

Katipunan Dialogue Podcast Season 5, Episode 2

Threat to Prevention: Understanding Deterrence as a Strategy

[00:00-00:16] *Opening Billboard*

[00:17] **Asst. Prof. Aaron Mallari (Host):** Magandang araw sa lahat ng mga naka-tune in ngayon dito sa DZUP 1602, and welcome to the newest season of The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast—where we hold conversations about national security and foreign policy. I am Aaron Mallari from the UP Department of Political Science, your host for this podcast.

[00:38] **Host:** The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast is brought to you by the Strategic Studies Program of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, o UP CIDS. Ang UP CIDS ay ang policy research unit ng University of the Philippines, at isa ang Strategic Studies sa mga research programs sa ilalim nito.

[00:58] **Host:** We are now on our second episode of the season and for today, we will discuss the concept of deterrence.

[01:05] In his first visit to the Philippines in March 2025, U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth echoed the White House's direction of re-establishing deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. For the country, this means deployment of more advanced military capabilities to the Armed Forces of the Philippines, enhanced interoperability, bilateral defense industry cooperation, and a joint cyber campaign. In 2024, the U.S. positioned a Typhon missile weapon system in the Ilocos region. This was coupled with larger and more frequent joint military exercises in the country. Both were seen as a deterrence tactic against China. While China continues to criticize the U.S. presence in the region, along with its positioning of the Typhon weapon system in the Philippines, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said that the country will keep the Typhon missile system as long as China continues to aggress our countrymen and claim our maritime territories.

[02:12] **Host:** Today, we want to understand more about the concept of deterrence. How is it different from provocation or aggression? And what is its ultimate goal?

[02:24] **Host:** We will be joined virtually by Mr. Matteo Piasentini, a senior lecturer in the UP Department of Political Science. Matteo holds a master's degree in law from the University of Padua in Italy. He once served as an official of the Italian Ministry of Defense. Although currently, he is pursuing his Ph D in International Relations and teaches at the Department of Political Science. Matteo is also an analyst of the China and Indo-Pacific Desk of Geopolitica, an Italian think tank. So, welcome to the Katipunan Dialogue podcast, Matteo. How are you?

[03:01] **Mr. Matteo Piasentini (Guest):** Hello, Aaron. I'm good, I'm good. How are you? Thank you for having me.

[03:04] **Host:** Alright. Can we do this podcast in Filipino?

[03:07] **Guest:** Oh, sige, sige.

[03:08] **Host:** Alright, sige. Let's get our discussion rolling. So, first, maybe let's go with the basics and the most fundamental question. So, what is deterrence, its different forms, and its intended outcomes?

[03:26] **Guest:** Alright, so, let's start with the big question, although let's try to make it understandable. In essence, in a nutshell, deterrence is a status quo strategy. An actor facing threats responds with a threat-based approach to prevent this threatful entity or we call it 'challenger,' in a particular way, and the aim of deterrence in essence, in relational terms, is to convince the challenger, the threatful actor, that the cost of acting outweighs the potential benefits. Or, in other words, the benefits of not acting outweigh the costs of not acting.

[04:17] **Guest:** So, in essence, the aim and the essence of deterrent is a theory or a strategy of stability, in the sense that deterrence prevents actors from changing what is the current state of affairs. And of course, deterrence is usually manifested in many different forms.

[04:42] **Guest:** We usually observe deterrence by denial and by punishment. And of course, by denial, that means that denying the challenger the possibility and the benefits of acting. And by punishment is, of course, in case of certain actions already happening, making it more and more costly. So, to prevent further, what we call, escalation.

[05:10] **Guest:** The idea of deterrence, and this is something that I find quite curious and quite amazing is that it's usually embedded in studies of strategic studies and so on, but it is deeply psychological. It is deeply psychological and pertains what states, in this case, we're talking about states, but we can also talk in terms of actors, are thinking of each other, and how they frame it, they read the situations and the dangers and the threats that are around it.

