Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China

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To cite this article: Luis Simón (2020): Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China, Contemporary Security Policy

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2020.1713604

Published online: 21 Jan 2020.

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Between punishment and denial: Uncertainty, flexibility, and U.S. military strategy toward China

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ABSTRACT
Most debates on U.S. military strategy in the Western Pacific revolve around the question of how to deter China. Advocates of deterrence by punishment believe that the Chinese threat is serious but not critical, because the United States can leverage its global military-technological advantages to preserve a position of regional military primacy. Those in favor of deterrence by denial point to China’s potential and “home advantages,” and argue that the United States should settle for more modest objectives such as preventing Chinese regional military dominance. I argue that the high level of uncertainty around Chinese capabilities and the evolving Sino-American regional military balance have led the United States to adopt a flexible strategy, and embrace distinct—even contradictory—operational concepts to deter Beijing: The United States itself mostly focuses primarily on deterrence by punishment, while actively encouraging and enabling its regional allies to develop deterrence by denial.

KEYWORDS U.S. military strategy; deterrence; uncertainty; strategic competition; U.S.-China rivalry; U.S. defense policy

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) of the United States warns that China is “pursuing a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 2). Against this backdrop, the question of how the United States can deter China from using military force to challenge its interests in the Western Pacific becomes increasingly relevant for experts and policymakers. The scholarly literature identifies two main approaches to deterrence: punishment (i.e., threatening severe penalties if an attack occurs) and denial (i.e., making an attack unfeasible or unlikely to succeed) (Pape, 1992; Snyder, 1961). Ascertaining what is the most appropriate way for the United States to deter China requires a clear assessment of the nature and scale of the military challenge posed by China. However, such assessment is found wanting.
Most scholars and experts seem to agree that China’s geostrategic rise and military modernization poses a serious challenge to U.S. interests in the Western Pacific (Allison, 2017; Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Christensen, 2015; Friedberg, 2011; Mahnken, 2011a; Mahnken & Blumenthal, 2014; Silove, 2016). What seems less clear, though, is just how serious the Chinese challenge is likely to be or, for that matter, what kind of approach Washington should adopt to deter Beijing (Christensen, 2006; Friedberg, 2005). Even if we were to assume that China intends to achieve regional military primacy in the Western Pacific, is such an objective realistic? Will Chinese economic growth remain steady enough so as to sustain a long-term military-technological competition with the United States? Will China be able to indigenously produce and operate high-quality military systems? Will it ever muster complex and joint military operations? And will Beijing manage to neutralize U.S. allies and partners in the Western Pacific and prevent them from balancing against it? The answer to any of these questions is likely to be somewhere between perhaps and to some extent.

How does the high uncertainty around the nature and scale of the Chinese military challenge in the Western Pacific affect U.S. deterrence strategy? Over the last decade, scholars and experts have hotly debated whether it would be more appropriate for the United States to leverage its global escalation dominance and thus exercise deterrence by punishment, or instead take the Chinese on their own terms and seek to deny them a militarily advantageous position in the Western Pacific (see, for example, Beckley, 2017; Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Hammes, 2012; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015; Khong, 2013/2014; Montgomery, 2014; Thornberry & Krepinevich Jr, 2016). Notwithstanding possible synergies, punishment and denial present important tradeoffs in relation to the capabilities required to operationalize them, the role they attribute to U.S. regional allies, and the importance they attach to the problem of escalation.

Punishment prioritizes long range air and sea strike capabilities that can directly strike Chinese territory (Harris Jr., 2017, p. 15). In turn, denial emphasizes the value of a disperse and resilient regional military footprint, or that of short- and medium-range missiles in Japan, Taiwan, or the Philippines to complicate China’s military movement within the first island chain (Beckley, 2017; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015; Hunzeker & Lanośzka, 2018; Thomas, 2013). The latter become more important as the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty opens the door for deploying US “theater range” missiles in the Western Pacific, and offset Chinese advantages in the missile domain (Cohn, Walton, Lemon, & Yoshihara, 2019). Allies are not that important in the context of punishment, whereas U.S. global capabilities and long-range strike are key. Yet allies become critical in a context of “active denial,” in that they would play a leading role and the United States would play an enabling one (Beckley, 2017). Another relevant
difference has to do with escalation: Denial is based on proportionality, and seeks to avoid escalation; punishment entails much higher escalation risks.

Much of the scholarly debate around how the United States should deter China has portrayed punishment and denial in alternative, contradictory, terms. Experts and scholars have largely followed a prescriptive approach, and focused on highlighting the comparative advantages of punishment over denial, or vice-versa. However, I argue that the high level of uncertainty around the nature and scope of the Chinese military challenge in the Western Pacific has actually compelled the United States to pursue punishment and denial simultaneously. To make sense of this puzzle, I point to the analytical distinction between U.S. regional strategic objectives (i.e., deterring China from using force to challenge U.S. interests in the Western Pacific) and the various operational concepts that can help underpin such objectives, which can be based on punishment as well as denial. In doing so, I seek to transcend the literature’s dichotomist approach to the question of what is the best way to deter China.

