



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### **The Taiwan Question: How to Think About Deterrence Now**

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#### **Introduction**

A prominent deterrence challenge now confronting Washington is how to deter China from resolving the Taiwan Question forcefully. There are many nuances to the Taiwan Question and the U.S. deterrence challenge involved, but the fundamental deterrence question is: can the United States now deter the Communist Party of China (CCP) from deciding to forcefully change the status quo on Taiwan, i.e., from removing the current democratically-elected governing authority and installing the CCP's own repressive governing authority instead? China's recent harsh repression in Hong Kong in violation of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration looms large in the background.

Deterrence success in this regard is not to end in any definitive sense China's desire to unite Taiwan with the Chinese mainland; that is a much heavier political burden than deterrence can

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or should be expected to bear. But, effective U.S. deterrence in this case is for the Chinese leadership to conclude, when considering its options for Taiwan, that the risks/costs of moving against Taiwan forcefully are intolerable compared to the relative greater safety of deciding, “not this year.” Deterrence surely cannot solve all geopolitical problems, but it may be able to accomplish that much.

Numerous commentators and academics present their competing opinions on how the United States should pursue deterrence in this case—there seems to be a daily publication on the subject. In most cases, however, this advice is derived from jargon and principles taken from America’s Cold War deterrence experience. That is understandable, but a mistake. The current deterrence challenge posed by China and the Taiwan Question is unprecedented and much Cold War-derived thinking about deterrence, including extended deterrence, is now of limited value.

### **The Taiwan Question**

The Taiwan Question, of course, is whether Taiwan will continue to have political autonomy, free of the CCP’s dictatorial rule, or come under China’s heavy thumb via Beijing’s use of force or coercion to change the status quo. Chinese leaders appear determined to resolve the Taiwan Question, whether peacefully or forcefully, within this current generation of CCP leadership. Although a precise deadline for this action is not obvious and may not exist, the CCP appears to have a general timetable that does not conveniently postpone this pending crisis to the distant future.

In contrast, the United States has declared its commitment to ensuring the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Question via Congress’ 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and subsequent policy statements by a succession of U.S. presidents. Indeed, the TRA provides the fundamental elements of enduring U.S. policy regarding the Taiwan Question:

- “The United States’ decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China rests upon the expectation that the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means.”
- “It is the policy of the United States...to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means, including by boycotts or embargoes, a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.”
- “It is the policy of the United States...to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character.”
- “It is the policy of the United States...to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardize the security, or the social or economic system, of the people on Taiwan.”



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- “The United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability.”
- “The President is directed to inform the Congress promptly of any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom.”

Since the TRA, the United States has walked the fine balance between two different unwanted possibilities: 1) backing Taiwan’s autonomy to such an extent that U.S. support effectively encourages Taiwanese leaders to declare formal sovereign state independence from China; and, 2) failing to support Taiwan’s autonomy to the extent that the CCP feels free to resolve the Taiwan Question forcefully. The United States has pursued this balancing act via a general policy of “strategic ambiguity.” That is, a measure of ambiguity in the depth and scope of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is intended to discourage Taiwan from provoking China by moving toward full sovereign state independence, while the same ambiguity also is intended to help deter China from moving forcefully against Taiwan.

### **Deterrence and Ambiguity**

It may seem counterintuitive that ambiguity or uncertainty in the scope of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan should be thought of as contributing to the deterrence of China. An ambiguous message is not typically thought of as the most efficient means of shaping behavior. Yet, in 1995, Harvard professor and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye exposed the expected deterrence value of “strategic ambiguity” when he said to Chinese officials that, in the event of China moving militarily against Taiwan: “We don’t know what we would do, and you don’t—because it is going to depend on the circumstances.”<sup>1</sup> This advertised uncertainty regarding prospective U.S. behavior explicit in Nye’s statement is expected to have deterrent effect. For many years, U.S. officials appear to have had considerable confidence in the value of uncertainty for sustaining the deterrence of China while simultaneously not stirring Taiwan toward independence.<sup>2</sup>

It is critical to understand the presumption underlying the expected deterrence value of strategic ambiguity. Uncertainty regarding the scope of prospective U.S. actions permits the listener, in this case the CCP, to conclude the U.S. response to a Chinese attack on Taiwan might be very powerful. The long-standing U.S. expectation that uncertainty provides decisive deterrent effect presumes that Chinese calculations will be determined by the deterring *possibility* of a very robust U.S. military commitment to protecting Taiwan and not by the alternative possibility also inherent in uncertainty, that the United States would not be so committed.



