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Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

**Tailored Deterrence:
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Executive Summary

Introduction

The basic nature of deterrence endures across time and place, but as U.S. policy now recognizes, the application of deterrence must be “tailored” to the specific opponent, occasion and context. A fundamental deterrence question now is: can the United States tailor its deterrence strategy to prevent the Communist Party of China (CCP) from deciding to forcefully remove the current democratically elected governing authority on Taiwan and installing the CCP’s own repressive governing authority instead? For decades, to help achieve this deterrence goal the United States has pursued a general deterrence policy of “strategic ambiguity.”

In no other field is ambiguous signaling considered a useful means of shaping behavior. Yet, in this case, the Chinese leadership is expected to calculate that because the United States *might* respond very forcefully, it will *not* attack Taiwan rather than calculating that the United States *might not* respond so forcefully, and therefore it *can* risk attack. In short, ambiguity is expected to impose caution on the CCP rather than *invite* aggression.

The expectation that the uncertainty associated with ambiguity will *deter the opponent more than the deterrer* is the prerogative of the power that enjoys a deterrence advantage. If the state seeking to deter, in this case the United States, is *not manifestly advantaged* in its deterrent position relative to its opponent, there is *no reason whatsoever* to believe that *it will be any less deterred by uncertainty than will be the CCP*. Deterrence advantage does not necessarily imply military dominance, but an advantageous position in those various levers of power that can provide deterrent

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effect. *In the absence of some form of deterrence advantage, there is no reasonable basis for expecting the United States to be more resolute in an uncertain context than is the CCP.*

The Role of Uncertainty In U.S. Cold War Deterrence Policy

The optimistic presumption that uncertainty will contribute to, rather than undermine, deterrence has been an enduring theme in U.S. deterrence theory and policy. During the Cold War, once the Soviet Union acquired the capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons against the United States, the U.S. extended deterrence threat to escalate a conflict in Europe to a superpower thermonuclear war could hardly be considered reasonable for the United States given the potentially self-destructive consequences of nuclear escalation. This harsh reality essentially compelled the United States to rely heavily on uncertainty for deterrent effect rather than the logic of a U.S. nuclear escalation deterrent threat. The *possibility* of U.S. nuclear escalation, despite its illogic, and the uncertain risk/cost involved for Moscow inherent in that possibility, were expected to deter Soviet leaders.

As the Soviet Union continually expanded its nuclear and conventional forces, the United States ameliorated the increasing illogic of its nuclear escalation deterrent threat on behalf of allies—and the corresponding increasing doubt about the credibility of that threat—by placing significant “tripwire” forces in Europe and integrating them with allied forces. This forward deployment of U.S. forces included thousands of nuclear weapons and, at the strategic force level, new planning for limited nuclear options (LNOs). 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 militarily dominant position. Sizable U.S. forces forward

deployed in Europe and LNOs could not magically make an illogical U.S. nuclear escalation deterrent threat reasonable and credible, but they did provide “tangible evidence” of “the risk of escalation to total nuclear war.”

Deterrence via Uncertainty Now

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. However, 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. consideration 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.

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, Chinese officials have stated openly that they have no room to conciliate on the Taiwan

Question. The drive to integrate Taiwan with the mainland under CCP rule appears to be a matter of territorial integrity and regime legitimacy—*an existential requirement*. The CCP appears to have created for itself a *high-risk cul de sac* by elevating nationalism and the incorporation of Taiwan into China as *essential rationales for its continuing legitimacy*.

Fundamental questions now must be asked: is there sufficient flexibility in the CCP's goal and timeline for deterrence 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? Do old notions that uncertainty about U.S. actions provides adequate U.S. deterrence credibility remain useful guidance?

While during the Cold War the United States essentially continued to follow a deterrence strategy predicated on uncertainty even as U.S. military dominance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union faded, the United States also took costly denial and punitive deterrence steps to preserve its position—steps *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 and, 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 challenging—especially as the United States appears to be losing the military dominance that could, in principle, make its favored approach to deterrence coherent. In short, the United States now faces the unprecedented question of how, without existing or readily apparent forms of deterrence advantage, to deter an opponent who may perceive an existential risk in *not* violating U.S. deterrence redlines?

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 credible deterrent 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 military 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.

A Changing Correlation of Forces and Contemporary Deterrence

Nuclear weapons will, without doubt, cast a shadow over any great power confrontation, and the potential effects of that shadow on the Taiwan Question may be significant, even decisive. Unlike the U.S. extended deterrent to many allies during the Cold War that included the threat of nuclear escalation, 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 “tripwire” forces and thousands of forward-deployed nuclear weapons to buttress its credibility, the United States appears to have no serious “tripwire” forces on Taiwan and eliminated virtually all of its forward-deployable, non-strategic nuclear weapons following the end of the Cold War.