Instead, I draw on the link between uncertainty and strategic flexibility to unpack Washington’s practical efforts to pursue punishment and denial simultaneously, even if recognizing the existence of contradiction and important tradeoffs between the two. An in-depth examination of primary documents and extensive interviews with U.S. defense officials does indeed show a sustained U.S. effort to reconcile punishment and denial. A key and related question has to do with how to prioritize between punishment and denial. In this regard, the empirical evidence also shows that the United States is devoting the bulk of its own resources to underpin punishment, while actively encouraging and supporting the efforts of its regional allies to deny China a dominant military position in the Western Pacific.

The article is structured as follows. The first section discusses the relationship between uncertainty, strategy and flexibility, and elucidates on the challenges associated with striking the right balance between a flexible strategy and a focused one. The second section explores how flexibility can help us better understand America’s approach to deterrence in the Western Pacific, and assesses an empirical record that shows a mixture of punishment and denial concepts. The conclusions identify some of the article’s limitations and policy implications, and point to possible avenues for further research.

**Uncertainty, flexibility, and strategy**

Deterrence aims at preventing an adversary from using military force to revise the status quo (Schelling, 1980). It operates when the deterring state communicates which actions involving military force are unacceptable; indicates its ability and willingness to impose prohibitively high costs if the adversary engages in those unacceptable actions; and if the adversary judges that the
costs for using force are unacceptable and so refrains from the proscribed behavior. The literature identifies two main approaches to deterrence (see, e.g., Pape, 1992; Snyder, 1961). Deterrence by punishment is based on the threat of severe penalties if an attack occurs. The focus is not the contested commitment but rather threats of wider punishment that would raise the costs of an attack (Mazarr, 2018). Deterrence by punishment is often exercised by those powers who enjoy global escalation dominance over their adversaries, and are therefore in a position to take the fight to their territory and defeat them militarily. Deterrence by denial seeks to make a given action unfeasible or unlikely, thus denying an adversary confidence in attaining its objectives. Denial is the go-to option for the weaker party, in that it assumes it cannot afford an escalation that it would lose, and instead focuses on raising the perceived costs of an attack by asymmetric means.

The line between denial and punishment can be somewhat blurry. After all, denial does entail some degree of punishment on the opponent, whilst punishment would reduce the opponent’s capabilities and thus deny its wider strategic objectives (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2019). But three important distinctions can be made. The first relates to the main function of each mode: Denial is about raising the direct costs of the enemy’s actions (Snyder, 1959, p. 1). The second relates to the theater of operations: on one’s own territory or area of influence (denial) versus on the enemy’s turf (punishment). Thirdly, denial entails communicating to the adversary that hostilities will be limited to its preferred area of action; whereas punishment promises to escalate the conflict onto new areas and avenues, thus signaling to the opponent that it cannot control events (Rhodes, 2000, p. 47).

What is the most effective approach to deter China from using military force to threaten U.S. interests in the Western Pacific? Uncertainty about an opponent’s intentions, capabilities, and how the two might evolve in the future make it hard for any given state to rush into a conclusive assessment about its opponent or how to deter it (Fitzsimmons, 2006; Gray, 2010). Uncertainty compels states to engage in an exercise of constantly second-guessing and probing their own operating assumptions, and militate in favor of a flexible approach to strategy and deterrence (Betts, 2000).

Many discussions on the rise of China in the United States have revolved around the question of whether that country is a status quo or a revisionist power (Johnston, 2003; Schweller & Pu, 2011). The Obama administration’s designation of China as “a responsible stakeholder in the international system” and refusal to label China as a “competitor” contrasted with its concerns about the growth of Chinese military power, thus illustrating Washington’s muddled perception of Chinese strategic intentions (Campbell & Ratner, 2018). The Trump administration, however, has explicitly designated China as a “long-term strategic competitor” that seeks to challenge the status quo in the “Indo Pacific” (DoD, 2018). Such assumption appears to carry broad
bipartisan support today (Campbell & Ratner, 2018). Yet, even if we assume that China does indeed aspire to achieve regional hegemony, there is still much uncertainty around the ways, means, and timing of China’s alleged hegemonic bid. Critically, does China intend to use military force to directly challenge the interests of the United States or its regional allies?

The problems associated with how to ascertain an opponent’s intentions have been amply discussed in the security studies literature (Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Edelstein, 2002). Intentions—or, rather, a great power’s perception of an opponent’s intentions—can change overnight (Jervis, 1978). Moreover, a state’s perceptions of its opponent’s intentions can be tampered with by its own biases (political, personal, bureaucratic, etc.), but also by the opponent’s resort to ambiguous signaling and/or deceptive measures. In this regard, an opponent’s strategic intentions tend to be affected by its capabilities and (relative) power position: What one wants depends in no small part on what one thinks he or she can realistically get. For these and other reasons, it is often argued that states cannot afford the luxury of focusing on an opponent’s intentions, and instead, they must focus on its military doctrines and capabilities, and take them at face value (Posen, 1984, p. 17).

