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# Alternative Options to Strengthen Small State Deterrence in the Face of New Great Power Competition

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# Key Takeaways

Deterring aggression is a constant challenge for both small states and their larger allies and partners. For many small states, resource and military limitations lead them to resort to guerrilla warfare or other denial strategies, hoping to use the fear of a prolonged insurgency with large human and financial losses to deter aggression. Due to worst-case assumptions on these states' ability to resist conventionally, Western allies and partners further encourage the use of guerrilla strategies via the provision of short-range, often man-portable, weapons to these countries. While such support is politically and strategically less risky, it may not contribute to deterring wars, especially in the face of aggressors that are willing to engage in high-casualty attacks and have few qualms of levying full military force even on civilian targets in retribution for defiance, as evidenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Nor would the threat of insurgency and traditional denial strategies necessarily work against grey zone aggression or incremental occupations.

There is a need to reconceptualize deterrence for small states by both the West and small states themselves. This paper asserts that traditional concepts for small states' defence and deterrence, such as "deterrence by insurgency" and non-offensive defence, are insufficient, and that instead, small states should be encouraged and supported to build up sufficient military capability that allows them to hold adversaries at greater risk. This may require the calibrated transfer and development of affordable strike technologies such as increasingly capable drones and long-range guided missiles, paired with improved strategic thinking, the development of theories of victory, and enhanced coordination with appropriate maritime enforcement agencies, that allow for small states to succeed in preserving their sovereignty without resorting to costly insurgencies or risking failures of deterrence. The paper ends with some policy considerations tailored for small states in Southeast Asia, like the Philippines, facing particular deterrence challenges.

# Introduction

Deterring aggression is a constant challenge for all states, but more particularly for middle-powers and small states as well as their larger allies. Such concerns must be balanced against other pressing issues and challenges. But as Ukraine and other geopolitical hotspots show, the need for deterrence to preserve national sovereignty and ensure autonomy will not abate. Indeed, despite the pleas of the well-meaning and those who advocate for more focus on non-traditional common threats, history has not ended, and interstate war has not been rendered obsolete.

The challenge of deterrence to small states is complicated by the complex realities of great power competition and today's unprecedented level of global interconnectedness. The very states that must be deterred hold a particular status in the international community due to their economic wealth, increasing influence, and military might. Small and middle powers are placed in an unenviable position of being economically dependent on states that threaten them and are not shy about leveraging such dependence against them.

*The core problem: in an asymmetric yet interconnected world, how may small states best be able to deter aggression?* It is important to distinguish between deterrence and defence; while both are interrelated, deterrence would come first, as the desired objective is to avoid war altogether without undue compromises of one's own interests, though in the event of deterrence failure, defence will be relied on.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a seminal moment in strategic studies and international relations. Its onset has not only brought general warfare back to European affairs but has also called into question the foundations of security enshrined since World War II—the reliability of Western security guarantees and the effectiveness of international institutions to resolve conflicts between states.

As the conflict between Ukraine and Russia grinds on, other 'frontline' states in identical yet variably different situations to Ukraine, such as in East and Southeast Asia, cast heightened concern, as new lessons, scenarios, and concepts are being generated from the war that would inform plans for both aggressors and defenders alike.

This paper is focused on small state deterrence as it applies to maritime states, particularly in the context of the Philippines and other comparable states in the Indo-Pacific region. It seeks to address a variety of scenarios from the worst case of deterring full-scale invasion to the less extreme but far more common day-to-day challenge of gray zone incremental aggression.

In an asymmetric yet interconnected world, how may small states best be able to deter aggression?

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# Indirect Denial: Small State Defence and Deterrence Practices

Non-nuclear small states often resorted to gruelling insurgencies, especially during the decolonization period.

Small states are often assumed to be helpless in the face of aggression especially by large states. However, Ivan Arreguin-Toft wrote that such 'weak' states could win wars, though this was not assured and is dependent on several factors, in particular the interaction between the strategies of the conflict dyads.<sup>1</sup> If strategies of the direct variety are used, indirect strategies should be employed to counter them,<sup>2</sup> which has also been promoted by various thinkers such as Basil Henry Liddell-Hart.

A classic example of indirect versus direct strategic interaction is the use of guerrilla warfare. States have been developing and promoting organized state-led guerrilla operations as the default strategy in the event of an invasion by an aggressor, with a recent example being the Resistance Operating Concept developed for and with Eastern European states.<sup>3</sup> Similar concepts are also being promoted to Taiwan to thwart an anticipated invasion by the People's Republic of China (PRC),<sup>4</sup> and have been proposed to other countries, such as the Philippines, for their defences.