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, by threat or employment, 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 forces on Washington – it now is the United States that must face a possible Chinese nuclear escalation threat with no apparent deterrence advantages to mitigate its coercive effect beyond the capability to engage in a nuclear escalation process that could be self-destructive.

The CCP understandably expresses 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. This may be bluster, but 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 potential for Chinese nuclear escalation and its overriding determination given its stakes in this case hardly point to greater apparent 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 was the undisputed dominant power in the Taiwan Strait. The CCP could reasonably be expected to be cautious and thus deterred by uncertainty given the significant U.S. local and strategic 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 – without now the deterrence advantages needed for that to be a credible deterrent option.

Unfortunately, the basic structure of the deterrence equation in this case appears to argue that uncertainty need not work in favor of the United States. 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 deterrence realities imposed by the context of this case, particularly its political background.

What to Do?

Potential denial and punitive deterrence tools that the United States may be able to exploit are political, economic and military, and could be pursued simultaneously and in concert with allies. That said, restoring deterrence will be a serious undertaking. The task is to ensure that a CCP-recognized redline exists to preserve Taiwan's autonomy, and that the CCP calculates that violating the U.S. deterrence redline would entail more intolerable consequences than would allowing Taiwan to remain autonomous.

While political and economic deterrence measures have the potential to contribute to that CCP calculation significantly, an adequate U.S. deterrent position will likely require U.S. and allied capabilities sufficient to deny China any anticipation of a prompt military victory over Taiwan, a rapid *fait accompli*, and to deny China any expectation that its nuclear threats will paralyze U.S. and allied support for Taiwan if it is attacked. Doing so does not necessarily demand U.S. "escalation dominance" in this case—which may be infeasible in any event; it does, however, demand that the United States and allies work to ensure that the CCP does not believe that China has escalation dominance. In short, the United States must foreclose a CCP "theory of victory" for the Taiwan Question.

Simply acknowledging the deterrence challenge facing the West is the needed first step. Unless/until the stark deterrence problem confronting the United States is recognized for what it is, any recommendations for

restoring the U.S. deterrence position that call for serious rethinking and efforts undoubtedly will fall on deaf ears.

Conclusion

For decades, the United States has acted as if China would shed its appetite to reorder the world in its image—status-quo powers often cling to the self-serving belief that the rising non-status quo power will follow their preferred values, norms and behaviors. That clearly has not happened in the case of post-Cold War China.

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 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.

It is, however, an open question whether U.S. policy makers will recognize and respond adequately to the challenge now facing the United States and the demands for innovative U.S. deterrence thinking and actions that challenge now imposes on Washington. 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. 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 take the steps necessary to do the same vis-à-vis China and accept the expense involved, or cling to fanciful notions of easy deterrence that are likely to fail in current circumstances.

Introduction

Following the Cold War, U.S. deterrence policy came to emphasize the need to “tailor” U.S. deterrence strategies to the specific opponent and circumstances for any given deterrence engagement. Adapting U.S. deterrence strategies to specific opponents and circumstances is not new; the goal was part of President Carter’s 1980 “Countervailing Strategy.”¹ But tailoring deterrence is now a well-established principle of U.S. deterrence policy.² The ubiquitous observation reflecting this development in U.S. deterrence policy is that, for deterrence, “one size does not fit all.”³ Indeed, the U.S. strategy to deter one opponent may be wholly inadequate for deterring another and different U.S. deterrence strategies may be needed for the same opponent in different circumstances. Simply communicating redlines to opponents may require wholly different approaches.

U.S. acceptance of the need to tailor deterrence strategies to different opponents and circumstances is now driven by growing recognition that U.S. deterrence strategies must adapt to multiple opponents and their diverse worldviews, goals, behavioral norms, value hierarchies, calculations of risk and cost, and strategic cultures.⁴ To do so, of course, demands the hard work

¹ See the discussion in, Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1984), pp. 71-72.

² Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (February 2018), pp. viii, ix, 26, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ The need to “tailor” deterrence for the post-Cold War era is first presented in Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), pp. 127-129. See also, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New*

necessary to understand opponents, as well as possible, as the foundation on which to build a deterrence strategy that is tailored to their unique characters and circumstances. As two deterrence scholars observed decades ago in this regard: "Not all actors in international politics calculate utility in making decisions in the same way. Difference in values, culture, attitudes toward risk-taking, and so on vary greatly. There is no substitute for knowledge of the adversary's mind set and behavioral style."⁵

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 tailor its deterrence strategy to prevent 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? Why might the CCP decide to do so? Perhaps because an economically successful, autonomous and democratic Taiwan is "a daily reminder to mainland China that yes, the Chinese can have a successful democracy too. They don't have to only live under authoritarian rule."⁶ China's recent harsh repression in Hong Kong in violation of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration looms large in the background.