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When considering the deterrence issues now associated with the Taiwan Question, this convenient presumption underlying the expected deterrence value of uncertainty and “strategic ambiguity” must be understood: the Chinese leadership is expected to decide that because the United States *might* respond very forcefully, it will not attack Taiwan rather than deciding that the United States might *not* respond so forcefully, and therefore it can risk attack. The Chinese fear of the *possibility* of a very strong U.S. reaction will render the U.S. deterrent sufficiently credible to be effective rather than the alternative possibility that China will instead *be reassured* by ambiguity regarding the U.S. response and thereby conclude that the risk of moving against Taiwan would be acceptable. In short, uncertainty is expected to compel prudent caution rather than invite aggression. If the former expectation regarding CCP perceptions and calculations is valid, then “strategic ambiguity” may be consistent with effective deterrence; if the latter is the case, then “strategic ambiguity” may provoke the failure of deterrence.

Clearly, it is comforting and convenient to expect that uncertainty will compel an opponent’s caution and contribute to deterrence rather than encourage aggression and undermine deterrence. Yet, it must be recognized that because there is no way of accurately predicting future CCP calculations in this regard, relying on uncertainty or ambiguity to provide reliable deterrent effect is largely an act of faith. As Colin Gray observed in 1986, “The virtue of uncertainty that looms so large in Western theories of deterrence could mislead us. Strategic uncertainty should provide powerful fuel for prudence, but it might also spark hope for success.”<sup>3</sup>

U.S. deterrence theory and policy has long been based on the possibly optimistic presumption that uncertainty will contribute to, rather than undermine, deterrence. This enduring theme in U.S. deterrence theory and policy can be traced to the pioneering work of Thomas Schelling, an early architect of U.S. deterrence thinking, and his famous formulation that effective deterrence can be based on a threat that “leaves something to chance,”<sup>4</sup> i.e., the fear of uncertainty.

### **Uncertainty In U.S. Cold War Deterrence Policy**

During the Cold War, Joseph Nye clearly emphasized the expected value of *uncertainty* as the basis for the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence covering NATO, *not* the rationality of a U.S. nuclear escalation threat: “So long as a Soviet leader can see little prospect of a quick conventional victory *and some risk of events becoming out of control and leading to nuclear escalation*, the expected costs will outweigh greatly any benefits.”<sup>5</sup>

The U.S. extended deterrence threat to escalate a conflict in Europe to a superpower thermonuclear war could hardly be logical for the United States given the potentially self-destructive consequences. Nevertheless, the possibility of U.S. nuclear escalation and the



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uncertain risk/cost involved for Moscow were expected to deter Soviet leaders. In a 1979 address to an audience of Europeans and Americans, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger emphasized the irrationality of the U.S. nuclear escalation deterrence threat with considerable candor: “If my analysis is correct we must face the fact that it is absurd to base the strategy of the West on the credibility of the threat of mutual suicide...and therefore I would say – what I might not say in office – that our European allies should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or if we do mean, we should not want to execute, because if we execute, we risk the destruction of civilization.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the United States and NATO continued to expect that *the possibility* that events could be beyond control and the United States could illogically escalate to thermonuclear war (and had the capabilities to do so) would help deter Soviet leaders reliably.<sup>7</sup>

