**Integrated deterrence in the Arctic: how it does (not) work and what it means for US’ Arctic allies**

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Abstract

Introduced by the United States as the cornerstone of their 2022 National Defense Strategy, integrated deterrence “entails working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships” (p.1). While it is heralded as the answer to holistic strategies by US’ adversaries, details on how this strategy of integrated deterrence is to be achieved and which role US allies are to play are scant. Employing strategic theory and deterrence theory this paper analyses the pitfalls of integrated deterrence as strategy and its execution and practicability in the Arctic region. It argues that integrated deterrence is not a workable strategy per se, and shines a light on how the Arctic states allied with the US nevertheless can support the goals of integrated deterrence towards maintaining a stable Arctic region.

Keywords: deterrence, Arctic, great power competition, NATO, alliances, strategy

**Introduction**

Great power competition has been on the rise over the course of the last decade. The United States (US) increasingly sees the People’s Republic of China (PRC, in this article China) as the greatest threat, and Russia upended the European security order with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. But the competition is not limited only to the military realm. Both Russia and China do not share the West’s distinction between peace, competition and conflict, but rather integrate political, economic and other tools with military tools to force their interests on their opponents.[[1]](#footnote-1) This allows them to work around American conventional military supremacy, and poses a challenge for the West in how to address such opponents that use any and all means to gain an advantage.

To be able to deter its competitors and their actions, the US introduced the concept of integrated deterrence in its most recent National Defense Strategy (NSD) from 2022, together with campaigning and actions to build lasting advantages. The idea behind integrated deterrence is to deter adversaries “across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict” by drawing on “all instruments of U.S. national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships” in a tailored approach to reduce opponents’ perceptions of the benefits of aggressive behavior.[[2]](#footnote-2) Yet, US Congress’ Commission on the National Defence Strategy – the independent body charged with assessing the 2022 NSD – notes in its final report released in July 2024 that this integrated deterrence approach is not reflected in practice.[[3]](#footnote-3) This poses the question whether integrated deterrence actually is a workable strategy to deter the opponents of the US, and what role US allies play in achieving integrated deterrence.

By drawing on strategic theory and deterrence theory, this paper argues that integrated deterrence itself is not a practicable strategy. While an integrated approach makes sense as a counter to opponents’ holistic strategies, in practice there are several challenges with integrated deterrence that are hard to overcome. [add more here] Instead of working across warfighting domains, theaters, and the spectrum of conflict, it might well be worth to distinguish who, what, and when one wants to deter – and whether and how that can be achieved and what role US allies can play in that. This paper analyses the Arctic region as a case to illustrate how to move towards a workable approach of integrated deterrence.

The next section introduces the theories and method this paper builds on. It sets out with strategic theory, examining what makes strategies workable and successful, and then turns to the concept of deterrence and what is necessary to deter opponents across the spectrum of conflict. It also argues for why the Arctic region makes a good case study for integrated deterrence. The following analysis proceeds in two parts: the first part examines integrated deterrence in light of the elements of good strategy and deterrence theory, to uncover why it is so difficult to implement integrated deterrence in practice. The second part of the analysis looks at the role of US allies in achieving integrated deterrence in the Arctic. The paper ends with a conclusion that summarizes the findings and reflects on their consequences for a future characterized by intensifying great power competition.

**Theory: What makes a good deterrence strategy?**

This section introduces strategic theory and deterrence theory as the backbones of the subsequent analysis. First it looks at strategic theory and the question what makes a good strategy; and in the second part it turns to investigate how to successfully deter an opponent.

Strategic theory, in short, is the study of the use of means, or resources, one has available to reach one’s objectives.[[4]](#footnote-4) Strategy is “the art of creating power”.[[5]](#footnote-5) It provides direction for the state; strategy “identifies objectives, concepts, and resources required to accomplish the goals established by policy”.[[6]](#footnote-6) It “is the employment of specific instruments of power (political/diplomatic, economic, military, and informational) to achieve the political objectives of the state in cooperation or in competition with other actors pursuing their own— possibly conflicting—objectives”.[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, strategy is about how (ways) a state uses its available means, military and others, to achieve its ends. The ends are dictated policy, but the choice through with ways, and means – the chosen strategy – these ends are to be achieved is bounded by criteria such as suitability, feasibility and acceptability; and “strategy informs policy of the art of the possible”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Strategy is thus the combination of ends, ways, and means; but this combination can be done in any number of ways. The crucial question then becomes, what makes good strategy?

