military response further exemplifies a calculated approach to exploiting this paradox.<sup>12</sup>

The inherent danger lies in the "red-line model," where limited responses to North Korean provocations could trigger a cycle of further escalation, potentially leading to a pre-emptive or

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<sup>11</sup> Wertz, Daniel, Matthew McGrath, and Scott LaFoy. 2017. "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program." NCNK. April 11, 2017. <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/north-koreas-nuclear-weapons-program>.

<sup>12</sup> Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. February 20, 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/us-indo-pacific-allies-are-unhappy-about-trumps-defence-demands-they-have-comply>.



preventive attack by Pyongyang, and even the intervention of Beijing.<sup>13</sup> This highlights that deterrence is not a static state but a dynamic, risky process, particularly in asymmetric relationships where one side might perceive its nuclear arsenal as enabling conventional aggression at lower thresholds. The stability-instability paradox underscores the precarious balance on the Korean Peninsula, where the very presence of nuclear weapons, while preventing major war, could inadvertently increase the frequency and intensity of dangerous, lower-level conflicts.

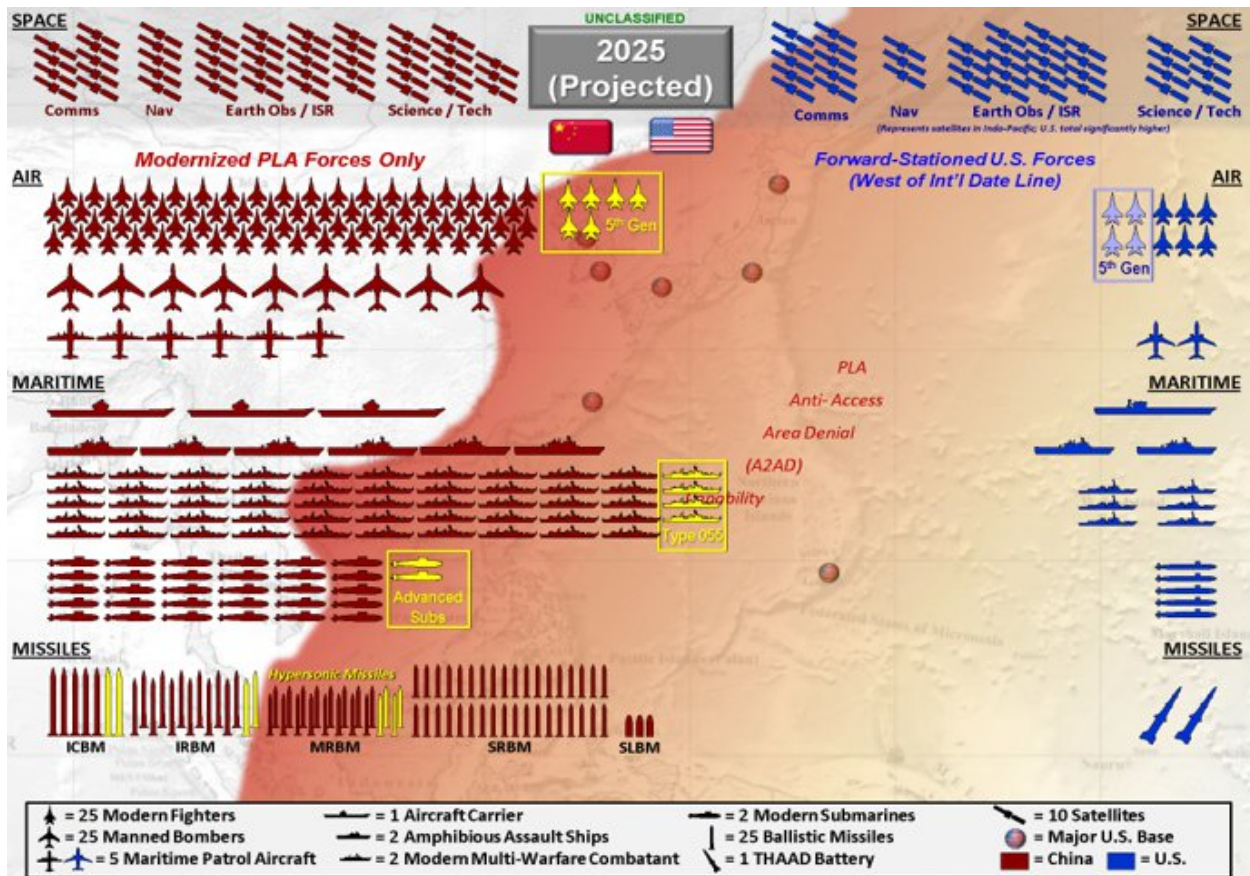
## **The US-Led Regional Deterrence Architecture: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Future Adaptations**

