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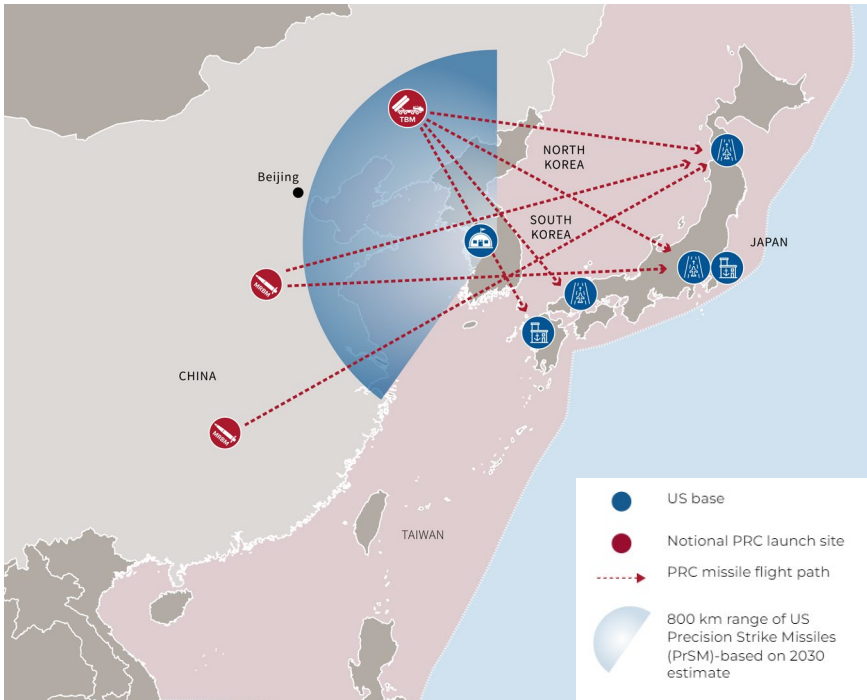
The United States and its allies must be ready to deter a two-front war and nuclear attacks in East Asia

Top three

- A conflict with either China or North Korea poses a grave and growing risk to the national security of the United States, particularly due to the potentials for conflict involving both countries and for nuclear escalation.
- In coordination with the United States' allies and partners, US defense and military leaders should therefore expand efforts to ensure preparedness to fight and win a potential conflict in East Asia, even one involving limited nuclear attacks or multiple adversaries simultaneously.
- The United States should also reduce escalation risks by prioritizing intra-conflict deterrence, fostering expanded multilateral military contributions, and influencing mid-level actors within adversaries' military structures to enable sub-regime deterrence.

Worth a thousand words

Northeast Asian geographic considerations in a US-PRC conflict



Although US military bases on Okinawa would be critical in a conflict with the PRC and or North Korea, PRC missiles would not need to fly over the Korean Peninsula in order to reach them; they and the full set of bases in South Korea have thus been left unmarked for the purposes of this graphic.

The geography of East Asia is a key potential variable increasing both the probability and impact of a US conflict with the PRC or North Korea expanding to simultaneous conflicts with both—particularly given the increasing ranges of modern sensors and weapons systems.

The diagnosis

The risk of conflict with the People's Republic of China (PRC) or North Korea—especially the potential for simultaneous escalation involving both—poses a serious threat to the United States and its interests. This threat is heightened by the possibility of either adversary resorting to limited nuclear attacks.

A two-front war in Asia could unfold even without close cooperation between Beijing and Pyongyang. Dysfunctional coordination or misunderstandings could just as easily lead to conflict. Furthermore, with both China and North Korea developing greater incentives and capabilities for limited nuclear attacks, the risk of a nuclear war in East Asia is rising.

Deep-seated organizational and cognitive biases have obstructed the ability of the United States and its allies to anticipate simultaneous conflicts with China and North Korea. Such biases also impede their preparations to manage such escalation and to counter limited nuclear attacks.

US and allied capabilities, command-and-control arrangements, and military posture are currently unsuited to prevent such scenarios. They are equally unsuited to provide a robust military response in the case of a two-front war and/or a limited nuclear war in East Asia. Simultaneous conflicts with both adversaries would impose severe operational and strategic challenges on the United States and its allies and/or their employment of nuclear weapons.

The prescription

If a US conflict with one adversary in East Asia doesn't end quickly, it is likely to widen.