Yarger states that “[g]ood strategy is an integral whole of the right objectives pursued through appropriate concepts and supported with the necessary resources”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, Lykke’s image of the three-legged stool is helpful: a good strategy has balance between its ends, ways, and allocated means – the three legs of the stool are even in length, balanced. If one leg of the stool is too short, the stool is no longer in balance and risks toppling over. Thus, pursuing an unbalanced strategy means accepting a greater risk that the strategy might fail.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Good strategy needs to relate to the ‘big picture’, the wider context, and should deliberately seek to account for and even create multiple-order effects. It should seek to shape the future environment and instead of simply reacting to it. Effectiveness is key, and to be prioritized over efficiency, but the latter is also desired. The strategy process needs to be founded on proper understanding and analysis of strategic environment and national interest and policy and should allow for flexibility and adaptability. It is crucial to recognize the difference between strategy making and planning: planning adapts strategy to a concrete world and ensures its execution.[[11]](#footnote-11) Creating and then implementing a good strategy is difficult, especially in a world characterized by increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA world; add source). There is no set formula, or answer. Whether a strategy is effective, and thus ‘good’, first of all depends on its design – the balance of ends, ways, and means; but it also depends on its implementation and its orchestration, where the strategy’s individual actions are coordinated to achieve the desired effect. This requires the strategy to be sustainable, both regarding the resources used as well as the will of the politicians and people.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To assess whether the US strategy of integrated deterrence is good, i.e. workable, the following criteria will thus be examined in the analysis:

1. Is there balance between the ends, ways, and means laid out in the strategy?
2. Suitability: Is the strategy suited to achieve the political end(s)?
3. Feasibility: Can the action be accomplished by the means available (related to ways)?
4. Acceptability: Are the costs justified by the importance of the desired effect (related to means + ways)?
5. Sustainability: can the strategy be implemented, orchestrated, and maintained over time (regarding resources and the will to see it through from politicians and people)?
6. Adaptability: Can the strategy account for and adapt to changing circumstances?

Since integrated deterrence is a strategy of deterrence, it is important to also look at what elements need to be present to successfully deter an opponent.

Deterrence theory (missing)

* Deterrence as form of coercion
* Deterrence vs compellence vs defense
* General deterrence vs immediate deterrence + extended deterrence vs direct deterrence
* Deterrence by punishment vs deterrence by denial
* 4 Cs of deterrence: Capability, credibility, cohesion + communication

Deterrence of grey zone activities and hybrid threats

What elements need to be present to be successful?

**Method**

The paper applies strategic theory and deterrence theory as outlined in the theory section above to investigate why it has been so difficult for the US to implement the strategic of integrated deterrence outlined in the 2022 NDS. It uses the Arctic region as a case to examine integrated deterrence in practice as well as the role for US allies.

The Arctic is generally defined as the region north of the Arctic Circle (about 66°30′ degrees north), which marks the southern limit of midnight sun and polar night.[[13]](#footnote-13) States with Arctic territories are thus the US, Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. The Arctic region is to a certain extent a best possible case to investigate the failure to implement integrated deterrence for three reasons: first, it is widely seen as area of increasing great power competition. Yet, it is not the primary arena for such competition, and there is wide-spread agreement that, while a potential great power war will involve the Arctic, it will most likely not break out in the Arctic.

Second, the region ties together all of the warfighting domains: the physical domains of land, maritime, air, and space; the information environment including cyberspace; and the electromagnetic environment.[[14]](#footnote-14) It also has relevance across the spectrum of conflict. The interactions of the US and its allies and their competitors in the Arctic range from cooperation on shared interests such as search and rescue, through competition below armed conflict in form of hybrid activities for access, resources, the governance of the region, and military build-up, to a potential armed conflict where the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom (GIUK) gap, radar stations in Greenland and at other strategic locations, as well as nuclear second-strike capabilities take center stage.