Direction (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 87-114.

⁵ Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 188.

⁶ Shelley Rigger, professor of political science at Davidson College, quoted in, Andy Serwer and Max Zahn, "You Should Care About Taiwan," *Yahoo Finance*, November 20, 2021, available at <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/why-you-should-care-about-taiwan-103511885.html?guccounter=1>.

Deterrence success in this regard is not likely 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 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. Carl von Clausewitz wrote that the nature of war has enduring continuities, but its characteristics change with different circumstances.⁷ Similarly, the basic nature of deterrence endures across time and place, but its application must be tailored to a particular opponent, occasion and context. The application of deterrence must answer particular questions: who deters whom? from what action? by threatening what response? in what circumstances? in the face of what counterthreats?⁸

The current deterrence challenge posed by China and the Taiwan Question is unprecedented and commentary on the subject that is derived from U.S. Cold War deterrence

⁷ This is the theme of the first chapter of the first book in, Carl Von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Hamburg, Germany: Nikol Verlag, 2008), p. 49.

⁸ This is the classic formulation by Herman Kahn and Raymond Aron. See Herman Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable in the 1980s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 120; and, Raymond Aron, *The Great Debate: Theories of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1965), p. 163.

experience, including extended deterrence, typically is now of limited value. The U.S. deterrence goal now must be to understand the contemporary CCP worldview per the specific circumstances of the Taiwan Question, and establish a U.S. deterrence strategy in light of that understanding.

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 may be 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 timeline 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.”
- “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 simultaneously to help deter China from moving forcefully against Taiwan.

Deterrence and Ambiguity

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that ambiguity in the scope of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan should be thought of as contributing to the deterrence of China. In no other arena is the uncertainty associated with ambiguous signaling 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.”⁹ This advertised ambiguity regarding prospective U.S. behavior explicit in Nye’s statement was expected to have deterrent effect. For many years, U.S. officials appear to have had considerable confidence in the value of ambiguity for sustaining the deterrence of China while simultaneously not stirring Taiwan toward independence.¹⁰ Most recently, Defense

⁹ 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>.

¹⁰ 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>.

Secretary Lloyd Austin reportedly expressed this approach to deterrence by observing that the United States would continue to *avoid* setting “redlines” regarding Taiwan.¹¹ The intentional absence of specified “redlines” ensures a level of ambiguity regarding the U.S. commitment.

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.

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 be deterred from attacking Taiwan rather than deciding that the United States *might not* respond so forcefully, and therefore it can risk attacking Taiwan. 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

¹¹ Tara Copp, “Austin Rejects ‘Red Lines’ for Taiwan, Ukraine: As crises loom, defense secretary reveals a bit of his diplomacy-first thinking,” *DefenseOne.com*, December 7, 2021, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2021/12/conveying-red-lines-only-exacerbates-problem-crises-loom-austin-puts-diplomacy-first/187329/>.

U.S. ambiguity 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. The functioning of deterrence does not depend on U.S. decision making, *per se*; rather it depends largely on Chinese expectations regarding U.S. capabilities, decision making and will.

Clearly, it is comforting and convenient to expect that ambiguity in signaling 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 to accurately predict 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.”¹²

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 has been an enduring theme in U.S. deterrence theory and policy generally. It 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,”¹³ i.e., the fear of uncertainty.

¹² Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 146.

¹³ See, Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp.187-188.

The Role of 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 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."¹⁴ McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, observed similarly that the basis for deterrence success in Europe was "simply the probability that any large-scale use of force against a NATO country would set loose a chain of events that could lead to nuclear war."¹⁵

Once the Soviet Union acquired the capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons against the United States, the U.S. extended deterrence threat to escalate a conflict in Europe to a superpower thermonuclear war could hardly be considered reasonable for the United States given the potentially self-destructive consequences of U.S. nuclear escalation. As Colin Gray asked rhetorically at the time, "Why would not an American president be deterred from inflicting 'unacceptable damage' by the certain knowledge of the unacceptable character of the anticipated Soviet response?"¹⁶ This harsh deterrence reality continued to the

¹⁴ Joseph S. Nye, "The Role of Strategic Nuclear Systems in Deterrence," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1988), p. 47. (Emphasis added).