When war came, non-nuclear small states often resorted to gruelling insurgencies, especially during the decolonization period. Vietnam, Afghanistan 1979-1989 and most recently 2001-2021 are (in)famous examples of insurgency's use to defeat a great power adversary. Historically, small state deterrence has been predicated on the threat of exacting tolls in

1 Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 18, 38-42.

2 Basil Henry Liddell-Hart, *Strategy*, 2nd Edition. (London: Meridian Books, 1954), 3-4.

3 Otto Fiala and Ulrica Petterson, "ROC(K) Solid: Resistance Operating Concept in the Shadow of Russia," *PRISM* 8, no. 4 (2020): 17-28, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/prism/prism\\_8-4/prism\\_8-4\\_17-28\\_Fiala-Petterson.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/prism/prism_8-4/prism_8-4_17-28_Fiala-Petterson.pdf).

4 Chiang Chin-yeh and Shih Hsiu-chuan, "Deterrence by denial Taiwan's best defense strategy: U.S. general," *Focus Taiwan*, April 08, 2022, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202204080014>.

manpower, resources and political capital that are unbearable to the other party, a type of deterrence threat known as *punitive resistance*.<sup>5</sup>

During the Cold War, creating alliances with other countries for purposes of collective defence against perceived threats led to the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Warsaw Pact, and several bilateral defence treaties between the United States and countries across East and Southeast Asia. A few states, such as Switzerland, practiced various forms of armed neutrality, eschewing formal alliances yet investing in capable armed forces. These forces are often configured for non-offensive defence (NOD), military capability sufficient to defend a state yet incapable of posing a major threat to its neighbours.<sup>6</sup> Guerrilla/Resistance Operations can also be considered a form of non-offensive defence.

These various strategies for small states generally seek to establish deterrence by denial. Deterrence by denial as a concept has gained renewed traction in response to the threats posed by so-called “revisionist” powers looking to alter the status quo regionally, or globally, to their favour. Deterrence by denial is regarded as more palatable than deterrence by punishment and more applicable to a wider range of threats.<sup>7</sup> In the case of small states, it is also a more accessible form of deterrence due to economic, political, and material constraints.

While the above strategies make logical sense for small and middle-sized states facing asymmetrically more powerful aggressors, there are drawbacks to a complete dependence on such warfare, especially in a changing strategic environment where revisionist aggression comes in multiple forms apart from full invasion and occupation.

Deterrence by denial as a concept has gained renewed traction in response to the threats posed by so-called “revisionist” powers looking to alter the status quo regionally, or globally, to their favour.

5 Karl Mueller, “The Continuing Relevance of Conventional Deterrence,” in *Deterrence in the 21st Century: Insights in Theory and Practice*, ed. Fran Osinga and Tim Swejjs, (The Hague: Asser Press 2020), 50-51; Mueller posits four different categories of conventional deterrence, based on the type of threat (denial or punishment) and the scope of theatre (operational or strategic). Denial categories of deterrence are battlefield defeat (deny the enemy by gaining operational victory in the battlefield) and strategic defeat (open up aggressors to long-term defeat by a target’s allies). Punishment categories include punitive resistance (threat to inflict heavy casualties even if defeated and occupied) and strategic retaliation (attacking valuable targets in retaliation for an attack).

6 Teo Kay Leng Derek, “The Viability of Non-Offensive Defense as a Strategy for National Security,” *Pointer* 38 no.4 (2013): 26-34, <https://www.mindef.gov.sg/oms/imindef/publications/pointer/journals/2012/v38n4.html>.

7 Patrick M Morgan, “Deterrence by Denial from the Cold War to the 21st Century,” in *Deterrence by Denial*, ed. Alex Wilner and Andreas Wenger, (New York: Cambria Press 2021), 16-18.

# Challenges of Deterrence for Small States

Southeast and East Asia are particularly sensitive to the balances of deterrence and interdependence, due to the developing nature of the region's economies and the socio-political premium attached to delivering economic growth.

After the Cold War, the nature of alliances adapted to the changing threat perception and security challenges. At the same time, due to expanding globalization, many states embraced trading partners despite the presence of unresolved disputes and potential flashpoints. While beneficial in terms of trade and development, this interdependence has increasingly become associated with more risks, as revisionist powers that happened to benefit extensively from open trade, particularly the PRC, exploited their newfound wealth to build up their military capabilities. They have also harnessed this interdependence as a weapon itself, using either access to their markets or the potential for investments as cudgels against states they have territorial or geopolitical disagreements with. Such a situation amplifies the need for strong deterrent capabilities, without which small states will invariably be forced to make deleterious compromises on their core interests.

