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Deterrence? What About Dissuasion?

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, the author is not attempting to redefine deterrence but to encourage readers to consider the notion of acting *before* deterrence—through dissuasion. So what constitutes dissuasion and why consider it? The author feels that similar to deterrence, there is no direct answer as each country has its own set of unique security challenges and capabilities. Furthermore, the issue is made more complex as nuclear powers and non-nuclear powers employ different strategies. So, in this essay, the author attempts to: (1) elucidate the limitations of deterrence theory, (2) establish a coherent trend of elements that help define the concept of dissuasion, and (3) adapt them to the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF)'s defence policy. He first begins by analysing the limitations of classical (rational) deterrence theory and its modern derivatives in the security landscape of tomorrow. He then explores the interpretations of dissuasion today and how they can be applied. Finally, the author develops what dissuasion as a strategic concept means for Singapore and how the SAF can meld dissuasion into deterrence thinking.

Keywords: *Deterrence; Dissuasion; Asymmetric; Hybrid Warfare; Adversaries*

INTRODUCTION

Deterrence—a word that appears in almost every contemporary defence doctrine—including Singapore's 'twin pillars of deterrence and diplomacy.'¹ However, the original premise of nuclear capability and/or military superiority as the backbone of deterrence has steadily eroded into the 21st Century. One reason is the rise of non-kinetic and asymmetric warfare, prompting armed forces around the globe to embark on measures that extend from their existing defence policies. The other arises from the trajectory of global interconnection in the 21st Century, introducing a myriad of complexities that render policies based on deterrence theory increasingly irrelevant or cost ineffective. Finally, the advent of the fourth industrial revolution—technologies that go beyond the digital revolution by fusing physical, digital and biological domains—promises the emergence of disruptive megatrends that will challenge tomorrow's concept of deterrence.²

Even within the SAF, various essays on deterrence continue to debate what deterrence means, and how to address the evolving security landscape by associating deterrence projection with Whole-of-Government Approach (WGA) and the non-kinetic domains of warfare.³ This, however, raises serious questions about

deterrence itself: is the SAF too entrenched in its deterrence philosophy to think outside of deterrence? Is deterrence a sacred cow that contemporary defence thinking must always link back to? Instead of arguing the evolution of deterrence further and further away from its conceptual roots, why not argue for a supplement to it? In his evaluation of Singapore's deterrence policy, then-MAJ Harold Sim highlights that 'deterrence as a key survival strategy is not fundamentally flawed, although it is at times unreliable.'⁴ This essay attempts to address this unreliability not by redefining deterrence, but by encouraging readers to consider the notion of acting before deterrence—through dissuasion.

So what constitutes dissuasion and why consider it? Like deterrence, there is no direct answer—each country has its own set of unique security challenges and capabilities. Moreover, nuclear powers and non-nuclear powers employ different strategies. Instead, this essay attempts to (1) elucidate the limitations of deterrence theory, (2) establish a coherent trend of elements that help define the concept of dissuasion, and (3) adapt them to the SAF's defence policy. To do so, this essay begins by analysing the limitations of classical (rational) deterrence theory and its modern

