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### To Deter China, Think Big

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Under the Communist Party, China has always insisted that it will eventually absorb Taiwan, by force if necessary,<sup>1</sup> but today a direct invasion from the mainland seems more likely than at any time since the early days of the Cold War. Military provocations,<sup>2</sup> exercises,<sup>3</sup> and incendiary rhetoric<sup>4</sup> from Beijing are reaching levels not seen for decades, combining to form grey zone aggression.<sup>5</sup> China continues to expand and improve its armed forces.<sup>6</sup> This is a very dangerous time.

Although it is impossible to know precisely how Chinese leaders expect an invasion of Taiwan to unfold, the dominant narrative in the United States is that the conflict would be short and limited. Some experts believe that if the United States came to Taiwan's assistance, it could stave off the invasion and China would desist.<sup>7</sup> Other studies and wargames suggest that a massive barrage of Chinese missiles might prevent effective American intervention.<sup>8</sup>

Whether the assessments believe that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would or would not succeed, they have one thing in common: they assume a relatively quick and geographically



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limited conflict. This leads most supporters of Taiwan to advocate increasing U.S. support to help make that nation a harder target.<sup>9</sup> While this is a good idea it is not enough: deterrence by denial<sup>10</sup> limited to the proximate defense of Taiwan is necessary but not sufficient. An effective strategy to deter China must expand deterrence so that it is global and multidimensional.

A strategy to deter an invasion of Taiwan should focus on China's greatest strength and vulnerability—its economy. The Chinese Communist Party sustains its grip on power by convincing its citizens that if they tolerate the party's repression and corruption, they will be rewarded with economic prosperity. Convincing the Chinese leadership that an armed invasion of Taiwan would undercut this prosperity for decades might change their strategic calculus and make the prospect of an invasion, even by a quick, relatively low-cost military campaign, much less appealing. While China's leaders are committed to absorbing Taiwan, they are realists who understand that the first rule of strategy is that the expected benefits of any policy or action must outweigh the likely costs.

To affect Beijing's strategic calculus the United States, in partnership with the global community of democratic nations, must think about a long-term strategy to undercut the Chinese economy if China invades Taiwan. The might including shutting off Chinese access to markets, resources, and financial flows around the world for years if necessary. It should incorporate sanctions, cyberwarfare and military force such as naval and air interdiction and blockades. It should clarify that if China invades democratic Taiwan, all the nations of the world will have to choose between continued economic ties with the global community of democratic nations or with a militarily aggressive China.

China should also have to consider whether the repressed non-Chinese people it now controls, like Tibetans and Uyghurs, would see a war between Beijing and the world as an opportunity to seek liberation. Large scale, protracted counterinsurgency is very expensive. The United States and the global community of democratic nations should take every opportunity to remind China of this.

Credibility is a vital component of deterrence. Hence, the United States and the global community of democratic nations should make clear to Beijing that the economic costs of an invasion of Taiwan would be crippling and sustained, hitting China much harder than the United States and its partners. Hints or strategic ambiguity are not enough.<sup>11</sup> This means that integrated, multinational planning for the protracted damaging of the Chinese economy after an armed invasion of Taiwan and for diminishing U.S. economic ties to China makes it less likely that such a plan would need to be implemented.

To make deterrence credible the United States must think about and potentially prepare for protracted, large scale global war. This is the last thing that any American wants, but the paradoxical logic of deterrence suggests that the best way to prevent it is to prepare for it. This



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means that the U.S. government should study and plan for national mobilization during a protracted global war, to include harnessing the economy for the war effort, severing economic ties to China, and significantly expanding the military.

Today most Americans consider national mobilization for war unthinkable. Even most national security experts scoff at the idea. Unfortunately, the Chinese know this and believe, like the Japanese at the beginning of World War II or Saddam Hussein when he invaded Kuwait in 1990, that Americans do not have the will to reverse armed aggression. The more that the United States can dispel this notion and make the Chinese believe that America would mobilize for war if necessary, the less Beijing will assume that whatever it gains from an invasion of Taiwan would justify the long term costs. Put differently, thinking the unthinkable can have strategic benefits.

