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## COMPARISON OF DETERRENCE MODELS IN US FOREIGN POLICY: COLD WAR VS US-CHINA COMPETITION

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This article provides a comparative analysis of the deterrence strategies employed by the United States during the Cold War against the Soviet Union and in the 21st-century strategic competition with the People's Republic of China. While both periods are grounded in the broader framework of deterrence theory, their application reflects the specific geopolitical and technological contexts of each era.

During the Cold War, the US strategy emphasized deterrence by punishment, relying heavily on the threat of massive nuclear retaliation. This approach was facilitated by a bipolar world order, ideological confrontation, and a symmetrical nuclear arms race, culminating in the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD). The strategy was underpinned by efforts to ensure second-strike capabilities and supported by arms control treaties designed to preserve strategic stability.

In contrast, today's strategic environment is defined by complexity, multipolarity, and rapid technological change. China is identified as the primary competitor, yet the nature of the rivalry is shaped by economic interdependence, asymmetric nuclear capabilities, and the rise of cyber, informational, and artificial intelligence-based threats. As such, US deterrence has shifted toward prioritizing deterrence by denial, emphasizing resilience, defensive capacity, and integrated deterrent approaches across military and non-military domains.

The article concludes that while both deterrence models remain relevant, the structure of international relations and emerging threats necessitate a stronger focus on deterrence by denial in current US policy.

*Key words:* USA, foreign policy, deterrence, cold war, China, great-power competition.

**Introduction.** Deterrence has been an integral component of US defence strategy since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shaping the American approach to international security and military posture. Originating in the early stages of the cold war, deterrence theory became the strategic lens through which the US navigated the tensions of its rivalry with USSR. The 21<sup>st</sup> century presents a geopolitical landscape where the rise of China as the new strategic competitor of the United States is accompanied by other emerging challenges requiring adaptation of deterrence models to achieve the US national interests.

This article employs comparative analysis as a framework to examine the evolution of the US deterrence strategy, focusing on the contrast between its posture toward the Soviet Union (1945–1991) and its contemporary strategy vis-à-vis China. It seeks to highlight how the changing nature of the international relations system and developing power dynamics have shaped the formulation and application of the deterrence strategy of the United States. The article builds upon the findings of international relations scholars who dedicated their works to the topic of deterrence and provides a brief overview of key aspects of the theory. It then explores how the US approaches to deterrence policy have manifested across both historical periods.

The article underscores a transformation in US strategic thinking: while Cold War-era deterrence largely emphasized deterrence by punishment through threats of retaliation, the con-

text of current strategic competition between the US and China demands a shift in priorities toward the tools of deterrence by denial.

**Background.** While deterrence *per se* is not a new phenomenon, its theoretic systematization as well as increased awareness and role in shaping the foreign and security policy of states came into being in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period saw the formalization of key concepts rooted in rationalist paradigms of political realism and strategic studies. Those foundations continue to inform the contemporary discourse, though they have undergone significant adaptations in response to evolving geopolitical and technological conditions.

While deterrence theory gained substantial prominence during the Cold War, when the context of the nuclear standoff between superpowers was a defining feature of the international order, contemporary scholars increasingly emphasize the necessity of empirical analysis across different geopolitical contexts, recognizing that deterrence must be reevaluated to sustain its efficiency [1]. The post-Cold War period has witnessed a broadening of deterrence theory to account for both military and non-military dimensions, including cyber, economic, and informational domains. He et al. argue that modern conflicts such as the Gulf War and the Russian-Ukrainian War not only test but actively reshape deterrence capabilities, reinforcing the dynamic and responsive nature of respective strategies [2].

At the core of deterrence theory lie two principal mechanisms: deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. Deterrence by punishment relies on the threat of credible retaliation to dissuade adversaries from taking hostile actions. The effectiveness of such measures depends on the perceived credibility and resolve behind the threat, aligning with classical deterrence models that consider states to be rational actors. Zagare further emphasizes this point, asserting that the strategic stability of the Cold War era was maintained mainly through the mutual threat of severe punitive consequences [3].

On the other hand, deterrence by denial seeks to prevent aggression by rendering its success unlikely or extremely costly. Mithal highlights how modern deterrence increasingly integrates conventional, cyber, and hybrid domains, reflecting a shift from exclusively punitive strategies to a more balanced approach that incorporates strong defensive measures and resilience-building [4]. This shift is particularly prominent in contexts where attribution of aggressive acts is difficult or where retaliation might not be feasible, such as in cyber and information warfare. Some scholars go further and argue that emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and increasing reliance on cyber capabilities undermine traditional frameworks and require more nuanced and innovative thinking about deterrence measures [5].

Moreover, the boundaries of the deterrence theory have expanded to include both hard and soft power instruments. Thus, strategic deterrence today is often intertwined with diplomatic initiatives, economic measures, and informational campaigns. This complexity underscores the need for an adaptable theoretical framework that would remain anchored in the underlying logic of deterrence but also be flexible to accommodate the evolving outlines of international conflicts. The US foreign policy in the post-WW2 period has served as an indicator of these changes.