¹⁵ McGeorge Bundy, "To Cap the Volcano," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), pp. 17-18.

¹⁶ See, Colin S. Gray, "Targeting Problems for Central War," in, *Strategic Nuclear Targeting*, Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson, eds. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 172.

end of the Cold War. It essentially compelled the United States to rely heavily on uncertainty for deterrent effect rather than the logic of a U.S. nuclear escalation deterrent threat. The *possibility* of U.S. nuclear escalation, despite its illogic, and the uncertain risk/cost involved for Moscow inherent in that possibility, 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 called out 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."¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

The expected deterrence 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

¹⁷ See, Henry Kissinger, "The Future of NATO," in, *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

¹⁸ British Defence Minister Denis Healey 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.

enemy in doubt" about "the escalation process."¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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. At a time of considerable U.S. strategic nuclear advantage, 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?"²¹ 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 consequences 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 behind the U.S. nuclear escalation threat and brandished instead the uncertainty of U.S. behavior as the basis for U.S. deterrence.

¹⁹ *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Information Series, February 1974), p. 16.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 228.

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.'"²² Secretary Rusk had put into practice the proposition that uncertainty deters over high stakes and at the highest possible political level. We do not know if this deterrence via uncertainty "worked" in this case; we do know that it did not fail.

Deterrence via Uncertainty Now

When now considering deterrence and the Taiwan Question, it must be understood that the expectation that a context of uncertainty will deter the opponent more than the deterrer is the prerogative of the power that enjoys an advantageous deterrence position. Deterrence advantage does not necessarily imply military dominance, but an advantageous position in those various manifest levers of power that can provide deterrent effect, including will, risk tolerance, determination, and military and/or non-military options.

If the state seeking to deter, in this case the United States, is not manifestly advantaged in its deterrent power position relative to China, there is no reason whatsoever to believe that *the United States will be any less driven to caution by uncertainty than will be China*. As noted, the presumed greater U.S. willingness to engage in a competition of

²² Ibid. See also, Arnold Beichman, "How Foolish Khrushchev Nearly Started World War III," *The Washington Times*, October 3, 2004, p. B 8.

threats in the context of uncertainty can logically only come from some perceived advantage over the opponent. Put differently, in the absence of some form of U.S. deterrence advantage, there is no reasonable basis for expecting the United States to appear to be, or to be, *more resolute* in an uncertain context than is the CCP. The dominant deterrence power may reasonably anticipate that its 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 should fear the dominant power's potential reaction, and that fear may reasonably be expected to produce greater caution and deterrent effect. In the absence of some level of deterrence advantage, however, that expectation has no reasonable basis.

It is no surprise that the founders of U.S. deterrence theory were from that generation of scholars 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.²³

NATO's reliance on extended nuclear deterrence continued throughout the Cold War because, "at no point...did the [NATO] allies face up to the feasibility of

²³ 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.

conventional defense in Europe and the possibility of successfully meeting a conventional attack with conventional forces.”²⁴ To a large extent, NATO continued to rely on a threat of nuclear escalation for deterrence, despite the fact that the execution of that threat, as Henry Kissinger observed at the time, would have been an illogical, even self-destructive act for the United States. This reality compelled the United States to pursue an approach to deterrence based on uncertainty vice the logical credibility of its nuclear escalation threat. Consequently, even as the United States lost its position of military dominance during the Cold War, it continued to base its extended nuclear deterrence “umbrella” to NATO allies on the comforting presumption that uncertainty regarding the potential for U.S. nuclear escalation would contribute to, rather than undermine, deterrence. That threat was far from certain, but the potential consequences for Moscow were thought to be so severe that even an uncertain deterrent would deter.

As the Soviet Union continually expanded its nuclear and conventional forces, the United States ameliorated the increasing illogic of its nuclear escalation deterrent threat on behalf of allies—and the corresponding increasing doubt about the credibility of that threat—by placing significant “tripwire” forces in Europe and integrating them with allied forces. This forward deployment of U.S. forces included thousands of nuclear weapons.²⁵ At the strategic level, the United States added limited nuclear options

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Amy Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons* (Congressional Research Service, September 6, 2019), available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>.

(LNOs) to its deterrence planning,²⁶ despite sharp domestic criticism that it was unnecessary to do so.²⁷ Of course, the United States also continued to affirm its deterrence commitment to allies.