How to assess an opponent’s capabilities, and the nature of the threat they represent? It is also difficult to answer this question with any degree of confidence. Capabilities and weapon systems cannot be analyzed in isolation, but only in the context of other capabilities present in one’s inventory, and of the broader strategy that gives them meaning. The same military capabilities can be categorized as defensive or offensive (Mearsheimer, 1983). For example, tanks can offer the mobility and firepower necessary for offensive operations, but can also endow the defense with the necessary mobility to respond to attacks (Mearsheimer, 1983, pp. 25-26). Even shields can be used for offensive operations, for instance, should the rider wield a sword on his other hand (Gray, 1992, p. 28). This links back to the problem of ascertaining an opponent’s intentions, thereby complicating discussions on the nature of China’s so-called anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the United States (Montgomery, 2017). Some authors argue that China’s A2/AD capabilities are essentially defensive, and seek to forestall offensive US operations in its immediate geographical vicinity (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016). Others, however, argue that its advances in A2/AD give China the confidence to behave more offensively, and even engage in probing below the deterrence threshold through acts of “grey” or “hybrid” warfare (Montgomery, 2017, p. 20).

The U.S. government and expert community may indeed be converging around the notion that China intends to achieve regional hegemony, and eventually displace the United States from the Western Pacific. Yet, there is still much uncertainty about whether China is willing to use force to
advance such objectives, as well as about China’s capabilities and the evolving regional military balance. Against that backdrop, what kind of strategy should the United States adopt to deter China?

**The promise of flexibility**

The literature offers relevant insights as to how rational actors cope with uncertainty (Ghoshal, 1987; Knight, 1957; Miller, 1992; Schwartz, 1991; Wernerfelt & Karnani, 1987). Schwartz (1991, p. 6) has warned against the dangers of underestimating uncertainty, and advocates the use of *alternative scenarios* for the purposes of examining and assessing alternative strategies. The risk management literature suggests that most firms will tend to avoid black-and-white, exclusive choices, and keep their options as open as possible. In the face of uncertainty, a so-called *flexibility bias* leads firms to strive to be able to survive in the widest possible range of environments or scenarios (Utterback & Abernathy, 1975). A similar logic applies to the military-strategic domain, whereby the most appropriate resource allocation strategy involves keeping options open with “bets” on multiples scenarios, choosing the most adaptable investments, and relying on emergent learning to make the right choices down the road (Danzig, 2011; Hoffman, 2015).

The notion that an uncertain international environment forces states to adopt a flexible approach to strategy is widespread in International Relations scholarship. Flexibility is the contemporary term for a classical principle of strategy: it enables a course of action to be modified in accordance with an encountered situation which may capriciously deviate from prior anticipations (Hart, 1937). Flexibility is typically seen as a mechanism to deal with contradiction, which occurs “when two pieces of information are inconsistent with each other in such a way that if one of them is true, the other is likely to be false” (Choi & Nisbett, 2000). As such flexibility becomes a particularly appealing strategy for states in a context of high uncertainty about the balance of military power and how it may evolve in the future. A state that resorts to strategic flexibility holds contradictory assumptions about its opponent but cannot tell with a reasonable degree of certainty which of them are false and which of them are true. As such, it is forced to think flexibly, and treat them all as potentially true. Flexibility is thus herein conceived of as a rational response to strategic uncertainty, namely a state’s ability to adopt patterns of behavior (in military parlance: operational concepts) that are seemingly contradictory. This predicament resonates strongly in the context of US debates about how to deter China.

Most scholarly discussions about how the United States should deter China are bounded by two alternative scenarios, which stem from contradictory assessments of Chinese capabilities and the evolving U.S.-China regional military balance: optimistic and pessimistic. Such scenarios are followed by two
alternative (ideal-type) strategies to deal with China: ambitious and cautious. Optimistic scenarios typically revolve around the assumption that the United States enjoys a number of structural geopolitical, technological or military-strategic advantages that underscore its power edge vis-à-vis China, and that such advantages are likely to endure (Bialos & Koehl, 2016; Christensen, 2001; Ross, 1999). These advantages would allegedly allow the United States to pursue ambitious strategies, aimed at preserving its geo-strategic dominance in the Western Pacific, by outmatching and defeating China militarily.

More downbeat assessments emphasize China’s size, economic, technological, or military potential, and suggest that Beijing is on the verge of becoming a regional hegemon of sorts, and will even soon be in a position to squeeze the U.S. military out of the Western Pacific (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Montgomery, 2014). Such grim scenarios would compel the United States to pursue more prudent and realistic regional geo-strategic objectives, and give up on the idea of regional military primacy altogether. The end-game, rather, would be to prevent Chinese primacy, through some form of regional balance of power (Posen, 2014; Ross, 2013). Militarily, this means the United States would focus on leveraging its regional alliances to deny the Chinese an advantageous position in the Western Pacific (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Hammes, 2012; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015). Denial can also be informed by pragmatic considerations. Given China’s rise and rapid military modernization, and considering that a global power like the United States cannot divide as high a percentage of its resources to the Western Pacific as China, denial makes for a reasonable compromise.3

Which of these ideal-type scenarios are most likely to come into fruition? Should the United States settle for one scenario over the other? If so, which one? And what would be the best way to cope with it? Alternatively, is it possible for the United States to hedge its bets and invest in flexible strategies that allow it to navigate both ideal-type scenarios? What are the pros and cons of betting strongly on one particular scenario and strategy (focus) versus maintaining flexibility? There is no black-or-white answer to any of these questions, but rather fifty shades of gray. However, it is always easier for the United States to conceptualize alternative scenarios related to China, and the range of available strategies to deal with them, considering only the extreme options, rather than the extreme range of options (Wernerfelt & Karnani, 1987). Regardless, a binary framework serves to instill a sense of order in an otherwise inherently complex discussion, not to imply that the United States should think quite so rigidly about China or its own strategy to deter it.