Southeast and East Asia are particularly sensitive to the balances of deterrence and interdependence, due to the developing nature of most of the region's economies and the socio-political premium attached to delivering economic growth. Some states have gone so far as to tie their trade and security agendas, especially in the 1990s-2010s, to mixed success.<sup>8</sup> These sensitivities also pose issues for providing deterrence via normal non-offensive defence and guerrilla methods. This can be observed in the case of Singapore; from the earliest days of its independence, it has relied on the so-called 'poisoned shrimp' strategy of making the state 'indigestible' to would-be aggressors.<sup>9</sup> It has evolved considerably as Singapore has grown and developed into a force designed to fight swiftly and decisively to avoid drawn-out conflicts, as well as conduct limited force projection. This is necessary because unlike in the 1950s-1960s, modern Singapore is such a built-up urban centre that the potential damage and disruption wrought by war will be extremely costly. Southeast Asia is no stranger to the cost and devastation of urban battles, as seen in the 2017 Marawi Crisis in the Philippines, where the government forces fought for five months against 'quasi-state' actors resulting in tremendous damage to Marawi City.<sup>10</sup> One can only imagine the destruction that could be inflicted to bigger cities during close quarters fighting or long-range bombardments by

8 Michael Intal Magcamit, *Small Powers and Trading Security: Contexts, Motives and Outcomes*, (London: Pallgrave Macmillan 2016), 217-223.

9 Daniel Le, "Poison Shrimp: Deterrence, Defense Cooperation, and Total Defense from Europe and Asia," (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2020).

10 Ben de Vera, "Marawi rebuilding to cost P80 billion," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 18, 2018, <https://business.inquirer.net/251030/marawi-rebuilding-cost-p80b>; It was estimated by the Philippines' Task Force Bangon Marawi ("Rise Marawi") that reconstruction could require up to 80 billion PHP, or 1.519 billion USD in 2018 prices.



peer states or great powers; again, the ongoing invasion of Ukraine has provided sobering examples.

Further, authoritarian regimes may possibly be better at fighting indirect guerrilla wars,<sup>11</sup> due to their greater ability to, at least initially, absorb the costs of employing the harshest measures both by controlling the flow of information about the conduct of the war, and by ensuring that even if domestic opposition exists, they are not in a position to affect/alter policy. Authoritarian states such as Russia are not passive regarding the threat of guerrilla resistance, as they have developed strategies to contain, de-legitimize and destroy popular uprisings, liberal and national liberation movements.<sup>12</sup> China is an infamous practitioner of such reflexive control, to the point it is exporting some of its techniques and technologies.<sup>13</sup>

Properly implemented resistance and guerrilla warfare can be significant for the actual defence of a country during a war, but it remains unclear whether such preparations contribute to deterrence. Authoritarian and even democratic great powers have not been deterred by the prospect of guerrilla warfare once they make the decision to attack/invoke. The invasion of Ukraine and Russia's constantly shifting objectives also show that even if the invader is dissuaded from full occupation, it can recalibrate its tactics to limited bite-and-hold land grab campaigns, akin to observed tendencies for post-1945 conquests.<sup>14</sup> While no longer as existential as full annexation, such losses of territory are far more difficult to reverse.

Further, focusing on guerrilla resistance to the detriment of other capabilities leaves such states constrained when transitioning from the defensive resistance phase to offensive phases necessary to retake territory or rollback aggression, especially if the aggressor is determined to keep what it has taken. This is because guerrilla resistance as normally envisioned uses capabilities that are distributed and can be concealed quickly either in the hinterlands, or in urban areas. Such systems like man-portable anti-armour, anti-air missiles and backpack drones can be great force multipliers, so long as the enemy is operating within reach.

The remarkable success of Ukraine beginning 06 September 2022 in rolling back Russian gains was arguably possible due to a mix of deception, strategic patience, and refitted forces with long-range arms such as the M31 family of 92km/57mi rockets fired by the famous M142 HIMARS and M270 MLRS, and the 150km/93mi AGM-88 HARM air-launched anti-radiation missile. However, these weapons were not made available in the phases before and immediately after 24 February. An argument could have been made that a stronger Ukrainian conventional force before 24 February 2022 could have deterred the invasion; the effectiveness of -such weapons in prosecuting a successful defence and limited rollback campaign will quite likely make them necessities for other states contemplating their own deterrent/defence postures.

11 Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, 27.

12 Aleksandr Vladimirovich Dvornikov, "The Staff of Future Wars," *Russian Military-Industrial Courier*, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/43971>.

13 Ryan Gallagher, "Export Laws: China's big tech companies are selling their surveillance to the world," *Index on Censorship* (2019): 35-37, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0306422019876445>.

14 Dan Altman, "The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm," *International Organization*, 74 (2020): 490-492, doi:10.1017/S0020818320000119.

Authoritarian and even democratic great powers have not been deterred by the prospect of guerrilla warfare once they make the decision to attack/invoke.