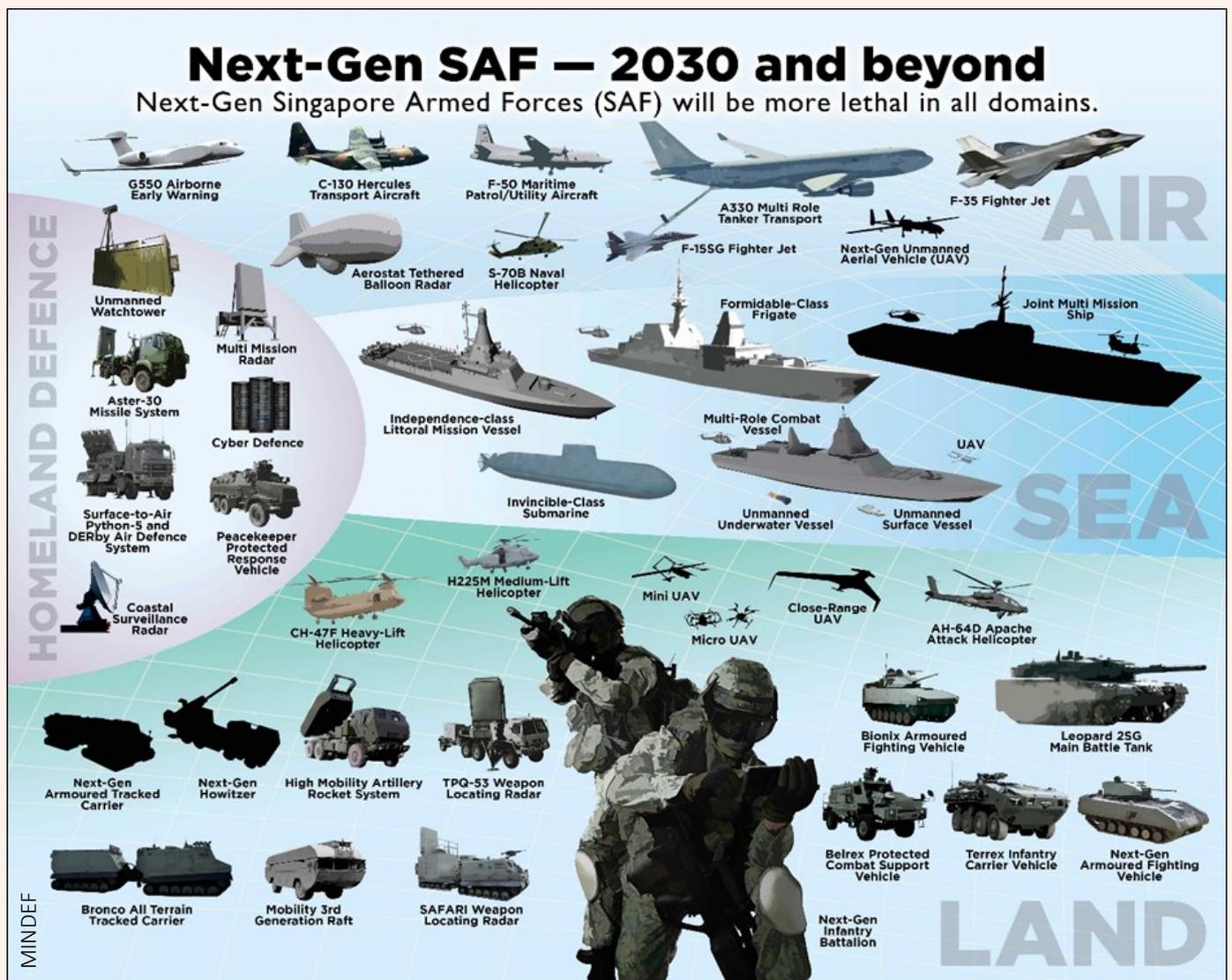
derivatives in the security landscape of tomorrow. It then explores the interpretations of dissuasion today and how they can be applied. Finally, the essay aims to develop what dissuasion as a strategic concept means for Singapore and how the SAF can meld dissuasion into deterrence thinking.

STRUGGLING WITH DETERRENCE

Towards the end of the 20th Century, policymakers began searching for answers to the new strategic context that would precipitate from the end of the Cold War. Some expanded on existing doctrines. In 1995, the United States (US) Department of Defense (DoD) produced a document titled *Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence*, which attempted to address ‘the broader view of deterrence’.⁵ The relevance of some of its recommendations had led some scholars to believe that it can be used to explain American foreign policy against Iran and North Korea.⁶ Yet a different, unconventional threat loomed on the horizon—

international terrorism. By the turn of the century, the US and its allies would be sucked into a ‘Global War on Terror’ (GWOT), provoking military thinkers worldwide to reflect on its broader implications. One of them, unsurprisingly, is the irrelevance of classical deterrence theory.⁷ The threat of nuclear weapons and overwhelming military retaliation would not have deterred the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, nor would it be particularly useful against insurgencies and its associated ramifications, as is the case today across large portions of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel region.