The United States maintains a complex regional deterrence architecture in the Indo-Pacific that is built upon a foundation of credible bilateral security relationships with key allies such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea. The provision of extended nuclear deterrence and a forward US military presence. The Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) represents a significant effort to strengthen US combat-credible military forces postured in the Western Pacific, aiming to deter by denial.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "(PDF) North Korea, Nuclear Weapons, and the Stability-Instability Paradox." n.d. ResearchGate. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303751525\\_North\\_Korea\\_Nuclear\\_Weapons\\_and\\_the\\_Stability-Instability\\_Paradox](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303751525_North_Korea_Nuclear_Weapons_and_the_Stability-Instability_Paradox).

<sup>14</sup>2025b. "The Risks of Rushing to Denial in the Taiwan Strait." Csis.org. 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/risks-rushing-denial-taiwan-strait>.



INDOPACOM estimate of 2025 Chinese forces in the Western Pacific. Image: USNI News

However, this architecture faces significant weaknesses. The current US nuclear theater posture in the Indo-Pacific is described as "practically nonexistent" when compared to the rapid nuclear buildup by China and North Korea in the region. US extended deterrence in the region still relies on a force posture largely conceived in 1991 and 2009, which saw the removal of forward-deployed nuclear weapons and the retirement of systems like the nuclear-armed Tomahawk land-attack cruise missile, leaving the US heavily reliant on strategic systems.<sup>15</sup> The air leg of the nuclear triad, for instance, has not been on alert for over three decades, impacting its readiness for potential nuclear crises. In response to these challenges, several adaptations and options are being considered like Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N), Re-alerting Air Leg and Forward-Deploying Assets, Nuclear Consultative Groups, Nuclear-Sharing Arrangements like NATO etc.

<sup>15</sup>2025b. "Allied Extended Deterrence: Towards a Collective Framework in the Indo-Pacific." Ussc.edu.au. May 18, 2025. <https://www.ussc.edu.au/allied-extended-deterrence-towards-a-collective-framework-in-the-indo-pacific>.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is a volatile region where nuclear brinkmanship is dangerously at play, driven by China's assertiveness and North Korea's aggressive nuclear capabilities. Traditional deterrence frameworks, including Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and extended deterrence, face unprecedented challenges from asymmetric threats, advanced technologies, and the complex interplay of multiple nuclear actors. The US policy of strategic ambiguity towards Taiwan, coupled with China's "salami-slicing" tactics, erodes deterrence credibility. On the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's nuclear shield risks emboldening lower-level provocations, highlighting the stability-instability paradox. The immense economic stakes, particularly Taiwan's role in global semiconductor supply chains, add a catastrophic dimension to any potential conflict. This erosion of deterrence credibility carries profound implications, potentially emboldening revisionist powers, increasing the likelihood of crises, and risking a dangerous cascade of nuclear proliferation due to a growing "assurance gap" among US allies. The interconnectedness of the Taiwan and Korean Peninsula challenges means a crisis in one area could quickly spill over, transforming regional conflicts into global confrontations. A safer path forward requires calibrated strategic clarity on Taiwan, stronger allied defense and assurance measures, an integrated deterrence architecture across domains, and robust crisis communication channels with Beijing and Pyongyang. Parallel investments in arms control, supply chain resilience, and multilateral risk-reduction efforts are essential to prevent miscalculation and stabilize the region's security environment.