Third, the Arctic region provides the US with a good set-up regarding allies, with seven of eight Arctic states belonging to NATO since Sweden joined in March 2024. The remaining Arctic state is Russia, which occupies over 50 percent of the Arctic coastline. Additionally, China has expressed interest in the region, and defined itself as “Near-Arctic State” in 2018. The Arctic region is thus the ideal case to investigate the US integrated deterrence approach and its shortcomings, as well as the role of allies in integrated deterrence.

The timeline used for the analysis concentrates on the period from the start of 2022 to the time of writing in late 2024. 2022 was chosen because the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 intensified great power competition to a level unseen since the end of the Cold War, and both the US National Security Strategy and 2022 NDS were released in October of the same year. Nevertheless, the paper draws on evidence and sources from earlier periods when relevant for the analysis.

Finally, the paper only uses unclassified, openly available sources. Because of the nature of the topic, this means that some aspects and/or details might have been missed in the analysis. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis to the greatest extend possible, the author participated in closed-door seminars and workshops on the topic and had several off the record conversations with relevant experts.

**Analysis 1: Integrated deterrence as a strategy**

Short intro to integrated deterrence: national security strategy + 2022 national defense strategy + 2024 DoD Arctic strategy (p. 1, executive summary)

The problem: how to handle opponents that use all and any means to gain an advantage 🡪 enter integrated deterrence; but is that actually a workable strategy and what role do US allies play?

“The most prominent declinist of the last decade, Paul Kennedy, argued that great powers succumb to “imperial overstretch” because their global interests and obligations outpace their ability to defend them all simultaneously” (from <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2010/ssi_bartholomees.pdf>, p. 226) Is integrated deterrence the answer – or does it fall into the same fallacy of ends?

Does it fulfill the basic requirements of a strategy?

1. Balance between ends, ways, means (+ risks):
   1. What is the strategy trying to achieve (ends)? Prevent aggressive action from opponents

"Integrated deterrence means using every tool at the Department’s disposal, in close collaboration with our counterparts across the U.S. Government and with Allies and partners, to ensure that potential foes understand the folly of aggression." 2022 strategy

* 1. How will the resources be used (ways)? Integrated deterrence (+ campaigning + creation of advantages)
  2. What will be used to support the how?

“According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks, “the cornerstone of integrated deterrence” is “combat credibility” or the ability of “the U.S. military to fight and win”.” <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/sharper-integrated-deterrence> 🡪 high-end munition stockpiles and overseas posture ([https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/no-i-in-team](https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/no-i-in-team?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Sharper%20Integrated%20Deterrence%20Jan%2011%202023&utm_content=Sharper%20Integrated%20Deterrence%20Jan%2011%202023+Preview+CID_7b749e3fa69269517514abe1383e4cf9&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor&utm_term=report))

* 1. What do we know reg. the acceptable risks and underlying assumptions?

1. Suitability: will the successful execution of the strategy (ways + means) actually reach the desired effect (ends)?
   1. What is integrated deterrence meant to deter? And can that be deterred? Problems for deterrence in cyber space and regarding hybrid/grey zone activities 🡪 elements for successful deterrence
2. Feasibility: can the action be accomplished by the means available (ways)?
   1. What is needed to deter? A lot of resources 🡪 Elements for successful deterrence
   2. Can the level of integration needed be achieved?
3. Acceptability: are the costs justified by the importance of the desired effect (means + ways)?
4. Sustainability: regarding resources and will to see it through
5. Adaptability: to account for changing circumstances

**Analysis 2: what does it mean for US allies in the Arctic?**

“what integrated deterrence entails in practical terms remains unclear, particularly to the very allies and partners Washington wants more from” jan 2023 <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/sharper-integrated-deterrence> 🡪 has this become more clear since then?

What role do and can the allies play?

**Conclusion**

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12. see e.g. Phil Lester, ed., *Making Strategy Better 2023* (London: The Royal College of Defence Studies, 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Another widely-used definition refers to the Arctic region as the area in the Northern Hemisphere where the average temperature for the warmest month (July) is below 10 degrees Celsius; the northern tree line roughly follows this boundary. See e.g. Arctic Portal, ‘Arctic Definitions’, Arctic Portal.org, accessed 5 November 2024, https://arcticportal.org/education/quick-facts/the-arctic/3448-arctic-definitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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