- The United States and its allies should reconceptualize planning for aggression by either the PRC or North Korea as marking the start of an Indo-Pacific campaign that also requires deterring—and potentially defeating—the other possible adversary.
- The United States and South Korea should shift their focus to a broader priority of protecting South Korea from aggression—encompassing deterrence of Chinese aggression in addition to North Korean aggression.
- The US government and nongovernment institutions should sponsor studies and wargaming on the potential conditions and drivers that might cause a US-China conflict over Taiwan to escalate to the Korean Peninsula.

The risk that a war in East Asia would go nuclear is rising, as both China and North Korea have increasing incentives and capabilities for limited nuclear attacks.

- The US defense community should direct and sponsor analysis and studies by the US Intelligence Community and outside analytic entities to track and identify signposts of North Korea's increasing capabilities and potential for limited first nuclear use, as well as signposts of the PRC potentially moving down this path.
- In collaboration with its allies, the United States should refine and amplify declaratory policies to emphasize that the United States and its allies will not be divided by a limited nuclear attack. This should include contextualizing the repeated US declaration that “there is no scenario in which the Kim [family] regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive.”¹

¹ “National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review,” US Department of Defense, 2022, 12, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

- In coordination with the United States' allies and partners, US military planners should expand efforts to ensure preparedness to fight and win even if faced with limited nuclear attacks, and to clearly communicate this preparedness to adversaries and allies alike. To preserve a range of military response options other than nuclear retaliation, the stage must also be set to avoid giving the impression that any response but an immediate nuclear counterattack would indicate weakness or hesitation.
- The United States should lead international interagency efforts to explore and prepare options to respond to, mitigate risks of, and deter a limited nuclear attack by China or North Korea—which should include studies, workshops, and tabletop exercises/wargames, at both unclassified and classified levels. This analysis should include evaluation of the pros and cons of a range of potential options to increase and signal readiness to employ US tactical nuclear weapons in response to a limited nuclear attack, if the situation calls for it—up to and including the potential ramifications of the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to the region or the Korean Peninsula itself.

The United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific are not currently well-situated to fight a two-front war and/or a limited nuclear war in East Asia.; the PRC's capability and capacity to do so is growing and it might soon be better positioned to fight the United States and its allies on multiple fronts simultaneously in its neighborhood.

- The United States should undertake a comprehensive reassessment of its command-and-control (C2) relationships and posture in East Asia in the context of evolving North Korean, Chinese, and nuclear threats, to identify the appropriate C2 relationships in the event of simultaneous conflicts with North Korea and China, as well as the best C2 arrangements and force posture for theater-level tactical nuclear responses, if needed.
 - US defense and military planners should ensure that the United States has effective, timely, and credible options for its own limited nuclear strikes in response to a limited nuclear attack, in addition to robust nonnuclear options. Relevant nuclear capabilities should be resourced, trained, staffed, equipped, and supported, while enabling messaging to dispel any perception among adversaries and friends that there is a gap in US capability that could be exploited through a limited nuclear attack.
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- The US defense community should increase the forward presence of relevant experts to help operationally and intellectually prepare key US allies and partners (particularly South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) for a conflict with the PRC and/or North Korea that involves a limited nuclear attack by either or both.

If conflict breaks out, however, the United States has options for managing escalation.

- Relevant US military commands should apply and operationalize a greater focus on intra-conflict deterrence, rather than just deterrence of conflict in general.
- The United States and its allies should seek more multilateral (e.g., Australian, Canadian, or UK) rotational contributions of aircraft and maritime patrols, and involvement in exercises to reinforce international commitment and contributions to deterrence of both North Korean and Chinese aggression.
- The US government should pursue study, development, and execution of approaches to pursue sub-regime deterrence within the PRC and North Korea as part of US deterrence strategy, including targeted influence of mid-level actors, to delay or prevent execution of escalatory moves, particularly limited nuclear attack.

Biases in US and allied institutions are impeding their understanding of how an East Asian conflict could escalate and their preparations to manage such escalation.

- The United States and allied analysts should develop new assessments of the likelihood and potential indicators of simultaneous conflicts with China and North Korea, as well as limited nuclear attack by Beijing or Pyongyang. These should use structured analytic techniques, such as key assumptions checks, to identify and overcome biases.
 - US and allied leaders should establish guidance that the risks of simultaneous conflicts with the PRC and North Korea, and limited nuclear attack by either, have such key implications that military planning and exercises should consider and address these possibilities, even if they are not used as the baseline.
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- US and allied militaries should establish working groups that cut across a variety of military commands to address preparation for simultaneous conflicts and limited nuclear attacks.
 - US policymakers and analysts should lead efforts to ensure their allied counterparts engage with the potential for simultaneous conflicts and adversary limited nuclear attacks through repeated inclusion of these possibilities in scenarios for exercises and dialogue agendas.
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