The expected value of uncertainty clearly was not confined to academic discussions. The official *NATO Handbook* during the Cold War stated that the alliance’s nuclear deterrence intention was “leaving the enemy in doubt” about “the escalation process.”<sup>8</sup> A now-declassified 1984 Department of Defense report entitled, *Report on the Nuclear Posture of NATO*, stated similarly that NATO’s response to Soviet aggression could take a variety of possible forms that would involve “a sequence of events” that posed “risks” for Moscow “which could not be determined in advance.”<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more importantly, Secretary of State Dean Rusk employed this approach to deterrence, i.e., relying on the opponent’s expected fear of uncertain risk to provide reliable deterrent effect, in a direct exchange with the Soviet leadership. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev raised the fundamental question about U.S. will and deterrence credibility when the potential U.S. suffering for carrying out its deterrent threat could easily have been intolerable for the United States. Khrushchev directly challenged Rusk regarding the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella by asking: “Why should I believe that you Americans would fight a nuclear war over Berlin?”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Khrushchev’s question asked aloud why Moscow should fear the U.S. deterrent threat when executing that threat on behalf of an ally could have led to horrific regrets for the United States itself.

Secretary Rusk’s response to Khrushchev reflected the U.S. expectation of deterrence via uncertainty. Rusk moved the question away from any rational logic of the U.S. threat to escalate and brandished instead the uncertainty of U.S. behavior as the basis for U.S. deterrence. Khrushchev should be deterred, he said, because the United States just might illogically escalate to nuclear war despite the potentially self-destructive consequences of such a decision. Secretary Rusk tells of this exchange with Khrushchev: “That was quite a question, with Khrushchev staring at me with his little pig eyes. I couldn’t call [President] Kennedy and ask, ‘What do I tell the [expletive] now?’ So I stared back at him, ‘Mr. Chairman, you will have to take into account the possibility we Americans are just [expletive] fools.’”<sup>11</sup> Secretary Rusk had put into practice the proposition that uncertainty deters over high stakes and at the highest possible political level.



### **Deterrence via Uncertainty Now**

When now considering deterrence and the Taiwan Question, it must be understood that the presumption that uncertainty will support deterrence, as opposed to degrade deterrence, is the privilege of the power that is dominant in perceived will and/or capabilities for deterrence. That is, the expectation that a context of uncertainty will deter the opponent more than the deterrer is the prerogative of the dominant power. If the state seeking to deter, in this case the United States, is not manifestly dominant in its deterrent power position relative to its opponent, there is no reason whatsoever to believe that *it will be any less driven to caution by uncertainty than will be the opponent*. A presumed greater U.S. willingness to engage in a competition of threats in the context of uncertainty can logically only come from some perceived advantage over the opponent. This advantage may be in will, risk tolerance, manifest determination, and/or military options – but there must be an advantage that allows the United States to be more resolute in an uncertain context than is the opponent. The dominant power may reasonably anticipate that its power relationship with its opponent is so manifestly asymmetrical that even a small, uncertain chance that it would respond forcefully will reliably deter that opponent from a highly provocative act. The weaker opponent must fear the dominant power’s potential reaction, and that fear may reasonably be expected to produce caution and deterrent effect. In the absence of some level of dominance, however, that expectation has no reasonable basis.

It is no surprise that the founders of U.S. deterrence theory were from that generation of thinkers and policy makers active immediately after the Second World War – when the United States was at the height of its power relative to the rest of the world. The U.S. power advantages at the time suited the narrative that the United States could endure uncertainty with greater determination than any other state. Most deterrence theorists and officials almost naturally embedded that context in their notions of U.S. deterrence policy: opponents could be deterred by uncertainty, but it would not compel the more powerful United States to similar caution and susceptibility to the opponent’s deterrent threat.<sup>12</sup>

NATO’s reliance on nuclear extended deterrence continued throughout the Cold War because, “at no point...did the [NATO] allies face up to the feasibility of conventional defense in Europe and the possibility of successfully meeting a conventional attack with conventional forces.”<sup>13</sup> Even as the United States lost its position of dominance during the Cold War, it continued to base its extended nuclear deterrence “umbrella” to NATO allies on this comforting presumption that uncertainty regarding a U.S. nuclear response would contribute to, rather than undermine, deterrence. As the Soviet Union continually built up its nuclear and conventional forces, the United States sought to ameliorate the increasing illogic of its nuclear escalation threat on behalf of allies – and the corresponding increasing doubt about the credibility of that threat – by placing significant “trip wire” forces (including large numbers of nuclear forces) in Europe and integrating them with allied forces, and by repeatedly affirming



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its commitment to allies. Sizable U.S. forces deployed in Europe could not magically make an illogical nuclear escalation threat reasonable, but they did provide “tangible evidence” of “the risk of escalation to total nuclear war.”<sup>14</sup>

The United States took these steps in a bid to sustain the credibility of an extended nuclear deterrent threat built on uncertainty even as the United States lost its dominant position and that U.S. deterrence threat became manifestly illogical given the likely regrets for the United States. Deterrence via uncertainty in this case also surely was aided by the history of U.S. support for European allies in two world wars and the U.S. commitment to Western Europe demonstrated after World War II by the U.S. Marshall Plan and the creation of the NATO alliance with its collective defense provisions.