At the same time, defence literature continues to diverge from the classical interpretation of deterrence itself. On this token, Trager and Zagorecheva argued that the assumptions made about adversaries in asymmetric situations are poorly understood, and that deterrence strategies can in fact be adapted against them.⁸ However, despite their overtures of ‘tailored deterrence’, it is clear that their presentation of



The next generation SAF for 2030 and beyond will be ready to deal with threats from all domains effectively.

deterrence borrows heavily from non-classical elements. Although deterrence can still be used to counter Low-End Asymmetric Threats, it is certainly not enough.⁹ The quandary for many theorists comes from the nature of their recommendations, which can be argued to 'deter' these new threats but do not fall within the range of what classical deterrence implies.¹⁰ The variations in deterrence frameworks have become more and more pronounced over time and show no signs of cessation. This trend is evident for the SAF, where the discourse on deterrence has evolved towards a logic of a strong and credible military force packaged with economic co-operation, strategic dialogue, WGA, and mutually beneficial partnerships.¹¹ Clearly, the attempts to incorporate more non-classical elements—some of which qualify deterrence through resilience—only serve to highlight the limitations of deterrence as a stand-alone solution. Moreover, given the complexities of hybrid warfare, we might be asking too much from deterrence alone, whatever the edition conceived.¹² As the ongoing Ukrainian conflict illustrates, hybrid warfare waged with non-kinetic means—cyber attacks and information operations—do not always fear military superiority and resilient societies.

MUTUAL EFFECTS BETWEEN DETERRENCE AND GLOBALISATION

No man is an island: the foundations of entire national economies rest on interconnections, trade and investment. Such inter-dependency is as sobering as it is unprecedented. Outside the dynamics of deterrence, globalisation amplifies economic and social conditions that promote military restraint between countries. By diffusing this notion of interconnectivity, any form of direct inter-state armed conflict would be reckless escalation towards economic suicide—this is especially true for Singapore. With inter-state armed conflict prohibitively adverse to most national interests, the prospect of military action then falls back to the proliferation of Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC), often involving failing or failed states and the intervention of conventional armed forces, where perhaps states will choose to undermine one another via proxy warfare.¹³ The hybrid nature of such warfare renders conventional deterrence highly ineffective, and states cope by cultivating resilience instead—while still calling it deterrence. Of course, states will also attempt to deter hybrid threats by suggesting the ability to project hybrid

means on potential adversaries, but insofar it is not clear if this really qualifies as an effective form of deterrence—especially against non-state actors—or as a form of pre-deterrence which aligns with the concept of dissuasion explored later in this essay.

Globalisation and interdependence are not alone in shaping the perceptions of deterrence. As the world becomes more multipolar, so does the concept of security. The strategic objectives of the major emerging powers today, such as those from the Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) bloc, are radically different from those of the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) during the Cold War.¹⁴ Meanwhile, geopolitical groupings, such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), have grown from strength to strength. The reorientation of the world into regional blocs and rival powers therefore introduces an equalising effect on global military balance. For non-nuclear states, credible deterrence in the form of trying to attain military superiority over potential adversaries becomes increasingly expensive and less significant in the context of asymmetric strategies. Unlike during the Cold War, when smaller states could take sides and benefit from the certainty of a bipolar world, a multipolar system compels them to organise themselves into communities and overlapping alliances, producing equalising effects.

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SO WHY DISSUASION?

Instead of convincing adversaries from committing acts of aggression, policymakers are now more and more interested in convincing rivals and potential adversaries to not embark on undesirable paths that allow them to threaten with aggression. For some, the concept of dissuasion has emerged as a viable framework to address this new development in international relations. The trend is most evident in the US where, since appearing in the *2001 Quadrennial Defence Review Report*, the concept of dissuasion has



Minister for Defence Dr Ng Eng Hen (third from right) attending the ASEAN-China Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting on 17th November 2019.

become a significant complement to the deterrence framework of the US defence policy. The American interpretation of dissuasion hinges on the overtures of pre-deterrence, that is to say by manoeuvring 'to shape the nature of military competitors (and opponents) in ways favourable to the US' and 'make deterrence easier'.¹⁵ The key challenge, however, is 'striking a balance between assertiveness and restraint'.¹⁶ This therefore involves a strategic use of foreign policy such as diplomacy, economic aid (or sanctions), investment and defence co-operation instead of the more militarised methods used in deterrence measures. While the elaboration of this concept is tailored to American needs, the fundamentals remain relevant to conventional armed forces. Because security threats tomorrow will continue to undermine deterrence-based policies, concretising dissuasion can be useful for armed forces in order to achieve desired outcomes.