However it unfolds, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be disastrous not only for the people of Taiwan but also for the United States and the global community of democracies. It would signal the end of the system of global order that has constrained great power war since 1945. Whatever came after would be more dangerous. And a major war would be devastating to the global economy, deeply damaging nations with the greatest stake in it. The strategic costs of a major war unleashed by a Chinese invasion of Taiwan make it imperative for the United States and its partners to do as much as possible to deter this.

Deterrence by denial is based on hardening a potential target so that an aggressor concludes that attacking it will not be worth the cost. The West relied on this during the Cold War because the Soviet Union had few other vulnerabilities that could be exploited. China, because of its deeper integration into the global economy and virtual connectivity to the rest of the world, does have potential vulnerabilities. This makes a combination of deterrence by cost imposition and deterrence by denial more effective than either method alone.

Dual deterrence must make Beijing understand that military aggression against Taiwan will both be costly in the short term and produce debilitating, protracted, expansive, and multidimensional costs in the long term. A narrow point defense of Taiwan is important but not enough. A strategy to support Taiwan must also be based on putting China's weaknesses and vulnerabilities around the world at risk for years or decades. But time is short so this must begin now.

<sup>1</sup> "Reunification will be by force if necessary whether US supports secessionists or not: China Daily editorial," November 7, 2021, available at <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202111/07/WS6187b4c9a310cdd39bc73d54.html>.



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<sup>2</sup> Yew Lun Tian and Yimou Lee, “China holds assault drills near Taiwan after ‘provocations,’” *Reuters*, August 17, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-says-military-drills-near-taiwan-were-response-provocations-2021-08-17/>.

<sup>3</sup> John Feng, “‘No Chance’ U.S. Can Stop Chinese Invasion of Taiwan, Military Expert Says,” *Newsweek*, July 22, 2021, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/no-chance-us-can-stop-chinese-invasion-taiwan-military-expert-says-1612128>.

<sup>4</sup> Paul D. Shinkman, “China Escalates War Rhetoric Over Taiwan: Do Not Test Our Determination,” *U.S. News & World Report*, January 29, 2021, available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-01-29/china-escalates-war-rhetoric-over-taiwan-do-not-test-our-determination>.

<sup>5</sup> Yimou Lee, David Lague, and Ben Blanchard, “China launches ‘gray-zone’ warfare to subdue Taiwan,” *Reuters*, December 10, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/hongkong-taiwan-military/>.

<sup>6</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021*, November 2021, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> Ellen Mitchell, “Milley: US ‘absolutely’ could defend Taiwan from China,” *The Hill*, November 3, 2021, available at <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/579869-milley-us-absolutely-could-defend-taiwan-from-china>.

<sup>8</sup> Dan De Luce and Ken Dilanian, “China’s growing firepower casts doubt on whether U.S. could defend Taiwan,” *NBC News*, March 27, 2021, available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/china-s-growing-firepower-casts-doubt-whether-u-s-could-n1262148>.

<sup>9</sup> See Jack Detsch and Zinya Salfiti, “The U.S. Is Getting Taiwan Ready to Fight on the Beaches,” *Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2021, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/08/us-taiwan-military-presence-china-biden-porcupine/>. Also see Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Elbridge Colby and Walter Slocombe, “The State of [Deterrence by] Denial,” *War On The Rocks*, March 22, 2021, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/03/the-state-of-deterrence-by-denial/>.

<sup>11</sup> David Brunnstrom and Mark Heinrich, “U.S. and allies would ‘take action’ if Taiwan attacked – Blinken,” *Reuters*, November 10, 2021, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-allies-would-take-action-if-taiwan-attacked-blinken-2021-11-10/>.

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