Given the apparent great Cold War success of extended deterrence based ultimately on uncertainty, and the apparent past success of U.S. “strategic ambiguity” for deterring China from resolving the Taiwan Question forcefully, most commentators continue to assert essentially familiar narratives regarding deterrence as guidance for contemporary U.S. deterrence policy. There are, however, several solid reasons for doubting the comforting expectation that deterrence “oldthink” now provides helpful guidance in this case.

### **Contemporary CCP Goals and Deterrence**

Discussions of deterrence pertinent to the Taiwan Question often focus immediately and even solely on the balance of forces at play, with uncertainty as the implicit, assumed basis for deterrence. But the oft-neglected contemporary political background of the Taiwan Question is of paramount significance in this regard, and very different from the political background of the superpower deterrence engagement during the Cold War.

The key political background questions that must now precede U.S. considerations of how to deter and calculate the capabilities needed for deterrence involve CCP perceptions of cost and risk versus benefit: how does the CCP leadership define cost and what value does it place on changing the status quo on Taiwan? Does the CCP envisage a tolerable alternative to changing the status quo on Taiwan? And, how tolerant of risk is the CCP leadership likely to be when it makes decisions regarding the Taiwan Question? These are the first-order questions when seeking to understand the contemporary deterrence challenge confronting the United States. Answers are a function of the CCP perceptions of power relations and regime interests, including the national myths that shape those perceptions of power and interests, and CCP perceptions of U.S. will and power. The prevalent discussions in Washington of deterrence and the forces needed for it are unlikely to be meaningful for deterrence purposes unless they follow from the answers to these questions, however tentative they might be.



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For deterrence to function by design in any context, the opponent must decide that some level of accommodation or conciliation to U.S. demands is more tolerable than testing the U.S. deterrent threat. There must be this space for deterrence to work. Yet, with regard to the Taiwan Question, the CCP appears to have left itself little or no room to conciliate in the way that the Soviet Union did in its Cold War pursuit of hegemony in Eurasia. This is not to suggest that there was any philanthropy on the part of Soviet leaders, but they typically left themselves room to conciliate if they met forceful resistance. This boundary on provocative Soviet expansionism followed the Leninist adage to probe with bayonets; if you encounter mush, proceed; if you encounter steel, stop. It also facilitated U.S. deterrence success.

In contrast, Chinese officials have stated openly that they have no room to conciliate on the Taiwan Question. The Chinese leadership appears unanimous in the view that Taiwan is part of China, and that reintegrating Taiwan with the mainland under CCP rule is a matter of territorial integrity and regime legitimacy—*an existential requirement*. This appears to be a fundamental animating national myth across the Chinese political spectrum—akin to President Abraham Lincoln’s Civil War commitment to reincorporating the South into the United States.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, the spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry spoke explicitly in this manner: “When it comes to issues related to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and other core interests, there is no room for China to compromise or make concessions. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory. The Taiwan issue is purely an internal affair of China that allows no foreign intervention.”<sup>16</sup>

Such expressions might simply be CCP posturing to intimidate Western observers, but they appear to fit the high-risk circumstances that the CCP has essentially created for itself by making the incorporation of Taiwan into China an essential condition for its continuing legitimacy to govern. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has been explicit in proclaiming that this must be done, peacefully or via force, within the forthcoming general time period. In a prominent speech in October 2021, Xi proclaimed, “The historical task of the complete reunification of the motherland must be fulfilled, and will definitely be fulfilled.”<sup>17</sup> And, as the Hoover Institution’s Elizabeth Economy has concluded, “One thing that you can learn about Xi Jinping from reading all of his speeches and tracking his actions is that there’s a pretty strong correlation between what he says and what he does.”<sup>18</sup>