While small states are encouraged to build their own forces, they are unlikely to act unilaterally, and are at times discouraged by their allies from doing so.

Alliances remain very important for small state defence and deterrence. While small states are encouraged to build their own forces, they are unlikely to act unilaterally, and are at times discouraged by their allies from doing so. In fact, for most of its alliances, the United States is expected to assume the retaliation/strike function for allied states. However, formal and legal structures have not become popular compared to years before. Alliance obligations and commitments have always been arenas for contention between parties; even with shared threat perceptions, there often are divergent opinions on how to best deal with such threats. Due to globalization, certain states have preferred more flexible arrangements rather than formal alignment, in the hope of being able to gain commercial and economic benefits by trading with their rivals, trusting that their security partnerships with third states may provide sufficient insurance in the event of a crisis. This 'hedging' strategy has been most evident in Southeast Asian states' responses to Chinese aggressive behaviour,<sup>15</sup> though European responses towards Russia during the initial months after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine also show similarities to hedge and try for some accommodation with the revisionist power.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, extended deterrence guarantees are subjected to questions of credibility, especially for crises where there is obvious asymmetry of interests and stake between the aggressor, the defender, and the state providing security guarantees. The likelihood of the state providing the security guarantees to commit its own forces to defend allies in distress, much less unleash a full retaliatory strike, has been discussed extensively during the height of the Cold War.<sup>17</sup> With the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the inability of the US and UK to meaningfully deter Russia despite their extensive support for Ukraine has reignited debates on the value of such security guarantees. Coupled with vague assurances, this perceived unreliability of US retaliatory capacity has induced umbrella states like the Republic of Korea to develop independent conventional counterforce capabilities, as embodied in its *Kill Chain* and *Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation* doctrines.<sup>18</sup>

This may be worse for maritime states depending on the geographic context and objectives to be contested. Unlike Ukraine which has a land border where its territorial defence forces and land power can be used to effectiveness, the ability to contest control of disputed seas and features will be dependent on naval and maritime resources that are comparatively less accessible, especially for states facing significant resource constraints. Geography will also pose a challenge to logistics as it is more difficult to resupply maritime states. Further, the nature of maritime claims and enforcement of coastal states' rights in exclusive economic zones entails sustained presence, which is best provided by persistent maritime platforms, rather than long-range weapons such as missiles. For maritime states, the option exists to engage in "active denial"; the use of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies to deny

15 Aileen San Pablo-Baviera, "China-ASEAN Conflict & Cooperation in the South China Sea: Managing Power Asymmetry," in *Re-Awakenings: The Study of National Security @50*, ed. Research and Special Studies Division, (Quezon City: National Defense College of the Philippines 2013), 211-216.

16 Ralph Gert Schöllhammer, "Why Europe Hedges Its Support for Ukraine," *Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-europe-hedges-its-support-for-ukraine-russia-crude-oil-lng-gas-imports-exports-kyiv-war-eu-membership-zelensky-putin-germany-france-poland-11653247453>.

17 Alex Wilner and Andreas Wenger, "Introduction - Next Steps," in *Deterrence by Denial*, ed. Alex Wilner and Andreas Wenger, (New York: Cambria Press 2021), 3.

18 Ian Bowers and Henrik Stalhane Hiim, "Conventional Counterforce Dilemmas: South Korea's Deterrence Strategy and Stability on the Korean Peninsula." *International Security* 45, no.3 (2021): 13-15, doi:10.1162/isec\_a\_003992021.

aggressors unlimited control of the sea and airspace which can be quite effective with the right weapons.<sup>19</sup>

A2/AD, while potentially effective, has its own challenges in providing deterrence, especially against grey zone coercion and gradualist seizures of maritime space. Grey zone coercion using deniable forces such as maritime militias pose challenges in crafting the appropriate response; as “fishing” vessels are wilfully being used by grey zone practitioners to discredit and frustrate defending states. A different strategy may be needed to thwart seizures of territories in these domains.

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Due to globalization, certain states have preferred more flexible arrangements, in the hope of being able to gain commercial and economic benefits by trading with their rivals, trusting that their security partnerships with third states may provide sufficient insurance in the event of a crisis.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul van Hoof, Nora Nijboer, and Tim Sweijs, “Raising the Costs of Access: Active Denial Strategies by Small and Middle Powers Against Revisionist Aggression,” The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, December 24, 2021, <https://hcsc.nl/report/deterrence-raising-the-costs-of-access/>.

# Analysis: Case of the Philippines

The nature of the threat to the Philippines is the persistent paramilitary grey zone coercion aimed at compelling the country to accept China's territorial and maritime claims, reinforced by the spectre of direct military confrontation.