[05:49] So, yeah, in a nutshell, when we talk about deterrence, we talk about this kind of behavior that is usually declined in terms of tactic or strategy depending on the actor that is thinking of deterrence and the subjects of deterrence and the circumstances of deterrence. So, I would say yes.

[06:10] And then, deterrence is part of the toolkit that states, great powers for sure, so, great power and capable states like the U.S., Russia, China, and so on. But also, arguably, secondary states. States that do not occupy the same rank in the international balance of power, they all can employ deterrence.

[06:40] But also, this is valid for every state, deterrence is not the single answer to threats, and it's not the single answer to ensure stability. We have, of course, a plethora of other tools of statecraft such as, well, diplomacy, assurances, incentives, coercion. And of course, we shouldn't disregard that deterrence usually goes hand in hand with the participation of states in institutions, the respect of international law, and so on and so on. So, deterrence is not the exclusive way that a state has to address threats, but is it, of course, and I would say, the base to address certain threats.

[07:30] **Host:** Alright. So, basically, in a nutshell, deterrence means trying to prevent conflict, right?

[07:37] **Guest:** Well, yeah. In a sense, it is a step prior to escalation, I would say. And then you have deterrence within escalation, so what you want to do is to prevent further escalation or escalation at all, and we know that of course, escalation is the pathway to conflict.

[07:59] **Host:** So, you mentioned that deterrence is within a toolkit that a state has in order to respond to particular scenarios in international affairs. And you mentioned some of these other mechanisms that a state has at the disposal. So, what would push a state to not go for deterrence?

[08:27] **Guest:** Well, we can also argue that, based on what we see, a lot of states are part of a system of deterrence. Even though, let's talk about a middle power or less powerful states, even though they do not think in terms of deterrence, usually, what they do, so the other tools or statecraft they employ are based on what we call, for example, general deterrence. There is a powerful state that ensures that certain threats coming from other actors remain low enough for these other states to engage the threatful states in terms of commerce, diplomacy, even showing incentives to cooperate rather than threat.

[09:28] Well, an example can be, of course, Russia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the NATO alliance and the US nuclear umbrella in Europe remain intact. But all NATO states and all states of the Atlantic pact, in that sense, engaged Russia economically, diplomatically. They gave incentives and reassurances to Russia in terms of their intentions not to challenge Russia further.

[10:00] So, for several years, and then of course, we know the situation is a bit different now, leveraging on the big patron, which is, of course, the United States and the NATO alliance, which is the base of deterrence, many other states, including mine, Italy, Germany, and so on, engage Russia economically in order to keep the threats coming from Russia low because it's about shaping different interactions and framing the relationship in a different way. So, once again, deterrence is the base for further state action that is not necessarily limited to deterrence purposes.

[10:45] **Host:** We mentioned a while ago that within this U.S. grand strategy, or strategy, of trying to exercise deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, they would strengthen their military relations with the Philippines. To some, it may seem ironic to prevent war or conflict by threatening or projecting the possibility of punishment or repercussions. So, I wanted to ask, what are the conditions necessary to make deterrence or actually the use of threat to be effective?

[11:26] **Guest:** Well, that's a big question, but, of course, it's a pressing one, I think, for many states now.

[11:33] **Host:** Maybe you can cite examples from history where we've seen it effective.

[11:41] **Guest:** Of course, of course. So, first of all, yeah, I concur that it may sound odd because talking about deterrence is usually associated with notions such as the arms race, the security dilemma, and so on and so on. And we know that these are usually considered as pathways to conflict. But, deterrence, like everything, is something that states do through planning and through understanding. So, in a nutshell, even a less powerful state like the Philippines can think of deterrence and think of the use of its limited military resources in an optimized way in order to actually maintain what we call it a credible posture.