This necessary incorporation of Taiwan may be a near-term requirement. ADM Philip Davidson, then-Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, reported to the Senate Armed Services Committee that, “Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions ...I think the threat is manifest during this decade, in fact, in the next six years.”<sup>19</sup> Taiwanese intelligence reportedly has claimed that Chinese leaders have discussed making this move circa 2024.<sup>20</sup> Others have suggested even sooner.<sup>21</sup>





It should be noted that historical arguments that dispute the CCP's claim of sovereignty over Taiwan are an appropriate interest for historians and perhaps international lawyers, but they are irrelevant to this deterrence question. What matters in this regard is not whether Chinese leaders' beliefs are historically correct, but whether they are strongly and widely held – which certainly appears to be the case.

### **Contemporary Deterrence and the Political Context**

The primary U.S. deterrence goal is to prevent the CCP from using force to achieve a goal that the Chinese leadership appears to consider an existential requirement for its governing legitimacy – uniting by force, if necessary, a part of China, i.e., Taiwan, deemed to have been unfairly wrested from the motherland. The apparent CCP perspective that Taiwan is a part of China and must be reunited or risk the loss of legitimacy to rule is of enormous significance for deterrence. Multiple studies show that decision-makers who consider themselves aggrieved and responding to the prospect of loss may accept increased levels of risk in their behavioral choices.<sup>22</sup> Equally important for U.S. deterrence considerations in this regard is the pertinent conclusion, based on a careful examination of historical case studies, that: “To the extent that leaders perceive the need to act, they become insensitive to the interests and commitments of others that stand in the way of the success of their policy.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, the United States would be the party standing in the way.

CCP perceptions and calculations of risk, cost and reward with regard to Taiwan appear to combine both of these factors and so render the U.S. deterrence goal an unparalleled challenge: Chinese leaders believe Taiwan to be an unarguable part of China – it is rightfully theirs – and they must act sooner rather than later to unite Taiwan with the motherland, with force if necessary. This is a matter of restoring China after past humiliation. The CCP's perceived need may be near absolute and Chinese leaders may thus be relatively “insensitive to the interests and commitments of others” who stand in the way of their cherished goal. If so, they have given themselves little or no room to conciliate – no space for deterrence to work.

If the basic CCP political beliefs are properly characterized here, fundamental questions must be asked: is there deterrence space to operate in this case, even in principle? If so, does an uncertain U.S. commitment to support Taiwan, i.e., “strategic ambiguity,” now contribute to or degrade deterrence? Can the old notions that the opponent's uncertainty about U.S. actions – with repeated U.S. expressions of a general commitment – provide adequate U.S. deterrence credibility? These fundamental questions seem to be only rarely aired, perhaps because an old seeming deterrence truth is convenient and comforting, i.e., deterrence is promoted by uncertainty and repeated U.S. expressions of a commitment.

Yet, as noted, the approach to extending deterrence that simply complements uncertainty with repeatedly-expressed U.S. commitments is a potentially coherent and logical strategy only for



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the dominant power. And, while, during the Cold War, the United States essentially continued to follow this general deterrence strategy even as U.S. military dominance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union faded, it took costly steps to preserve its deterrence position *that appear to be nowhere in sight for Taiwan*. Perhaps more importantly, the United States never had to contend with a Soviet leadership that was driven by the belief that NATO territory belonged to Moscow – territory which, as a matter of national integrity and regime survival, had to be recovered sooner rather than later. Cold War extended deterrence did not have to carry such a heavy load. Indeed, the political background of the contemporary deterrence goal could not be more different from that of the Cold War, nor more challenging for deterrence as U.S. dominance ebbs vis-à-vis China in Asia. In short, the United States now faces the unprecedented question of how, without forms of dominance, to deter an opponent who may perceive an existential risk in *not* violating U.S. deterrence redlines?