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The Philippines faces its own unique deterrence challenges. Despite its legal victory in the 2016 Arbitral Award and diplomatic overtures from the previous and current Philippine administrations, China's military and non-military coercion against the Philippines continues to this day.

The incremental aggression by the People's Maritime Militias (PMMs), supported by the China Coast Guard (CCG) and the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN), has restricted the room for manoeuvre of claimant states (composed of Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines). Between this and the increasing military power deployed by the PLA, there exists an increasing threat of a *fait accompli* should China pursue a decisive resolution of the disputes in its favour. This is supported not only by the growing size and capability of the PLAN and other PLA armed service branches, but by their increasing role as an active enforcer of China's claimed maritime sovereignty and rights with regards to the disputed waters.<sup>20</sup>

The nature of the threat to the Philippines features the persistent paramilitary grey zone coercion aimed at compelling the country to accept China's territorial and maritime claims, reinforced by the spectre of direct military confrontation. Such threats by the PLAN is something that unfortunately the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), as currently configured, may not be able to unilaterally resist.<sup>21</sup> The risk of direct military attack by the PLA should the country respond to a paramilitary incident is a perennial concern, and the *raison d'être* for why the Philippines holds on heavily to its defence alliance with the United States. While the United States has been more forthcoming in its show of support for the Philippines in recent years, the credibility of its security guarantees continues to be questioned, due to the asymmetry of geography and interests. In the absence of a strong US forward presence in the Philippines, the cost of access for China to continue operating in the West Philippine Sea can be ascertained as to be very cheap to almost free.

It is becoming increasingly clear to the Philippines that a credible defence posture is important to backstop and provide a fallback to diplomacy. To this end, it has embarked on a decade-long defence modernization program that is set to create a credible defence force by 2028.

20 Koh Collin Swee Lean, "Beijing's Naval Posture in the South China Sea: A Post-Pandemic Update." *The Maritime Issues*, September 12, 2022, <http://www.maritimeissues.com/security/beijings-naval-posture-in-the-south-china-sea-a-postpandemic-update.html>

21 Rommel R Cordova, "Philippine Strategic Approaches to Address China's Gray Zone Strategy in the South China Sea," *Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress* Foundation, Inc., January 22, 2020, <https://appfi.ph/resources/commentaries/2932-philippine-strategic-approaches-to-address-china-s-gray-zone-strategy-in-the-south-china-sea>

Several challenges must be overcome to truly achieve this objective, particularly with regards to theory, strategy, and systems.

Current Philippine external defence strategy is extremely reactive, a consequence of the country's pacifist constitution which serves as a normative and intellectual constraint to Philippine defence thinking.<sup>22</sup> This concedes all initiative to aggressors, who can choose where and when to attack, and do so from beyond the Philippines' exclusive economic zone and into the country's interior. Any aggressor can do this with practically zero risk of retaliation due to the very limited reach of Philippine defences.<sup>23</sup> The Philippines is keenly aware of this possibility, with several academic scenario projections highlighting the country's vulnerability to remote bombardments before any invasion is attempted.<sup>24</sup>

Philippine force development is presently designed towards enhancing Philippine presence and awareness in the contested seas and airspace, while at the same time addressing other missions such as internal peace and security, and disaster response.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the AFP currently has a mixed force structure that is not entirely optimized towards deterrence, lacking technologically sophisticated capital units with long-range systems capable of force projection, or large numbers of disposable and cheap combatants (outside of manpower) that are advocated in some formulations of deterrence-by-denial.<sup>26</sup>

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22 Dianne Faye Despi, et al., "Short, Sharp and Multidimensional: Future Wars and Considerations for Philippine Defense and Deterrence," in *President's Papers: The Future of Philippine Warfare Volume 1*, (Quezon City: National Defense College of the Philippines 2021), 83-84.

23 The longest-range capabilities currently available to the AFP are: ~10km GBU-31 JDAM and GBU-12/49 Paveway II guided munitions and ~22km AGM-65G2 Maverick air-to-surface missiles delivered by Philippine Air Force's F/A-50 Fighting Eagle light strike fighters with combat radius of 900km; the SSM-700K Haesong anti-ship missiles of the Philippine Navy's two Jose Rizal-class frigates with a published range in excess of 180km. The Philippine Navy Marine Corps and the Philippine Army are in the process of procuring BrahMos land-based anti-ship missiles with a range of 290km, with the first batteries due to arrive in 2023.

24 Xylee Paculba, et al., "The Future of Philippine Naval Warfare," in *President's Papers: The Future of Philippine Warfare Volume I*, (Quezon City: National Defense College of the Philippines 2021), 68-73. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Plans and Programs, "National Defense Strategy 2018-2022," Department of National Defense, October 31, 2018, 32-35.