The hybrid nature of such warfare renders conventional deterrence highly ineffective, and states cope by cultivating resilience instead—while still calling it deterrence.

For other nuclear powers, Russia, China, United Kingdom (UK) and France, the national nuclear deterrent remains an 'indispensable core'.¹⁷ The possession of nuclear weapons provides a deterrence capability far more credible and less expensive than what conventional weapons can produce, permitting these countries a much enhanced autonomy compared to others.¹⁸ There are, however, limitations to nuclear deterrence.¹⁹ While essentially an offensive tool, nuclear deterrence revolves around defensive policies and a range of taboos.²⁰ If anything, potential adversaries, even conventional ones, are encouraged to embark on asymmetric measures. While dissuasion does not feature as a theme, the French definition of dissuasion remains grounded in the tenets of rational deterrence. These countries have begun leveraging more and more on the characteristics of dissuasion, foreign policy and force tailoring, in order to address tensions before they worsen and to counter the asymmetric actors of hybrid warfare. The UK's White Paper on National Security in 2012 focused on developing smaller, agile and versatile forces (force tailoring) while China's White Paper on National Defence in 2010 discussed the careful use of economic and diplomatic relations to maintain regional stability (foreign policy).²¹ In their own ways, states complement

deterrence by shaping competitors and opponents in ways that allow a more flexible deterrence posture.

Furthermore, non-nuclear states can no longer pursue deterrence based on superior capabilities and numerical advantage as a solution to national security. Firstly, the nature of today's security threats bifurcates: on the higher end, globalisation and multilateralism becomes the backbone of mutual deterrence with other countries; on the lower end, force transformation and unconventional methods are needed to fight asymmetric adversaries. Secondly, states which exercise their armed forces without the consent of the international community risk political and economic exclusion—the anathemas of today's globalised world. Finally, the orientation of more powerful states towards a dissuasion-deterrence system also creates conditions for less powerful ones to follow suit. Hence lesser, non-nuclear states are also forced to adapt by embarking on operational and structural changes that are characteristic of proactive pre-deterrence. In this perspective, the SAF's dialogue on deterrence is consistent with the dissuasion-deterrence narrative espoused by the American interpretation of

dissuasion—except that dissuasion is not fleshed out as distinct from core deterrence.

Because security threats tomorrow will continue to undermine deterrence-based policies, concretising dissuasion can be useful for armed forces in order to achieve desired outcomes.

DISSUASION AND THE SAF

By examining the trends and interpretations of dissuasion above, we can narrow down our dissuasion concept as a form of pre-deterrence which depends on the security dilemma of the state. In this regard, the SAF seeks to persuade others not to take a particular path, or to take a different one, such that deterrence becomes necessary. To do so, the SAF should do well by pursuing the following:



The Republic of Singapore Navy's Formidable-class frigate RSS Tenacious (foreground) sailing in formation with India, Japan and the Philippines Navies in Group Sail to Exercise RIMPAC, from 22nd to 24th June 2018.

(1) Intelligence

Dissuasion requires acting before the need to deter. This means a greater demand to identify strategic trends that may point to a particular opponent—even an ally—attempting to create a capability that can become a threat or an undesirable element in the future. The SAF will want to refine its application of intelligence and connections to think-tanks to recognise such trends with greater rigour. As future security relationships are also likely to be based on co-dependency in the information age, the SAF will want to consider how to exploit these resources in the context of a regional or even global information network.

(2) Dissuasive Diplomacy

Singapore favours the development of force balances which are favourable to peace and stability. For the SAF, this means discouraging potential adversaries from embarking on malevolent paths through dialogue and strategic alignment with regional security partners. For a small state, of course, the range of action is limited. Nevertheless, international reaction to the Terrex incident and on Singapore's neutrality in the ongoing territorial disputes in the South China Sea illustrates how diplomatic or media pressure can potentially affect the SAF's orientation. Nevertheless, Singapore will do well by committing to active diplomacy in encouraging regional actors to choose mediation over conflict. In its capacity, the SAF should sustain its momentum in fostering diplomatic ties with other militaries in domains such as maritime piracy, international terrorism, humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