[12:43] And the main ingredient for deterrent to succeed, I would argue, is credibility. So, showing a certain commitment about what is your acceptable threshold, what are your red lines, communication, and communication does not mean threatening the other, the challenger, right? It is about saying what you consider acceptable or not with a certain degree of ambiguity because, of course, it's a game of information. And then, it's about backing your capabilities and backing your commitment to the red lines you said and keep on sourcing and having the will to collect resources in order to stand.

[13:30] Why am I saying that? Because a commitment to deterrence is not just relegated to, which of course entails the use of the military and other coercion means, but at the same time, it's also the base to build a different relationship and a base to negotiate from a different standpoint. Right? And so this is in a nutshell what makes the terms useful even though we're talking about military tools, but military tools can be employed for diplomatic purposes, right? So for communication purposes, for engagement purposes.

[14:21] Okay, well, when it comes to examples, of course, we already mentioned the example of Russia, right? Russia until the first Ukraine crisis specifically, so it's a solid 15 years of deterrence and engagement that in a way worked but also at the same time think about the Korean Peninsula. In the North Korea-South Korea situation, we had phases of divergence but also of dialogue between the two Koreas, right? And it is my contention, taking the side of the advocates for deterrence, that South Korea could be able to do that because of its deterrence capabilities towards North Korea that have to be unfortunately adjusted, accordingly, based on North Korea's capacity. But the fact that in certain historical junctures we see South Korea and North Korea, talking rather than fighting, it is probably the result of South Korea's deterrence efforts.

[15:33] At the same time, I would like to say, which is quite recent, India and Pakistan. We all know that those two countries have a very complicated and conflictual relationship, but because of deterrence, and because of a specific form of deterrence, they, and in spite of course of the state of tension and in spite of the incidents that happened, even the recent ones, the two countries never resorted to conflict, full-fledged war because of the deterrence capabilities, nuclear deterrence capabilities that each other have.

[16:15] So in a sense, we can say that sometimes there are moments of friction, but the overall stability has been maintained because before attacking Pakistan and vice versa, both actors are cognizant of the enormous cost in terms of disruption that these actions can induce. So, they are resorted to then talk, so, they go back to diplomacy. But, this is, my contention is only possible thanks to this factual material base of deterrence.

[16:51] **Host:** Alright. Now, so you mentioned a while ago that basically one of the key ingredients of deterrence is credibility, right now, so some may think that it will ultimately boil down to power, right, whether you can actually deter or not. So, maybe my question now is, and you mentioned a while ago that even smaller states like the Philippines can think in terms of deterrence. But I want to pick your brain more about that. So, basically, how is it possible for developing countries such as the Philippines to basically assert and develop the capacity to have this deterrence policy? So, how will the Philippines do it?

[17:41] **Guest:** Okay, so well, first of all, it is much more complicated for less powerful states to think in terms of deterrence. And I think that, at a minimum, these states have to think of deterrence in creative ways. So, in ways that are not strictly related to the military use or military response.

[18:08] But let me digress a second and just by claiming that even how rapidly technology is developing, especially military technology, this kind of pattern, so the multi-domain dimension of deterrence and engagement is something that states like Italy have to think of as well.

[18:32] So, having said that, the problem of the Philippines is, and this has always been the problem, is its lack of capabilities vis-a-vis Chinese assertiveness. And the problem is also that China seems to have the upper hand in determining when to escalate and how to escalate in a certain field. We call it the gray zone, right? It's never a fully-fledged war, but we have a low intensity kind of clashes that the Philippines is, in a way, unable to respond because it's living in a constant asymmetry, right?

[19:17] So, first of all, for states like the Philippines, the concept of deterrence has to be localized and asymmetrical. They cannot think in terms of general deterrence or regional deterrence. But it is my contention that by optimizing the resources to what are the stringent, immediate fields in which deterrence may be useful, you can actually craft, as the Philippines, a symmetric response to certain threats, and mainly the threats of Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.