I argue that the high degree of uncertainty that surrounds China’s capabilities means the United States cannot reasonably tell how threatening China is or will become nor, for that matter, what is the best way to deter China from using military force to threaten US interests in the Western Pacific. This forces
Washington to accommodate different assumptions about China’s military power and its likely evolution, and thus adopt a flexible strategy to deter China. Specifically, such deterrence strategy is operationalized through both punishment and denial concepts. Whereas such concepts may indeed be contradictory; their coexistence makes sense in the context of a flexible strategy premised on a high level of uncertainty about Chinese capabilities and the evolving regional military balance.

If, in a context of high uncertainty about an opponent’s capabilities or the evolving military balance, it seems advisable for states to embrace strategic flexibility, can they actually operationalize it? This question raises an important problem: It is much easier to keep an open and flexible mind than to maintain a flexible strategy. Admittedly, states are unlikely to ever give up on their quest for strategies that are flexible, and capabilities that are transferable, that is apt to meet different futures and contingencies. But that is not quite as easy as it sounds. When deciding which force posture to adopt or which capabilities to invest in, states must often establish priorities. After all, strategic flexibility represents a compromise, not a silver bullet. It might help a state hedge against uncertainty and remain relatively competent in the face of multiple futures or threats, but it will not leave that state in an optimal position to navigate any of those futures or threats individually. In turn, betting on a clear future, adopting a focused strategy and a single operational concept to address it can bring a higher reward than hedging bets, but is also riskier. This is known in the risk management literature as the flexibility versus focus tradeoff (Wernerfelt & Karnani, 1987).

Although flexibility might help states cope with, and even mitigate, strategic uncertainty, they still face an inescapable tradeoff between flexible choices and focused choices. The key is not whether a state makes choices—for it can always make flexible choices—but rather how it prioritizes its resources. An effective strategy must prioritize, not just enumerate, alternative scenarios, and prioritize the capabilities and skills needed to (best) navigate each of them. Given that focus and flexibility each have their drawbacks and advantages states will typically strive to achieve the right balance between the two. To do that, they shall resort to cooperation with other states. In this vein, the risk management literature suggests that a cooperative arrangement can give an actor (and its partners) a reasonable presence in several scenarios, thus affording it the advantage of both focus and flexibility (Wernerfelt & Karnani, 1987, pp. 192–193).

Making sense of U.S. strategy in the Western Pacific

The question of how to deter China necessitates a clear assessment of Chinese military power, and how it may evolve. This question is bounded by two sets of factors. The first relate to the assumption that the United States enjoys a
significant military-technological edge, a highly mature regional alliance infrastructure (which contrasts with China’s lack of allies), and that its superior conventional and nuclear capabilities afford it *escalation dominance*. These advantages would seem to buy Washington time, and downplay any sense of urgency about China’s rise (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015/2016; Lieber & Press, 2006). The second have to do with the fact that China’s rapid technological and military modernization, its “home advantages” in the Western Pacific and its advances in A2/AD pose a serious threat to America’s strategic position in the region (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2005; Mahnken, 2011a).

Different experts emphasize different factors, which lead them to different conclusions about the nature and scale of the Chinese military threat and how it may evolve. Yet, most DoD officials argue that the high level of uncertainty about China’s strategy, the quality of the technologies available to it, its force structure, and the skill with which it is likely to apply its forces make it very difficult to come to a clear-sighted assessment of China’s military capabilities, the U.S.-China regional military balance or how it may evolve in the future. Moreover, the opacity of the Chinese political and military systems and the importance of deception in Chinese strategic culture further compound this problem (Mahnken, 2011b).

The high level of uncertainty about the nature of the Chinese threat means that optimistic and pessimistic assessments of Chinese capabilities (and the evolving regional military balance) coexist. And that constitutes a powerful incentive for the United States to adopt a flexible military strategy, that is one that allows it to contemplate different—and even contradictory—operational concepts. Such premise challenges the central logic of the scholarly and expert debate on U.S. military strategy in the Western Pacific, which focuses on the question of what sort of China-related assessments—optimistic or pessimistic—are more accurate, and what approach to deterrence—punishment or denial— is more appropriate for the United States. Indeed, an examination of official documents and extensive fieldwork suggests that current U.S. strategy revolves around the premise that optimistic and pessimistic assessments of the military balance are both realistic, and that both punishment and denial operational concepts are therefore necessary, even if this may lead to some contradictions.