This political background of the contemporary Taiwan Question makes the U.S. deterrence goal much more problematic, especially as the United States appears to be losing the military dominance that could, in principle, make its favored approach to deterrence coherent – in this case characterized by “strategic ambiguity.” The United States, understandably, would like to continue enjoying the benefits of effective deterrence via uncertainty without expending the effort now needed to sustain a dominant position, but the past circumstances that favored this U.S. approach to deterrence are not a U.S. birthright. The United States took extensive and expensive steps to help preserve its deterrence position during the Cold War even as it lost dominance. However, unlike in the Cold War, and in the absence of any comparable steps, the United States appears now to face a foe that is virtually compelled by the political context to challenge the U.S. position, by force if necessary. Indeed, in its pursuit of Taiwan, China likely cannot, and does not appear to share the caution generally practiced by the Soviet Union in its pursuit of expansionist goals – caution possible for the Soviet Union because it was not dedicated to an expansionist goal it deemed to be of existential importance. This fundamental difference in the political context degrades the value of the early U.S. Cold War deterrence experience that underlies most contemporary discussions of the subject. Commentary on deterrence and its requirements that misses this unique critical political context is unlikely to be helpful.

### **A Changing Correlation of Nuclear Forces and Contemporary Deterrence**

Nuclear forces are far from the entire picture with regard to CCP and U.S. deterrence decision making pertinent to the Taiwan Question. Yet, nuclear weapons will, without doubt, cast a shadow over any great power confrontation, and the potential effects of that shadow on the resolution of the Taiwan Question may be significant, even decisive. Even a quick look reveals that, again, the United States faces an unprecedented deterrence challenge.



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Unlike the U.S. extended deterrent to allies during the Cold War that included the threat of nuclear escalation in the event of Soviet attack, the United States does not have any apparent nuclear umbrella commitment to Taiwan and no bloody history of national sacrifice for Taiwan. And, while the Cold War extended deterrent was accompanied by the U.S. deployment of large numbers of “trip wire forces” and thousands of forward-deployed nuclear weapons to buttress its credibility, the United States appears to have no serious “trip wire” forces on Taiwan and eliminated virtually all of its forward-deployable, non-strategic nuclear weapons following the end of the Cold War.<sup>24</sup> Even the venerable submarine-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile (TLAM-N) was retired from service a decade ago.

In contrast, China may leave open the option of nuclear first use with regard to the Taiwan Question and has numerous and expanding nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities to support the forceful resolution of the Taiwan Question, if necessary. The United States now faces the possible reality of an opponent with both local conventional force advantages and a nuclear escalation threat in the event of a conflict over Taiwan. The United States must, correspondingly, deal with the caution that context must force on Washington—it has no readily-apparent deterrence advantage in this context, no deterrence dominance. The United States and NATO built their deterrence policy against the Soviet Union on the presumption that Soviet leaders would be compelled to caution by the West’s threat of nuclear escalation—however uncertain. Yet, now it is the United States that must face a possible Chinese nuclear escalation threat with no apparent advantages to mitigate its deterring effect other than the capability to engage in a nuclear escalation process that could be self-destructive. The CCP understandably appears to express the view that it is not China but the United States that will be compelled to greater caution by the uncertainty and risks of this context.<sup>25</sup> The potential for Chinese nuclear escalation and its overriding determination given its stakes in this case certainly makes this turnabout plausible. The United States must calculate whether it or China is the party more willing to risk great injury if the CCP decides to resolve the Taiwan Question forcefully. The basic facts of the engagement hardly point to greater U.S. will to engage in a competition of threats, potentially including nuclear threats, in the absence of U.S. advantages that help to mitigate the risks for the United States.

For decades, the United States has been the undisputed dominant power in the Taiwan Strait. Given this power position, reliance on “strategic ambiguity” and uncertainty to deter was a logical option once the United States proclaimed its commitment to Taiwan. The CCP could reasonably be expected to be cautious and thus deterred by uncertainty given the significant U.S. power advantages. That U.S. dominance appears to be fading fast or has ended. Yet, the United States still appears to rely on uncertainty to deter. Unfortunately, in the absence of some U.S. deterrence advantage that is not now obvious, there is no apparent reason for the CCP to be more cautious in an uncertain context than the United States—and given the asymmetry of stakes involved, there is reason to expect the CCP to be less cautious than the United States. These are the harsh structural deterrence realities imposed by the context of this



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case, particularly its political background. Pointing to the currently larger raw number of U.S. strategic nuclear weapons alone does not alter these basic realities.