[19:58] So, first of all, we have a narrower, more localized idea of deterrence in this sense, which is usually coupled, however, with what kind of general deterrence you are riding on. I wouldn't say free riding, because of course we know the cost that the Philippines-U.S. alliance brings to the Philippines in terms of autonomy, in terms of territory, in terms of everything, right? But at the same time, the Philippines should be cognizant on the fact that there is a good behind this, which is being under the system of general deterrence that is kept by the United States and the United States somehow are trying to buttress in the region. So, the idea here is that the bigger patron takes care of the general deterrence and you take care of what you can actually do and what is tailored for you.

[20:59] Now, this however doesn't really respond to the big question, how do we go beyond power and military, right? But I don't think we should go beyond this in the terms that we should discard it entirely. But I think this is the base for doing other things and having a much more nuanced assessment on what is Chinese power, the magnitude of Chinese power, what are the interests of China, understanding China in that sense, right, and understanding China from a position of strength and not, how do I say, and do not resort to the defeatism, which has been a narrative that has been employed sometimes to justify some forms of negotiation, right, with China.

[21:56] Now, after this abstract reasoning, let me just quickly narrow it down to what happened, for example, last year. Last year, 2024 was, of course, a year pestered by incidents in the South China Sea, and we all know that in June 19, a serious incident happened in Ayungin Shoal, around Ayungin Shoal or the Second Tomas Shoal, where a Filipino sailor lost his fingers, chopped by a machete during a clash with a Chinese coastguard.

[22:38] Now, the Philippines, thanks to the steps it took to strengthen the U.S. alliance, and in a way the reassurances that it got from its allies and other partners, was able to actually resort to negotiations with China. So, the Philippines, probably, we can argue that was actually, has improved its deterrence capabilities to the point that it can engage China and resort and come to an agreement for Ayungin Shoal. So, I'm talking about localized and specific actions that, however, have a stabilizing effect, bear a stabilizing effect. We do have much less, if not nothing, in terms of Ayungin Shoal after the agreement.

[23:34] So, it's a big lesson for the Philippines in the sense that yes, there is this overarching deterrence and stable material capability to respond, but this doesn't mean that it should be used in any case. But it gives you enough emboldening, I would say, to resort to different tools without being in a lower position compared to China. That is the goal, I think. And this is, of course, by no means a definitive solution or answer, but if we want to think about the theory of victory for the Philippines, given the natural constraints that the Philippines have, I think that is the lesson.

[24:21] **Host:** All right. So, thank you for that. Maybe to wind up our conversation but to also put you on the spot. I'll put you on the spot with this final question. Given the United States' ongoing efforts to rebuild deterrence globally, basically, do you think this strategy in the Indo-Pacific is going to be effective in deterring China? Or to what extent do you think the U.S. will succeed in preventing further aggressions from China?

[24:55] **Guest:** Oh. So, right, well, the answer, of course, should be, should be framed in the sense in light, of what we discussed. And by circling back to what deterrence is about, right, it is about raising the costs of action and keeping the benefits of inaction higher than the cost of inaction, right? So, what that means is that the steps

that the United States and its alliance system have to take in the next few years are of an unprecedented magnitude to respond to the increase of Chinese power.

[25:49] Now, but let me clarify this. I'm trying to objectify these actors in the sense that it doesn't really matter what Chinese intentions are, but by the fact that China is ramping up its capabilities, that's something that lowers the cost of aggression, of course, because the more capable you are, the lesser the cost of doing certain things. And the more palatable opportunities are, like wedges in alliances, U.S. disengagement, and so on, those are gaps that can be filled by an increasing powerful state.

[26:33] And the problem is that given the growth of China, and given how China is investing in this State capabilities and military capabilities. The challenge is real to maintain, I would call it maintain stability through deterrence.

[26:53] Now, is the U.S. effectively responding to it? I would say not yet. I would say not yet for two reasons. First of all, I think there's been a delay in the U.S. response to that. The U.S. has been engaged in many other theaters and even though there has been a tendency to pivot to Asia, right, to Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific, like we want to call it now, then we see in the Biden administration how the attention has been diverted to other theaters like Russia, like Israel, and so on and so on.