(3) Force Tailoring

The orientation of military assets can be used to dissuade. For example, in the case of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy's expansion, the US Navy has reorganised its fleets with warships that carry specific weapons which target submarines and naval aviation in an attempt to discourage or complicate the development of Chinese capabilities and policies which may constitute 'an aggressive sea-control navy.'²² The PLA, in response, has embarked on an indirect approach of psychological, media, and legal warfare 'aimed at countering US presence in Asia prior to any potential

kinetic conflict and putting China in a position to control and shape its security.'²³ On this token, both powers will likely continue down the path of trying to shape each other's behaviours outside the realm of deterrence. In a region experiencing significant growth in military spending, the SAF must manage and communicate—and perhaps even influence others—its defence acquisitions in a manner that is consistent with discouraging the development of particular outcomes.

The suggestions above, however, highlight one important theme: adversaries may simply refuse dissuasion, or respond by embarking on an alternate path. If not managed properly, dissuasion policies can backfire by antagonising the intended target and drive it to develop threatening military capabilities. For the SAF, the challenge is therefore to balance dissuasion as a potent but discrete prelude to deterrence in order to face future security challenges.

As security threats tomorrow will often spill over borders, it is possible to draw a continuum between national and regional dissuasion policy. This can be achieved by reinforcing regional defence industries to achieve greater autonomy, closer collaboration with regional militaries to offset the global poles of power, and greater co-operation across economic and political domains to reinforce the effects of mutual deterrence based on interdependency instead of military might. Furthermore, a strong regional framework is essential for supporting the institutions and procedures to combat transnational actors—terrorists, traffickers and pirates etc.—of hybrid warfare.

CONCLUSION

In fine, we have explored the relevance of dissuasion as distinct from deterrence and how it can be applied to deterrence thinking. Nevertheless, there must be caution given to the word 'dissuasion' and the term 'dissuasion concept' that we are trying to construct. There is no need to change the SAF's tenets of deterrence and diplomacy, but it would be foolish to consider them absolute. Instead of continuing to expand on or refine what deterrence means, it may be salient to instead compartmentalise certain elements of the existing deterrence doctrine and concretise them as a complementary framework—such as in the form of dissuasion.

ENDNOTES

1. "Defence policy and Diplomacy", 18 Oct 2012, Singapore Ministry of Defence, www.mindef.gov.sg, retrieved 8 Feb 2016.
2. Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, World Economic Forum, 2016.
3. "Is the SAF's Deterrence Posture Still Relevant as the Nature of Warfare Continues to Evolve?". Bernard Tay, *Pointer*, vol 42, no. 2 (2016).

"Will Strengthening The SAF Mean Strengthening Singapore's Deterrence As A Non-Nuclear State?" Lee Li Huat, *Pointer*, vol 41, no. 4 (2015).

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4. "Is the Concept of Deterrence as a Key Survival Strategy for Small States Fundamentally Flawed?", *Pointer*, vol 33, no. 2 (2007), p.39.
5. "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence", Policy Subcommittee of the Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) of the United States Strategic Command (current USSTRATCOM, former CINCSTRAT), U.S. Department of Defence, 1995.
6. The document promotes the projection of "ambiguity" against potential adversaries and creating the impression of a possibly irrational American response to "[reinforce uncertainty] in the minds of an adversary's decision makers." Moreover, deterrence through the threat of use of nuclear weapons will continue to be its top military strategy. pp. 5-7. Ibid.
7. While classical deterrence theory has been consistently criticized as logically inconsistent, the proponents of a new branch of deterrence theory, "perfect deterrence", continues to operate on assumptions that the actions of adversaries can be understood based best estimates on state behavior and internal characteristics. Evidently, that 4 is not the case with terrorist organizations and insurgency groups. See Zagare, Frank C. (2004), "Reconciling Rationality with Deterrence: A Re-examination of the Logical Foundations of Deterrence Theory", *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 16 (2): pp. 107–141.
8. Trager, Robert F., and Dessislava P. Zagorcheva. "Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done." *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/06): 87-123.
9. The concept of Low-End Asymmetric Threat can be taken in contrast to the definition of High End Asymmetric Threat (HEAT) by the 2009 United States Quadrennial Defense Review, which considers, for example, China as an asymmetric threat due to the apparent difference in military power and technological disparity (in the context of the United States) but goes further to prefix the threat as "High-End" to distinguish against the other types of asymmetry.
10. Kroenig and Pavel recognises that efforts to deny terrorists strategic benefits can arise from managing coverage of terrorist attacks, instilling "resilience" in the population, and careful communication with ideological and religious groups. Evidently, such efforts are far from the tone of classical deterrence. Matthew Kroenig and Barry Pavel, "How to Deter Terrorism", *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2012, Center of Strategic and International Studies, p. 28-33.
11. For more insight into deterrence from SAF writers, see "Credible Deterrence: Reviewing Discourse & Reframing the SAF to deal with Full Spectrum Threat Complex", Irvin Lim, *Pointer*, vol 31, no. 3 (2005), p.16-35.