25 Office of the Assistant Secretary for Plans and Programs, "National Defense Strategy 2018-2022," Department of National Defense, October 31, 2018, 32-35.

26 Chiang and Shih, "Taiwan's Best Defense Strategy".

# Policy Considerations

A path forward is in developing a deterrence strategy that has elements of “active denial” and retaliation, supported by coordination with civil maritime law enforcement and other forces.

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Given the above situation, what can the Philippines and other states faced with similar threats do to deter aggression? A possible path forward is in developing a deterrence strategy that has elements of “active denial” and retaliation, supported by coordination with civil maritime law enforcement and other forces, to address aggression utilizing grey-zone coercion. In developing this, the following may be considered:

*Develop or revise small states’ theories of victory.* A key gap observed with the strategies of small states discussed earlier in the paper, whether guerrilla based or conventional non-offensive defence, is that it assumes the aggressor can be made to quit their belligerent actions via force attrition.<sup>27</sup> As events in Ukraine show, inflicting tens of thousands of casualties to an invading force may not suffice to convince the aggressor state’s leadership or people of a war’s futility, at least enough to facilitate an expedient and early war termination. In the case of Taiwan, the Philippines, or other claimants in the South China Sea, there is no guarantee that China will stop a military operation after arbitrary amounts of casualties, even if the goal of such an operation is “small” from the perspective of Western audiences. The PRC’s control of media allows it leeway to dampen potential blowbacks from small casualty events such as the 2020 Ladakh incident with India,<sup>28</sup> and it is entirely possible that its more sophisticated censorship apparatuses can allow the PRC to weather casualties similar to what Russia suffers in Ukraine, with regard to a hypothetical invasion of Taiwan. For such scenarios, an alternative theory of victory aimed at affecting adversary decision-making outside of force attrition in the battlefield may be required.

In crafting such a theory, there is need to pay attention to signalling and deterrence messaging. Even with a comparatively sizable force, it may not contribute to deterrence if the aggressors believe that a country’s willingness to use force despite an existential threat is limited, or that it does not have any capability to pose harm or militarily contest the aggressor’s objectives. Small states may be able to signal their potential to deter threats against their own security by procuring the right weapons, such as long-range strike capabilities.

*Increase retaliatory reach with longer range weapons.* Current capabilities of maritime small states like the Philippines and most other Southeast Asian countries allow a prospective aggressor to take the initiative to strike with no risk or harm to themselves, due to the lack of any long-range missiles or fighter aircraft to strike back, much less intercept them. Apart from procuring such weapons, more affordable but similarly ranged assets like the now-famous

27 Christopher Telley, “Guerrilla Deterrence: Can Small-State Resistance Preparations Fend Off Bigger Threats?” (Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018), 8.

28 “China Blogger Gets 8 Months in Prison For Galwan Casualties Post,” NDTV, June 01, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/china-blogger-gets-8-months-in-prison-for-galwan-casualties-post-2453816>.

Small states may be able to signal their potential to deter threats against their own security by procuring the right weapons, such as long-range strike capabilities.

Bayraktar TB2 or enhanced versions could contribute to increased striking power. In Southeast Asia, Singapore and Vietnam, and to a lesser extent Indonesia, have modest stocks of long-range arms via an assortment of advanced anti-ship missiles, theatre ballistic missiles, guided artillery rockets and strike aircraft, with the Philippines having started procurement on land-based BrahMos missiles. Closer to the region, Japan has decided to amass a stock of long-range missiles despite having a well-known pacifist constitutional limitation, recognizing the need to hold potential aggressors' operating bases at risk.<sup>29</sup> There are proposals for Australia to acquire long-range strike capabilities such as the B-21 Raider bomber as well as long-range missiles. Regardless of which options Australia ultimately acquires, it is understood that without long-range strike (or "impactful projection" in Australian parlance), they will simply have a defensive posture that absorbs punishment.<sup>30</sup>

The strategic effect of long-range weapons has resulted in several non-proliferation schemes developed to limit its spread. The incendiary reactions of great powers to a small state's acquisition of long-range weapons, as seen in the US reactions to North Korean ballistic missile acquisition and China's reactions to Japanese and Australian plans for longer-range weapons, provide further evidence to the idea that such weapons can contribute to small states' deterrence. Such weapons may contribute to a category of conventional deterrence known as strategic retaliation, wherein a defending small state may strike vital targets not immediately relevant to the ongoing attack but may be more valuable to aggressor states' leadership. Karl Mueller writes that, while historically associated with strategic bombing and nuclear weapons, technologies have since evolved that could allow some measure of accurate and precise strategic retaliation against specific key objectives without necessarily resorting to nuclear arms. Such a strategy may be promising especially if the aggressor in question is not deterred by the prospect of incurring large casualties on the battlefield or believes such losses are unlikely.<sup>31</sup>