**Overview of US deterrence policy during the Cold War.** The Cold War era was marked by the emergence of a bipolar system of international relations, with the United States and the Soviet Union competing for global hegemony. This ideological and geopolitical division crystallized into two opposing blocs: the Western alliance system represented by NATO, and the Eastern bloc, dominated by the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Within this rigidly polarized environment, deterrence emerged not just as a military doctrine but as a cornerstone of US foreign and defence policy.

Central to the US strategic thinking during this period was the overwhelming reliance on nuclear deterrence. John Foster Dulles, the US Secretary of State from 1953 to 1959, in his speech

before the Council on Foreign Relations, declared that “Local defenses must be reinforced by the deterrent of massive retaliatory power. A potential aggressor must know that he cannot always prescribe battle conditions that suit him” [6]. This statement reflects the prevailing mindset of the time: that security could be ensured through the threat of catastrophic retaliation. This approach was embodied in the strategy of *massive retaliation* that provided for an unrestrained nuclear response to any attack on the US or its allies.

To support this doctrine, the US embarked on an extensive nuclear arms race, developing the nuclear triad comprising land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers. These measures were meant to guarantee a second-strike capability, ensuring that the US could retaliate even in the event of a surprise attack. This logic was furthered by the concept of the “doomsday machine,” making sure that even in case of destruction of the command-and-control centres, there would be an automatic nuclear strike in response. Such developments emphasized the necessity of a credible and survivable nuclear arsenal as the foundation of deterrence [7].

The further increase of nuclear arsenals and achievement of nuclear parity between the US and the USSR led to a realization of the devastating effects of a potential nuclear confrontation. This led to the concept of *mutually assured destruction* (MAD), which was based on the assumption that if both sides possessed the capability to inflict unacceptable damage on one another, neither of them would initiate a conflict. However, this configuration also entailed other risky strategies aiming to exploit it, such as the *brinkmanship* policy, which involved pushing crises to the verge of disaster to force concessions [8].

As the risks of total war became more apparent, the US adopted the *flexible response* doctrine, which allowed for proportional retaliation based on the nature and scale of the aggression, thus offering a wider range of military options and reducing the reliance on immediate nuclear escalation. In parallel, the US worked toward the establishment of a broader strategic stability system, incorporating various arms control and confidence-building treaties. These included the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and the later Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). These agreements aimed to limit the scope of the arms race and reduce the risk of unintended escalation.

Overall, the US deterrence strategy during the Cold War was heavily influenced by the logic of a zero-sum game, where gains for one side were perceived as losses for the other. In this adversarial framework, maintaining strategic balance and credible retaliation capabilities were seen as essential for preserving peace and preventing conflict. As such, Cold War deterrence was a product of both strategic necessity and ideological confrontation, rooted in the desire to contain Soviet expansion while avoiding the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war.

**Overview of US deterrence policy in competition with China.** In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the strategic orientation of US deterrence policy has increasingly centred on the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is recognized as the primary strategic adversary attempting to claim global hegemony. The 2022 National Security Strategy of the United States – the most current strategic framework at the time of writing – articulates this position, stating that “The PRC is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it” [9]. It further outlines the primary approach to countering this challenge:

“Our strategy toward the PRC is threefold:

1) *to invest in the foundations of our strength at home – our competitiveness, our innovation, our resilience, our democracy;*

2) *to align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with a common purpose and in common cause and*

3) *compete responsibly with the PRC to defend our interests and build our vision for the future.*

*The first two elements – invest and align – [...] are essential to out-competing the PRC in the technological, economic, political, military, intelligence, and global governance domains” [9].*

This formulation reflects a broader understanding of deterrence that extends beyond military capacity to encompass economic, technological, and political dimensions.

In contrast to the Cold War’s reliance on formal defence treaties such as NATO, the current US strategy in the Indo-Pacific leverages a more flexible and informal network of partnerships. While traditional bilateral security agreements with countries like Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Taiwan remain essential, new arrangements such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialog (Quad) and AUKUS have emerged as platforms for regional coordination. These are not binding alliances *per se* but rather mechanisms for situational cooperation, allowing flexibility while signalling strategic resolve. Forward deployment of American forces and maintenance of overseas military bases reinforce the US presence in the region, also remaining a key element of deterrence [10].

Although the nuclear dimension continues to play a role in the broader deterrence framework, it does not take a central place in the US-China competition. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the estimated size of the US nuclear arsenal is around 3,7 thousand warheads, while China possesses only 500 [11]. In the meantime, the Pentagon has projected that China might double its stockpile within five years, prompting strategic concerns [12]. However, the primary function of the nuclear component remains focused on systemic stability and nonproliferation rather than direct deterrence against China. The strategic asymmetry, combined with China’s declared no-first-use policy and the US approach of strategic ambiguity has resulted in a deterrence environment that is less dominated by nuclear considerations and more reliant on a broad array of conventional and unconventional tools [13].