To be sure, the co-existence of punishment and denial in the context of America’s strategy to deter China does not do away with the problem of prioritization. It is seemingly difficult to predict which operational concepts will be more prominent or visible at any given point in time or space (that is, across the different sub-regions that conform the Western Pacific theatre of operations), not least because that will largely depend on the assessment of China’s evolving capabilities and position. However, a closer look at current discussions on which military strategies are more appropriate to deal with the Chinese military threat in the Western Pacific can help us get a better
sense of how U.S. strategy is evolving, and how punishment and denial concepts are prioritized and under which circumstances.

**From primacy vs. balancing to punishment and denial**

An important way to get out of the confusion that surrounds the debate on how to deter China is to establish a clear distinction between U.S. military strategy and the various concepts that can help the United States operationalize such strategy. From a deterrence viewpoint, the main aim of U.S. military strategy in the Western Pacific is to prevent China from using force to threaten U.S. regional interests. Whether such interests are about preserving the status quo (i.e., replacing U.S. dominance by some form of balance), achieving Chinese regional military primacy or something in between is beside the point. In turn, a concept of operations—or operational concept—is a verbal or graphic statement that clearly and concisely expresses what the commander (in this case PACOM) intends to accomplish and how it will be done using available resources (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2019, p. 45). A CONOPS thus translates broadly defined military-strategic objectives (that is, deterring China from threatening US allies or interests in the Western Pacific) into specific operational ones, and outlines the ways and means to accomplish such objectives.

At present, most scholarly discussions in the United States regarding how to deter the Chinese military challenge in the Western Pacific revolve around two broad questions: how to punish China and how to deny it an advantageous position. Punishment-oriented concepts assume that the preservation of America’s ability to project military power into the Western Pacific and move within that area with near impunity are critical to the security of regional allies and of the United States itself, and that Chinese A2/AD capabilities ought to be destroyed or degraded. In turn, those concepts aimed at denying the Chinese a dominant position in the Western Pacific rest on the assumption that the United States should come to terms with the harsh reality of Chinese A2/AD capabilities, and accept it will be unable to maintain the level of military access and movement it has traditionally enjoyed in the area. Instead, it should develop more realistic military-strategic objectives, aimed not at maintaining unhindered access and freedom of movement to/within the Western Pacific, but rather at denying China those very goods (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Hammes, 2012; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015) (Table 1).

Examples of deterrence by punishment include Air–Sea Battle (ASB), an operational concept produced jointly by the Service chiefs of the US Air Force and Navy aimed at preserving U.S. power-projection capabilities in the Western Pacific in the face of China’s A2/AD challenge, Global Surveillance and Strike system (Martinage, 2014) or Conventional Prompt Global Strike (Woolf, 2014). Some of these concepts are still in development, and many details remain classified. Proponents of such concepts tend to assume
that China will continue enhancing its A2/AD capabilities and that, in the case of a crisis, it would conduct large-scale preemptive attacks aimed at inflicting severe damage to U.S. forces and bases in the Western Pacific, disrupt its command and control networks, and destroy its supply lines (Krepinevich Jr., 2010).

In order to deter China from conducting such preemptive attacks, and to minimize the initial damage to its own forces and allies should the Chinese indeed attack, the United States would execute a “blinding campaign” against PLA battle networks, suppress long range PLA Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and strike systems, and seize and sustain the initiative in the air, sea, space, and cyber domains. This would require direct strikes into Chinese territory, and could lead to an all-out war between the United States and China. Blumenthal (2012) summarizes this predicament quite succinctly: In order “to stop or thin out a missile barrage,” the U.S. Air Force and Navy “would probably have to shoot the archer rather than the arrow,” and this “means hitting a substantial number of targets on the Chinese mainland” (p. 176). This has led some observers to dismiss deterrence by punishment for being “too offensive” (Hammes, 2012).

Deterrence by denial is about how the United States should exercise A2/AD itself, with a view to enforcing a distant blockade against China (Heginbotham & Heim, 2015; Mirski, 2013). One prominent example of deterrence by denial is Offshore Control, a concept that seeks to minimize the probability of escalation to a nuclear conflict with China (Hammes, 2012). Indeed, criticism of deterrence by punishment often revolves around the assumption that China’s nuclear arsenal imposes serious restrictions on offensive concepts that lean on direct U.S. attack on Chinese territory. Additionally, it is often argued that punishment is distinctively unappealing for U.S. regional allies, because they risk a full scale Chinese retaliatory attack against their own

### Table 1. U.S. strategy and regional deterrence in the Western Pacific.

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<th>Operational concepts</th>
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territories (Talmadge, 2017). These considerations have led the United States to think beyond punishment, and explain the increasing popularity of deterrence by denial in a Western Pacific context. 

Those in favor of deterrence by denial often advocate for establishing a set of “concentric rings” that hinder China’s military use of the sea inside the first island chain, defends the sea and air space of the first island chain, and dominates the air and maritime space outside the island chain. To do this, the United States can rely on numerous small islands from Japan to Taiwan and on to Luzon (in the Philippines), to provide dispersed land-basing options for air and sea defense of the gaps in the first island chain, and invest in mine and counter mine capabilities for denial purposes (Coté Jr., 2011; Gholz, Friedman, & Gjoza, 2019; Holmes, 2012). Deterrence by denial reduces the possibility of nuclear escalation, and also seeks to exploit America’s competitive advantages, by moving the conflict to a geographical setting that favors the use of “tactical actions that pit U.S. strengths against Chinese weaknesses” (Hammes, 2013).