*Consider alternative force concepts.* Small state force structures suffer from trying to do too much with too little. If effective deterrence is desired, reorienting force concepts to maximize deterrent power is unavoidable. One such alternative deterrence force concept may be to establish an air-maritime version of "concentric lines of castles."<sup>32</sup> Such castles will be built around long-range strike systems that can provide protection for maritime presence forces (discussed in the next point), and lookout for key targets beyond one's EEZ boundaries. This is broadly similar to 'fortress fleet' concepts used to describe the development of the

29 Tim Kelly, "Japan plans to develop longer-range missiles to counter China, Russia," Reuters, August 31, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/japan-plans-develop-longer-range-missiles-counter-china-russia-2022-08-31/>

30 Marcus Hellyer and Andrew Nicholls, "Impactful Projection: Long-range strike options for Australia," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 12, 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/impactful-projection-long-range-strike-options-australia>.

31 Mueller, "Relevance of Conventional Deterrence," 51-52.

32 John Warner III, *The Air Campaign: Planning for Combat*, (Pickle Partners Publishing 1988, ed.2014), 23-24, 102; Warner talked about five types of air superiority cases, with Case I being a situation where both opposing sides could reach each other's airbases and rear areas. He likened this situation to "concentric circles of opposing castles, where either side can sally forth and besiege individual castles, mindful of course that help will shortly come from elsewhere... if action is not taken to block it". The analogy implies that defended airbases are the castles, with opposing airpower being the forces that could sally forth. A defence force should aim to fight Case I for effective deterrence, as it is generally accepted that small states will never have enough power to achieve Case II (total dominance over an adversary) and is at risk of Case III (adversaries attack a small state at will). Cases IV and V speak of unilateral or multilaterally-agreed upon constraints to action; while politically desirable to reduce escalation for larger states, it leaves small states at the mercy of a larger state as the constraints condemn the small state to battles of attrition, which is to be avoided if possible.

Committing, procuring, and training for any specific force concept will require significant investments in resources, time and effort which will be difficult to amend if the threat evolves, or if the adversary engages in sustained multifaceted coercion using multiple different approaches.

PLAN in the early 2000s.<sup>33</sup> However, while most 'fortress fleet' ideas seek to use land-based weapons to extend maritime influence and fight naval battles, this concept of maritime castles requires small states to gain the capability to launch their own retaliatory attacks on critical military targets beyond just the seas. Such a posture does not eliminate the disparity between small states and larger adversaries, but it complicates the aggressor's risk calculus, as it can no longer conduct coercive actions at zero risk to important rear areas and valuable assets. Such a posture may increase the utility and deterrent value of small states' limited defence resources, rather than wasting them on an aggressor's more numerous and disposable forward forces. In the case of the Philippines, this could require developing a strategy and force posture that is capable of striking adversary bases and critical targets when attacked, rather than weathering an attack and fighting a naval/air battle of attrition that overwhelmingly favours the adversary or wait for allied rescue that may or may not come.

Identifying the right force posture is important, as the types of forces best suited for more conventional deterrence-by-denial such as mass-based resistance and attrition-based defence are quite different from forces that can contest campaigns of coercion other than invasion, such as grey zone operations or threats of long-range bombardment. Committing, procuring, and training for any specific force concept will require significant investments in resources, time and effort which will be difficult to amend if the threat evolves, or if the adversary engages in sustained multifaceted coercion using multiple different approaches. An example of the complications of "min-maxing" for specific threats can be seen in recent debates regarding the right weapons to defend Taiwan which faces multiple coercion threats apart from the often-discussed all-out invasion scenario.<sup>34</sup>

There are several challenges, apart from expected financial and technical concerns, that must be met to effectively utilize the above-mentioned weapons for deterrence, without posing a destabilizing threat to surrounding countries. A scheme might be to reorient and redesign the overall force postures to a non-offensive design concurrently with the procurement of such strike capabilities. This reorientation may require such concessions as reducing sizes of armies, which have been historically considered as the key offensive arms due to their capacity to occupy and conquer ground.<sup>35</sup>

Such a reorientation will come with its own issues and may well generate resistance, not only from expected adversaries and other states, but domestically. In the case of the Philippines, it has long been observed that the Philippine Army remained the predominant service despite the country's maritime geography, due to the preoccupation with internal threats.<sup>36</sup> Reorienting to naval, air, cyber and missile forces would logically require downsizing of the Army and reassignment or even elimination of billets. It would certainly entail a reorientation of

33 James R Holmes, "A "Fortress Fleet" for China," *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* (2010): 115-128.