"Deterrence Through Various Confidence Building and Security Measures", Lim Chin Peng, *Pointer*, vol 39, no. 4 (2013), p.25-33.

"The Viability Of Deterrence Strategies By Non-Nuclear States", Wee Eng Peow, *Pointer*, vol 41, no. 3 (2014), p.1-7.
12. Larkin's elaboration of the flaws of the United States' application of tailored deterrence comes to suggest that no matter how one recalibrates deterrence, disparities exists where deterrence is simply not effective. Sean P. Larkin, "Cracks in the New Jar: The Limits of Tailored Deterrence", *Joint Force Quarterly*, n. 63, October 2011, NDU Press, Washington, D.C.

13. Taking the Iranian nuclear situation for example, Israel has repeatedly stated that it would not tolerate Iran's nuclear ambitions and that appropriate military action will be taken if Iran continues to develop an offensive nuclear capability. The U.S., and to some extent the European Union, echoes the same policies and exerts pressure on Iran most ostensibly in the form of economic sanctions. Iran, however, compensates for the punishment via sustained ties with China and Russia, countries which may seek to profit economically and politically. The same dynamics can be applied to the situations in North Korea, the Middle-East, the Gaza Strip, and more recently in North Africa and East Ukraine.
14. The BRICS bloc refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. According to estimates, the 4 BRIC economies (excluding South Africa) are expected to overtake G7 economies by 2027. Its growing economic clout, however, does not necessarily translate into greater political clout that is as interventionist as the western-dominated international structure was in the 20th century. China, for example, despite being the second biggest economy in the world today, remains adamant about its policy of "modernization first, global player second". Rana Foroohar, "BRICs Overtake G7 By 2027", 20 March 2009, *The Daily Beast*, www.thedailybeast.com, retrieved 1 February 2017.

Wen Jiabao, "Full text of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's speech at Britain's Royal Society", 28 June 2011, *Xinhua News*, www.xinhuanet.com/english, retrieved 1 February 2017.
15. Ryan Henry, "Deterrence and Dissuasion for the 21st Century", IFPA-Fletcher Conference, 14 December 2005.
16. Richard L. Kugler, "Dissuasion as a Strategic Concept", *Strategic Forum*, Institute of Strategic Studies (National Defense University, U.S.), No. 196, December 2002.
17. Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and security in the 21st century: China, Britain, France and the enduring legacy of the nuclear revolution*, 2000, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 2.
18. In the case of France, the onus of homeland security rests largely on a robust nuclear umbrella, liberating the conventional branch of the armed forces to engage in external operations. Likewise, China's nuclear capability permits the investment of assets that focus on the development of expeditionary forces. While nuclear arsenals are not cheap, they are cost-effective and act as a preamble to the liberation of conventional forces from national defence.
19. Threats against vital interests are not always responsive to nuclear deterrence, such as in the case of the Falklands War of 1982, or the 9/11 attacks. Nor can it dissuade: knowledge of British and American nuclear capability would not have prevented their opponents from developing the means to carry out their attacks.
20. Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security*, p. 54.
21. "MOD Sets Out Plans to Ensure Investment in State-of-the-art Defence Equipment", 1 February 2012, UK Government, www.gov.uk, retrieved 2 February 2013.

"China National Defence in 2010", 31 March 2011, Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, www.china.org.cn, retrieved 2 February 2017.
22. James A. Rushton, "Operationalizing Dissuasion", *Naval Postgraduate School (U.S.)*, 2006, p. 86.
23. Kristien Bergerson, "China's Efforts to Counter U.S. Forward Presence in the Asia Pacific", *USCC Economic and Security Review Commission*, 2016, p.8.



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