Deterrence by denial serves a wide variety of purposes, and appeals to U.S. regional allies and partners. On the one hand, U.S. regional allies and partners do not have the resources to invest in the capabilities and technologies required for punishment. Japan constitutes a (partial) exception, but its armed forces remain legally constrained to strictly defensive functions. On the other hand, for political and escalation-control reasons, U.S. regional allies are likely to gravitate toward deterrence by denial. Investing in denial signals defensive intentions that can help reassure adversaries, and thus mitigate the security dilemma. According to a U.S. defense official, “it just makes a lot of sense for Japan and Taiwan to invest in A2/AD.” Last but not least, getting its allies to focus on denial makes sense from a US perspective, as it gives Washington a monopoly over escalation control, and allows it to mitigate the risk of entrapment. In the words of a U.S. defense official, getting the US to “concentrate on the offensive side of things” would mean “Japan would not have to do it itself,” and that “would also be most welcome from the perspective of managing the Japan alliance adequately.”

Punishment and denial present important synergies, both in terms of the capabilities needed to underpin them as well as in matters related to force posture or alliances. In the area of capabilities, many synergies can be found. Some examples include the importance of stealth or that of resilient, “A2/AD proof” command and control, communications and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems. More broadly, even the most modest operational concepts aimed at countering China’s A2/AD challenge in the Western Pacific require forward military presence and regional alliances. This can be explained by at least two reasons. The first relates to geography: China’s position in the East Asian “rimland” denies the United States “strategic depth” in the region (Krepinevich Jr., 2017, p. vi). The second has to
do with the fact that America’s regional allies (with the possible and partial exception of Japan) are unable to balance China’s growing military power without significant U.S. support. Thus, any credible military strategy in the Western Pacific must include forward presence and regional alliances.

However, there are also tradeoffs between punishment and denial. Indeed, most experts and defense officials argue that different concepts require different capability mixes, as well as different approaches to force posture and alliance management. Deterrence by punishment tends to emphasize long range air and sea strike assets based off theater, i.e., outside the range of China’s A2/AD capabilities (Harris Jr., 2017, p. 15). In turn, deterrence by denial underscores the potential of in-theater short and medium range missiles and platforms to complicate Chinese military movement, as well as the sort of asymmetric warfare capabilities that can raise the costs of a potential Chinese military invasion and occupation (Heginbotham & Heim, 2015; Thomas, 2013). Punishment and denial also have different implications in terms of force posture and the role of allies. The role of regional bases and allies is rather passive and supportive in a punishment concept, to the point of becoming almost redundant for core missions like long-range strike (Martinage, 2014; Woolf, 2014). Conversely, denial requires a more extensive use of regional bases as well as the active engagement of local allies and partners. To be sure, allies can pursue denial strategies on their own—it helps plan for scenarios in which Washington is itself averse to escalation risks (i.e., decoupling).

Punishment and denial strategies also assume different attitudes toward the problem of escalation. Advocates of punishment argue that unless the United States shows it is in a position to defeat thus punish—China militarily, its commitment to provide extended deterrence will not be credible. In that sense, they are less concerned about the risk of escalation, not least because they believe that U.S. “escalation dominance” reinforces deterrence. The flip side of the argument is that allies may worry that the United States will not escalate on their behalf. Thus, those who advocate for denial attach greater importance to the need to contain any possible conflict with China, and warn about the perils of escalation to a full conventional (or even nuclear) war (Talmadge, 2017).

Rather than focusing on the question of whether punishment or denial is king, the key question for the United States seems to be how to integrate both concepts in the context of a broader strategic response to China’s rise and improving military position in the Western Pacific. The 2015 National Military Strategy (NMS) speaks simultaneously of denying an advantage to an adversary and defeating such adversary (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015, p. 5), the latter being a precondition for deterrence by punishment. In the event of aggression, “denying adversaries their goal will be an immediate objective,” and that would lay the foundations for defeating the adversary. In a more
detailed document that addresses the specific threat posed by China’s A2/AD capabilities in the Western Pacific, Pacific Commander U.S. Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr. also embraces both punishment and denial, as he speaks simultaneously about the need for the United States to preserve an “advantage in a denied environment” (2017, p. 15) as well as working with regional allies to “enhance denial capabilities” (2017, p. 31). Multiple DoD officials involved in the making of U.S. strategy toward China corroborate that both punishment and denial are part of Washington’s strategic inventory to deter China in the Western Pacific.17 The problem, however, is that it is always easier to think flexibly than to act flexibly.

Punishment, denial, and America’s focus versus flexibility tradeoff

As already argued, certain capabilities and approaches to force posture and alliances are more apt for accomplishing certain tasks than others. A related question thus arises: What is the appropriate balance between punishment and denial? An examination of U.S. strategy in the Western Pacific unveils a clear division of labor, whereby the United States is directing most of its own efforts to underpin deterrence by punishment, whilst actively sponsoring the efforts of its regional allies and partners to deny China a position of regional military dominance.