34 Raymond Kuo, "The Counter-Intuitive Sensibility of Taiwan's New Defense Strategy," *War On The Rocks*, December 06, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/the-counter-intuitive-sensibility-of-taiwans-new-defence-strategy/>.

35 John Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, ed. John Mearsheimer, (WW Norton and Company 2001), 29-54

36 Jay Tristan Tarriela, "Why the Philippines Needs to Revise Its National Defense Act," *The Diplomat*, September 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/why-the-philippines-needs-to-revise-its-national-defence-act>



the country's strategic culture and thinking,<sup>37</sup> a formidable challenge despite the extant threat in the South China Sea. The AFP also has other mission areas expected of it, and there will be pressures to cater to those areas instead of focusing into a deterrent posture.

*Interagency collaboration for grey zone challenges.* Given tight budgets, greater coordination and offloading of presence and constabulary commitments to the appropriate maritime enforcement agencies, such as coast guards and fisheries enforcement units may be a politically palatable complement to the above proposals to invest in long-range strike. This would reduce the pressure on maritime states in Southeast Asia to build up their conventional navies to provide a presence for countering gray zone operations, which would otherwise compete with resources for strike capabilities more suited for deterrence. This also ensures that their build ups do not overly upset regional balances of military power. Both the Philippines and Vietnam are already underway in strengthening their respective coast guards, with Vietnam taking a step further by establishing their own maritime militia to complement coast guard and naval forces.<sup>38</sup>

Such a division of labour may allow otherwise cash-strapped militaries to focus their investment onto strike capacities that would more effectively contribute to deterrence, as well as provide protective cover for expanded routine presence and enforcement operations of coast guards, akin to what the PLAN does in support of CCG and PMM operations. It also allows small states to exercise a strategy of limited control to continue asserting their claims, but with less risk of overt escalation compared to purely naval responses to grey zone coercion.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the success of using this approach is dependent on strong interagency collaboration and seamless coordination between coast guard, military and/or militia forces. In the case of the Philippines, such coordination between the Philippine Coast Guard and the military is already underway and has borne fruit in responding to incursions such as the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident.<sup>40</sup>

Both the Philippines and Vietnam are already underway in strengthening their respective coast guards, with Vietnam taking a step further by establishing their own maritime militia to complement coast guard and naval forces.

37 Jesse M Pascasio, "The National Defense Act: We need strategic thinking, not a mad rush to legislation," Rappler, October 6, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/opinion-national-defence-act-we-need-strategic-thinking-not-mad-rush-legislation/>.

38 Nguyen Khac Giang, "The Vietnamese Maritime Militia: Myths and Realities," IDSS Papers, Rajaratnam School of International Studies, July 21, 2022, [https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22040-the-vietnamese-maritime-militia-myths-and-realities/#.Y8P\\_4XZByUk](https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip22040-the-vietnamese-maritime-militia-myths-and-realities/#.Y8P_4XZByUk).

39 Renato De Castro, "Addressing China's gray zone operations through Philippines' civil-maritime agencies," The Philippine Star, April 25, 2022, <https://www.philstar.com/news-commentary/2022/04/25/2176647/addressing-chinas-gray-zone-operations-through-philippines-civil-maritime-agencies>.

40 Erick Nielson Javier, "Rethinking the Philippines Deterrence in the South China Sea," The Diplomat, March 26, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/rethinking-the-philippines-deterrence-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

# Conclusion

The imperative for small states to develop their own deterrence capabilities is increasing in this era of heightened great power competition. Technological advances and scale economies could allow for a more level playing field between small states and the great powers, while forestalling or minimizing the risks of gruelling insurgencies that would cause incalculable loss of life and property to small states.

Of course, this does not come without risks, especially to valued international norms of non-proliferation, as well as regional balances and tensions between states. It may not be as efficient as leaning on large allies like the United States. However, recent events, as well as known socio-economic and geopolitical trends make it clear that current paradigms for small state defence and deterrence need to evolve.

The risks of strengthening small state deterrents can be managed; small states are less likely by themselves to suddenly become even more aggressive relative to existing revisionist great powers just because they gain a few long-range missiles or a certain number of strike drones. Strengthening small state deterrence capacity necessarily strengthens their leverage to engage in diplomacy without being forced into bad deals. It can also make the small states more credible as allies, as their strike capabilities can be combined to increase their groupings' combat power should a full-scale war come, while reducing the perception of free-riding and pressures for the larger ally to respond to small-scale, grey zone coercion.

Ultimately, strengthening small state deterrence is necessary, not only to safeguard the physical viability of such states, but to ensure that they can chart their own courses. In developing their capabilities, small states may be able to not only preserve their space but gain the competency and confidence to engage the world on their own terms, instead of being at the mercy of great powers.

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