[27:30] Most importantly though, coupled with the notion of the U.S. needing to rebalance to Asia, there is also the idea that the U.S. couldn't do it alone, to deter China from further destabilizing the region without allies, without allies and partners. Now, the problem is at this juncture that Trump is coupling this with, of course, dubious, I would say, trade policies that may put a strain in Japan and Korea's relationship with the United States to the point that we're seeing Japan and Korea resorting to trilateral negotiations with China in terms of trade.

[28:17] So, this is not to say that there is no deterrence, but this is to say that there is no coordinated deterrence in this sense, meaning that Japan and Korea are feeling strong and secure enough to engage China in terms that the U.S. wouldn't like. And this becomes even more problematic when we talk about emerging states of Southeast Asia, specifically Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, that may be considered crucial now, right, to maintain stability. But of course, these are states that hedge, and so they keep equidistant, if not like now leaning more towards China, an equidistant position between the two superpowers, which means simply that China will occupy also some key areas of engagement in terms of security, making these countries not exactly reliable to coordinated a containment or ensuring stability. This is actually the juncture we're in. So, probably, if the United States wants to effectively ensure stability in the Indo-Pacific, looking at what is the trajectory of Chinese power, it has to do more. And this is simply a reality.

[29:40] And let me just briefly conclude also that while Europe still maintains a certain kind of security organization, which is NATO, and of course NATO has its own problems, there are increasing, we see the increasingly, we see the existing security institutions in Asia being increasingly inadequate to respond to Chinese power and to this different kind of security scenario. So, what is happening is that there are these new forms of security corporations that are emerging, like the Quad, right? We call it mini laterals, right?

[30:24] The Quad, but, in this case, I'm thinking about AUKUS more than anything else. And probably, if we're thinking strictly in deterrence terms, AUKUS is probably the biggest bet of the United States and its allies in the region because we usually focus on AUKUS and the submarine deal, but AUKUS is actually, we call it a technological incubator. There's this idea that the U.S. alone cannot make it alone, cannot respond alone to the increase of Chinese power so AUKUS is instrumental to ensuring general deterrence. So, we keep the technological thresholds high, we develop military technology in an accelerated and joint participated way to keep the cost of actions high. That's the idea.

[31:18] **Host:** Alright. Thank you, Matteo, for sharing your knowledge and insights on the concept of deterrence. Any last words?

[31:25] **Guest:** Well, I would just say thank you very much for this opportunity. It's been a pleasure. I'm absolutely delighted to talk about these issues.

[31:36] **Host:** I'm sure you are. Okay. Thank you, Matteo!

[31:39] **Host:** The Marcos regime adopted a new defense strategy that shifted the focus to combating external threats and aligning more with like-minded countries. Sa harap ng patuloy na mga agresyon ng China sa Pilipinas, patuloy na nagiging hamon para sa isang small and developing country katulad natin ang pagpapalakas ng kakayahang ipagtanggol ang ating mga teritoryo at soberanya. At sa ngayon, we can use all the help that we can get mula sa iba't ibang mga bansa.

[32:09] Maraming salamat sa lahat ng mga nakinig sa ating episode ngayong araw. Pakinggan ang mga previous episodes ng Katipunan Dialogue Podcast sa aming Spotify account, The Katipunan Dialogue Podcast. For more updates about other activities and projects of the Strategic Studies Program at ng UP CIDS, you may visit our website, cids.up.edu.ph

[32:34] Like and follow na rin ang official Facebook page ng UP CIDS at DZUP para sa mga susunod na episodes ng ating podcast.

[32:43] Once again, I am Aaron Abel Mallari, your host for this podcast. Thank you for being with us today. Join us in the next episode of the Katipunan Dialogue Podcast where we hold conversations about national security and foreign policy. Dito lang sa DZUP 1602, kasali ka!

[33:01-33:03] *Closing billboard*