When it comes to deterring China in the Western Pacific, most of America’s own resources and capabilities are indeed devoted to punishment. According to Admiral Harris, “[p]acing the A2/AD threat is not an option”; the United States must invest in the capabilities and technologies needed to “defeat an aggressor,” and therefore “must outpace the competition” (2017, p. 20). This is hardly surprising. For starters, the United States currently enjoys a significant military-technological edge over China (Bialos & Koehl, 2016; Gilli and Gilli, 2019). Any military conflict between these two countries would raise the specter of escalating into an all-out conventional war, or even a nuclear confrontation (Dobbins, 2012). And notwithstanding any “home advantages” China might enjoy in the Western Pacific, the fact that the United States has superior conventional and nuclear capabilities give it a position of global escalation dominance. Preserving such dominance is the foundation of deterrence by punishment. In this sense, most U.S. defense officials consulted argue that the United States is currently in a position to defeat China militarily, and that losing that edge would be critical to the preservation of a regional balance of power in East Asia, and to U.S. national security.18

Its military-technological advantages may well suggest that the most efficient way forward for the United States is to devote the bulk of its own resources to deterrence by punishment. However, Beijing’s military modernization and “home advantages” in the Western Pacific do compel the United
States to seriously ponder the possibility that the threat of punishment might not suffice, and embrace alternative—partly contradictory, partly complementary—operational concepts. In this regard, most U.S. defense officials recognize that different “sub theaters” (e.g., east, south China seas, Taiwan), warfighting domains (sea, undersea, air, cyber, electromagnetic space, etc.) and technological areas of competition are likely to require a different balance between punishment and denial. In particular, those parts of the Western Pacific theater of operations that are adjacent or very close to Chinese-controlled landmasses (like Taiwan) are already so vulnerable to China’s A2/AD that the only credible way for the U.S. to prevail there is by threatening with significant escalation.

Given the high uncertainty that surrounds China’s strategic development, the United States recognizes the importance of both punishment and denial concepts. However, the need to prioritize has led Washington to devote most of its own efforts to punishment while mainly delegating denial to its regional allies and partners. In particular, the United States is encouraging its regional allies to focus on denial, and is also supporting such efforts in a number of ways (Beckley, 2017). According to Admiral Harris, the United States needs to help “improve the multi-domain awareness” of its regional allies and partners and “increase their domain denial capability so that they can better protect their territory and enforce their maritime rights” (2017, p. 31).

An important example of Washington’s efforts to underpin denial by indirect means is the DoD’s 2016 Southeast Asian Maritime Security Initiative, a partner capacity building program that involves Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, Brunei, and Taiwan. Through defense aid as well as the conduct of joint exercises, the MSI aims to bolster the maritime domain awareness capabilities of US partners in Southeast Asia with a view to addressing a wide range of maritime challenges, including China’s growing assertiveness in the South China Sea (Rapp-Hooper, Chism, Kresja, Scharre, & Jackson, 2016). Also in this spirit, the United States and Japan have worked together to strengthen the coast guards and maritime law enforcement capabilities of southeast Asian countries with a view to strengthening their denial capabilities (Harold et al., 2017).

To be sure, the emphasis on building allied and partner denial capabilities does not rule out U.S. investment in its own denial capabilities where appropriate, especially when there exists potential for synergies between punishment and denial. According to a DoD official, it “makes a lot of sense for the United States to make some investments in A2/AD, especially in areas like air and missile defense, which can serve the double purpose of defeating A2/AD—thus setting the foundations for deterrence by punishment—and imposing A2/AD on China.”
Missile defense perhaps constitutes the best example of a direct U.S. investment in deterrence by denial. The United States and its allies face a multifaceted missile threat of Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) salvos including air-delivered cruise missiles, land- and sea-launched capabilities, as well as ballistic missiles. In order to address that threat, special importance is being afforded to improving the air and missile defenses of U.S. and allied bases and assets in the Western Pacific (Gunzinger & Clarke, 2016). Such improvement revolves around two competing lines of effort: upgrading existing concepts by means of “hardening,” “dispersal,” or “burying”; and investing in a new generation of missile defense systems, by leveraging the potential of laser technologies and electromagnetic rail-guns to make missile defense both more reliable and less costly. In addition to developing and fielding its own missile defense capabilities in the Western Pacific theater, the United States has devoted much effort to helping Japan improve its own ballistic and cruise missile defense capabilities. This constitutes yet another prominent example of U.S. sponsoring of deterrence by denial.

Arguably, the possible deployment of theater-range (that is, short-, medium-, and intermediate-range) missiles in the Western Pacific represents the most promising avenue for the United States to invest in deterrence by denial. According to a former DoD official, Washington needs to “invest in land-based anti-ship capabilities and land-based, short range capabilities” in the Western Pacific. The demise of the INF Treaty constitutes an important opportunity in that regard, even if questions remain as to which regional allies may be willing to host theater-range US missiles in their territory, let alone develop and field their own (Cohn et al., 2019). In any event, most U.S. defense officials seem to agree that while the United States should certainly not neglect itself the potential of denial-oriented concepts and capabilities, it should support them mainly indirectly, that is by encouraging its allies to invest in them. A U.S. defense official summarizes this point succinctly:

As far as the counter power projection business goes, that’s something our regional partners will be naturally positioned to do. We haven’t been in that business ourselves, so it won’t be easy for us to get good at it. So it makes more sense for our partners to do that.