Another significant contrast with the Cold War is the high degree of economic interdependence between the US and China. Whereas the US and Soviet economies were effectively separated by the «iron curtain», in recent years, China has been among the top trade partners of the US [14]. This interdependence presents both opportunities and constraints. Economic tools such as sanctions and export controls can function as forms of deterrence by punishment. However, the potential costs of decoupling or escalating trade conflicts introduce new strategic dilemmas, as punitive measures could inflict collateral damage on the American economy.

At the same time, technological innovation has gradually become an integral component of modern deterrence strategies. The rise of emerging technologies, namely artificial intelligence and cyber capabilities, has reshaped the strategic landscape. These developments demand an adaptive shift in strategic thinking that is increasingly visible in US strategic documents [15]. Such technologies introduce new tools for deterrence outside traditional military force.

Furthermore, the current strategic environment for the US is no longer dominated by a single adversary. While China is the primary strategic competitor, deterrence planning must also account for rogue states, regional powers, and non-state actors. For a period of time, there was a belief among scholars and policymakers that traditional great power competition was giving way to more fragmented transnational threats [16]. However, the resurgence of interstate conflict in various regions has reaffirmed the relevance of classic deterrence principles – albeit in a more complex and fluid environment.

As a result, deterrence strategies have evolved to include concepts like tailored deterrence, which adjusts responses based on specific actors and situations, and integrated deterrence, emphasizing cross-domain coordination and collaboration with allies as well as combining them with traditional deterrence tools.

**Conclusion.** The comparative analysis of US deterrence strategies during the Cold War and in the context of contemporary competition with China illustrates both enduring principles and significant adaptations in American strategic thinking. While the foundational logic of deterrence remains consistent, the practical implementation of it has evolved in response to shifting geopolitical realities, technological developments, and changes in the nature of global threats.

During the Cold War, deterrence by punishment, particularly through the threat of massive nuclear retaliation, stood at the heart of US policy. The bipolar structure of the international system, the nuclear arms race, and the ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union made strategies like massive retaliation, mutually assured destruction, and brinkmanship the cornerstones of American deterrence. Stability was sought through overwhelming retaliatory capabilities, with strategic success measured largely by the ability to maintain credible and survivable second-strike options.

In contrast, the current strategic competition with China occurs in a more complex and interconnected global environment. The emergence of new domains such as cyber, space, and artificial intelligence, combined with economic interdependence and the presence of multiple state and non-state actors, has necessitated a broader and more flexible deterrence architecture. Deterrence by denial has gained increasing prominence. This is evident in the US emphasis on integrated deterrence, tailored deterrent strategies, and forward presence, as well as in the strategic use of economic and technological levers.

Thus, the key takeaway of this analysis is that while the modern deterrence policy of the United States continues to incorporate elements of both deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial, the current developments in the structure of the international system, as well as the nature of emerging threats and challenges to US national security, entail a greater priority on deterrence by denial. This shift reflects a necessary adaptation to a multipolar, technologically dynamic, and interdependent world, where traditional deterrence frameworks alone are no longer sufficient to safeguard American interests.

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## ПОРІВНЯННЯ МОДЕЛЕЙ СТРИМУВАННЯ В ЗОВНІШНІЙ ПОЛІТИЦІ США: ХОЛОДНА ВІЙНА І ПРОТИСТОЯННЯ США З КИТАЄМ

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Ця стаття містить порівняльний аналіз стратегій стримування, що застосовувалися Сполученими Штатами під час холодної війни проти Радянського Союзу і в стратегічному протистоянні з Китайською Народною Республікою у 21-му столітті. Хоча обидва періоди ґрунтуються на ширших засадах теорії стримування, їх застосування відображає специфічний геополітичний і технологічний контекст кожної епохи.

Під час холодної війни стратегія США робила акцент на стримуванні шляхом покарання, значною мірою покладаючись на загрозу масованої ядерної відплати. Такому підходу сприяли біполярний світовий порядок, ідеологічне протистояння та симетрична гонка ядерних озброєнь, кульмінацією якої стала доктрина взаємного гарантованого знищення (MAD). Ця стратегія була підкріплена зусиллями, спрямованими на забезпечення потенціалу другого удару, і підтримувалася договорами про контроль над озброєннями, покликаними зберегти стратегічну стабільність.

На противагу цьому, сьогодне срагерічне середовище визначається складністю, багатополярністю і швидкими технологічними змінами. Китай вважається головним конкурентом, але характер суперництва визначається економічною взаємозалежністю, асиметричним ядерним потенціалом і зростанням кібернетичних, інформаційних загроз і загроз, пов'язаних зі штучним інтелектом. Таким чином, стримування США змістилося в бік надання пріоритету стримування шляхом заперечення, яке робить акцент на стійкості, обороноздатності та інтегрованих підходах до стримування у військовій і невійськовій сферах.

У статті робиться висновок, що хоча обидві моделі стримування залишаються актуальними, структура міжнародних відносин і нові загрози вимагають більшого фокусу на стримуванні запереченням у сучасній політиці США.

*Ключові слова:* США, зовнішня політика, стримування, холодна війна, Китай, протистояння великих держав.