### Conclusion

There are indeed steps the United States could take to help restore its deterrence position in this case. But unless/until the stark deterrence problem is recognized for what it is, recommendations in this regard undoubtedly will fall on deaf ears. No variations in the repeated U.S. affirmations of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan—including more or less ambiguity—nor new labels for U.S. deterrence strategies can address the structural challenge to U.S. deterrence goals posed by the shifting correlation of forces and the political background of the Taiwan Question. Changes in language suggest action, but cannot solve basic political and material problems. Herman Kahn emphasized this point regarding deterrence more than six decades ago: “About all an unprepared government can do is to say over and over, ‘the other side doesn’t really want war.’ Then they can hope they are right. However, this same government can scarcely expect to make up by sheer determination what it lacks in preparation. How can it persuade its opponent of its own willingness to go to war if the situation demands it?”<sup>26</sup> And, “Usually the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing.”<sup>27</sup> The basic structure of the deterrence equation in this case appears to argue that China is the more willing and that uncertainty need not work in favor of the United States—these realities must be the starting point for U.S. deterrence considerations.

If the United States is to deter by design in this case, it must recover some form of deterrence advantage that addresses a context in which the opponent appears to be extremely committed to an existential goal in opposition to the U.S. deterrence redline, and has consciously sought to shift the correlation of forces, including nuclear forces, to its advantage for the very purpose of defeating the U.S. deterrence position and attaining its goal. The fundamental deterrence questions that must be addressed by the United States are what form of dominance might it preserve, or more likely regain, that would support the credible deterrence strategy it needs to uphold the U.S. position expressed in the 1979 TRA, and how can it achieve that position?

Identifying that advantage and moving toward it is likely to involve considerable expense—much as it did in Europe during the Cold War. More costly, however, would be a successful CCP campaign to forcefully take and occupy Taiwan. The consequences for the United States in terms of its alliances, nuclear proliferation, and the ability to operate freely in the Pacific would be disastrous, if not existential.

It is, however, an open question whether U.S. policy makers will recognize and respond adequately to the deterrence challenge now facing the United States and the demands for innovative U.S. thinking and actions that challenge now imposes on Washington. U.S. leaders must identify how to restore the U.S. deterrence position and then decide if the value of doing



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so is worth the price tag. It seems self-evident that effective deterrence is well worth the cost, but the United States has had a persistent and strong internal political call for deterrence without undue effort and, for some, the Cold War lesson made possible by the combination of unparalleled U.S. power and a generally prudent Soviet foe seems to be that the United States can declare its deterrence commitments and foes will reliably bow to U.S. dominance and comply with expressed U.S. redlines. But, that world no longer exists. The deterrence lesson from the Cold War that should now inform us is that the United States needs to recover an advantageous deterrence position tailored to the opponent and context if it hopes to deter by design vice luck. Unfortunately, that context and opponent with regard to the Taiwan Question now present unprecedented challenges for U.S. deterrence goals. The previous generations of U.S. civilian and military leaders took extensive steps to help preserve an adequate deterrence position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The question is whether the current generation of U.S. leaders will seek to do the same vis-à-vis China and accept the expense involved, or cling to past notions of deterrence as an enduring U.S. birthright that are likely to fail in current circumstances. The consequences of the latter would be disastrous, but the verdict is not yet in and time will tell.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Martin L. Lasater, "A U.S. Perception of a PLA Invasion of Taiwan," in Peter Kien-hong Yu, ed., *The Chinese PLA's Perception of an Invasion of Taiwan* (New York: Contemporary U.S.-Asia Research Institute, 1996), p. 252. See also, *Press Briefing by Deputy Press Secretaries Barry Toiv and David Leavy*, August 13, 1999, Transcript released by the Office of the White House Press Secretary, available at, <http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/I2R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1999/13/8.text.1>; and, *Press Briefing by National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, National Economic Advisor Gene Sperling, and Press Secretary Joe Lockhart*, Sky City Hotel, Auckland, New Zealand, September 11, 1999, Transcript released by the Office of the White House Press Secretary, available at, <http://www.pub.whitehouse.gov/urires/I2R?urn:pdi://oma.eop.gov.us/1999/9/12/7.text.1>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Demetri Sevastopulo and Andrew Ward, "Clinton Backs 'Ambiguity' on Taiwan Policy," *Financial Times*, August 3, 2007, available at, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/fd5cc702-4153-11dc-8f37-0000779fd2ac.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> See, Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp.187-188.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph S. Nye, "The Role of Strategic Nuclear Systems in Deterrence," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1988), p. 47. (Emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> See, Henry Kissinger, "The Future of NATO," in *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> British Defence Minister Denis Healy captured this belief with his famous dictum that, "it takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians," i.e., an almost entirely incredible threat would suffice for deterrence. See Denis Healey, *The time of my life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Information Series, February 1974), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Posture of NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 1, 1984), (Secret/Restricted Data; declassified in part, October 1984), available at, [http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/reading\\_room/394.pdf](http://www.dod.mil/pubs/foi/reading_room/394.pdf).