All in all, by encouraging and sponsoring denial, the United States is hedging against uncertainty, and preparing for a contingency in which China achieves or gets close to achieving a position of military dominance in the Western Pacific. In order to do so without committing too many resources—otherwise needed to underpin deterrence by punishment—Washington is focusing on mobilizing its regional allies and partners for denial purposes. This logic allows the United States to straddle two sets of (partly) contradictory scenarios (optimistic and pessimistic), that is by embracing a flexible military strategy that incorporates punishment and denial concepts, whilst devoting
most of its own direct efforts to underpin punishment and largely delegating denial to its allies and partners.

Conclusion

This article has sought to shed light on the debate over how to best deter China from using military force against US interests in the Western Pacific. Most scholarly discussions on this subject revolve around the question of which strategies are best. However, I have argued that the high level of uncertainty about the nature of China’s military threat—and the co-existence of optimistic and pessimistic assessments of the military balance in U.S. strategic circles—explain Washington’s choice for a flexible strategy to deter China, that is one that integrates alternative—even contradictory—operational concepts based on punishment as well as denial.

Against a backdrop of high uncertainty, it does seem sensible for the United States to elicit black-or-white solutions to the problem of how to deter China, and operate with more than one framework of reference at a time. But ambiguity has its limits. One thing is to adopt a flexible approach to deterrence; and quite another is to translate flexibility at the level of specific concepts of operations. When it comes to designing concepts of operations, the United States needs to make decisions regarding which force posture to adopt or which capabilities to invest in, which might commit it to a particular course of action. After all, certain force postures or capabilities are more apt for accomplishing certain tasks (e.g., punishment) than others (e.g., denial). A key question, then, arises: What is the appropriate balance between punishment and denial? The risk management literature suggests that a cooperative arrangement can allow an actor (and its partners) to operationalize more than one course of action. In line with such findings, I have shown that the United States is devoting most its own resources to underpinning punishment, while sponsoring allied and partner efforts to deny China a dominant military position in the Western Pacific.

The analysis herein presented yields several implications for U.S. strategy and policy in the Western Pacific. Despite some of the contradictions featured by punishment and denial, these two approaches to deterrence also share enough basic principles (i.e., the need to offset China’s advances in A2/AD through military innovation and the leveraging of forward presence and regional alliances) so as to present numerous synergies. How can the United States minimize the tradeoff between punishment and denial as it continues to think about how to deter China in the Western Pacific? What kind of force structure, capabilities, force posture and alliance strategy would allow the United States to maximize synergies, thus helping it underpin punishment while more efficiently supporting allied efforts to underpin denial? Further
research should elucidate on these important questions, which remain by and large unexplored.

Notes

1. My research focuses on the period following the Obama administration’s announcement of its rebalance to Asia in 2011. I draw on relevant academic and expert literature, and multiple confidential interviews with current and former U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) officials. Between October 2015 and November 2019, I have conducted 31 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior U.S. defense officials and experts over multiple field trips to Washington, DC. Most of the officials and experts interviewed have or have been directly involved in strategic planning, policy planning, international security affairs, or Asia and Pacific security affairs. The information extracted from the interviews has been triangulated with data from official U.S. government documents and secondary literature.

2. Anti-access capabilities are used to prevent or constrain the deployment of opposing forces into a theater of operations, whereas area-denial capabilities are used to reduce their freedom of maneuver once in a theater. For a discussion of A2/AD in the context of Chinese strategy see Mahnken, 2011a.

3. I thank Robert Jervis for raising this point.


6. The depiction of optimism and pessimism hereby presented is based on an assessment of the military balance, not on a perception of Chinese intentions. In this sense, those who advocate for punishment may be optimistic about the military balance, but pessimistic about Chinese intentions. In turn, some denial advocates can be more optimistic about Chinese intentions. I thank Robert Jervis for raising this important point.

7. ASB has been subject to a good share of criticism, especially from the U.S. Army. Efforts to find a role for the Army led to a re-labeling of the concept to Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAMGC) in January 2015. See Schwartz and Greenert (2012); Van Tol, Gunzinger, Krepinevich Jr., and Thomas (2010); Friedberg (2014).


12. Interview with former U.S. defense official, October 26, 2016.


22. Interview with U.S. defense official, October 27, 2016.


27. Interview with U.S. defense official, October 26, 2016.


Acknowledgements

For useful and constructive feedback, the author would like to thank Jordan Becker, Caterina Carta, Jonathan Caverley, Zack Cooper, Linde Desmaele, Robert Jervis, Alexander Lanoszka, Alexander Mattelaer, Hugo Meijer, Evan Brayden Montgomery, Florian Trauner, Toshi Yoshihara, and three anonymous reviewers.

Disclose statement

No potential conflict of interest has been reported by the author.

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