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<sup>10</sup> Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. See also, Arnold Beichman, "How Foolish Khrushchev Nearly Started World War III," *The Washington Times*, October 3, 2004, p. B 8.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of this expectation reflected in U.S. deterrence theory in, Keith B. Payne, *The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice From the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2008), pp. 255-261.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence S. Kaplan, Donald D. Landa, and Edward J. Drea, *The McNamara Ascendancy 1961-1965, History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, Vol. 5, (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006), p. 309.

<sup>14</sup> *NATO Handbook*, op cit., p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> The author would like to thank Heino Klinck, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia, for suggesting this analogy regarding the CCP commitment to reuniting Taiwan with the Chinese homeland.

<sup>16</sup> "China Vows No Concession on Taiwan After Biden's Comments," *AP News*, October 22, 2021, available at, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-china-beijing-taiwan-f4fdeb6e15097d55f5d4c06b5f8c9c29>.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Ni, "Xi Jinping vows to fulfill Taiwan 'reunification' with China by peaceful means," *The Guardian*, October 9, 2021, available at, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/09/xi-jinping-vows-taiwans-reunification-with-china-will-be-fulfilled/>.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in, Demetri Sevastopulo and Kathrin Hille, "Washington Shies Away From Open Declaration to Defend Taiwan White House Official Says Shift to 'Strategic Clarity' Would Carry 'Downsides' in Face of China's Belligerence," *Financial Times Online* (UK), May 5, 2021, available at, <https://www.ft.com/content/26b03f60-ac06-4829-b2ed-da78ac47116a>.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Davidson, "China Could Invade Taiwan in Next Six Years, Top Admiral Warns," *The Guardian* (UK), March 9, 2021, available at, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in, Rachael Bunyan, "China 'has Debated Invading Taiwan Islands After 2024,' Taiwan Security Official Claims," *Daily Mail* (UK), November 4, 2021, available at, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10165601/China-debated-invading-Taiwan-islands-2024-Taiwan-security-official-claims.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See, Jimmy Quinn, "Beijing's Taiwan Invasion Timeline: Two Predictions," *National Review*, November 9, 2021, available at, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/beijings-taiwan-invasion-timeline-two-predictions/>.

<sup>22</sup> See the discussion in, Jack S. Levy, "Applications of Prospect Theory to Political Science," *Synthese*, Vol. 135, No. 2 (May 2003), pp. 215-241. See also, Robert Jervis, "Political Implications of Loss Aversion," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1992), pp. 187-204; Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 70; and, Thomas Scheber, "Evolutionary Psychology: Cognitive Function, and Deterrence," in *Understanding Deterrence*, Keith B. Payne, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 65-92.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, "The Deterrence Deadlock: Is There a Way Out?," in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology & Deterrence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 183.

<sup>24</sup> See, Susan J. Koch, *Case Study Series, The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2021), available at, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd\\_casestudy-5.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, "China's Will Stronger Than USA Commitment to Taiwan," *Global Times* (China), October 15, 2021, available at, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236363.shtml>.

<sup>26</sup> Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 213-214.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 287.



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