Sizable U.S. forces forward deployed in Europe and LNOs could not magically make an illogical U.S. nuclear escalation deterrent threat reasonable and credible because neither could eliminate U.S. unmitigated vulnerability to Soviet nuclear retaliation. But large-scale forward military deployments integrated with allied forces (and LNOs) did provide “tangible evidence” of the hopefully deterring “risk of escalation to total nuclear war.”²⁸

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 militarily dominant position and that U.S. deterrence threat became

²⁶ In 1974, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger announced publicly that the United States would introduce limited nuclear threat options to provide greater deterrence credibility. He said this was made necessary because increased Soviet nuclear capabilities had rendered the credibility of large-scale US response options to limited attacks “close to zero.” See, James Schlesinger, *US/USSR Strategic Policies*, Testimony in, U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 93rd Congress, 2nd Session, March 4, 1974, p. 9; see also, pp. 7, 12-13, 55. See also James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report, FY 1976 and FY 1977* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, February 5, 1975), p. II-3-II-4; and, James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1975* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, March 4, 1974), pp. 32, 42.

²⁷ Many commentators past and present assert that nuclear deterrence is easily understood, that it functions reliably against all rational opponents, and that its requirements are relatively modest and simply met. For an extended discussion of this “easy deterrence” narrative see, Keith B. Payne, *Shadows on the Wall: Deterrence and Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2020), pp. 65-82.

²⁸ *NATO Handbook*, op cit., p. 16. In the late 1970s, a senior U.S. official said to this author that the U.S. nuclear escalation threat for NATO should be credible because the number of U.S. forces and dependents in Europe was equivalent to having a city the size of San Francisco located there and at risk.

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 bloody world wars and the continuing 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 collective defense provisions. This history and these developments undoubtedly contributed to the credibility of the U.S. deterrence commitment even as the military correlation of forces shifted in favor of the Soviet Union.

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. However, looking more deeply into the unique features of deterrence in the case of the Taiwan Question—as is necessary to tailor deterrence—suggests that there are several solid reasons for doubting the comforting expectation that deterrence lacking steps to sustain its credibility can continue to be effective.

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. consideration 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, regime interests and will, 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 in this case unless they follow from the answers to these questions, however tentative they might be.

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 forceful 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 an issue of national sovereignty;²⁹ the drive to integrate Taiwan with the mainland under CCP rule appears to be a matter of territorial integrity and regime legitimacy—*an existential requirement*. This may be a fundamental animating national goal across the CCP leadership spectrum—akin to President Abraham Lincoln’s Civil War commitment to reincorporating the South into the United States.³⁰ Most recently, the spokesperson for the Chinese Defense Ministry, Wu Qian, said, “Especially on the Taiwan issue, China has no room for compromise, and the U.S. side should not have any illusions about this.”³¹ A Foreign Ministry spokesperson also stated 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.”³²

²⁹ See the discussion in, Odd Arne Westad, “Review Essay: Identity Politics With Chinese Characteristics,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 1, 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/review-essay/identity-politics-chinese-characteristics>.

³⁰ 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.

³¹ Quoted in, Ben Blanchard, “U.S. Should Not Have Any Illusions About Taiwan, China Says,” *Reuters*, November 25, 2021, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/us-should-not-have-any-illusions-about-taiwan-says-china/ar-AAR77SC?ocid=uxbndlbing>.

³² “China Vows No Concession on Taiwan After Biden’s Comments,” *AP News*, October 22, 2021, available at

Such expressions might simply be CCP posturing to intimidate Western observers, but the CCP appears to have created for itself a *high-risk cul de sac* by elevating nationalism and the incorporation of Taiwan into China as *essential rationales for its continuing legitimacy*. 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.”³³ 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.”³⁴

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.”³⁵

<https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-china-beijing-taiwan-f4fdeb6e15097d55f5d4c06b5f8c9c29>.

³³ 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/>.

³⁴ 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>.

³⁵ Helen Davidson, “China Could Invade Taiwan in Next Six Years, Top Admiral Warns,” *The Guardian* (UK), March 9, 2021, available at

Taiwanese intelligence reportedly has claimed that Chinese leaders have discussed making this move circa 2024.³⁶ Others have suggested even sooner.³⁷

The question of an opponent's determination and timeline may be critical to the possibility that deterrence can operate. If the opponent is fully dedicated to a goal it perceives as of existential importance and has pinned its political legitimacy to that goal and a specific timeline for its realization, deterrence may have no space to function. Deterrence may simply not be applicable in this context, much as it was not applicable to Adolf Hitler's determination to undertake Operation Barbarossa, i.e., his ill-fated decision to invade the Soviet Union. For various reasons,³⁸ it was Hitler's "irrevocable decision to solve the problem of German 'living-space' before 1945 at the latest."³⁹ In the context of such leadership decision making, deterrence may have no space to operate.

With regard to the Taiwan Question, there may be little flexibility with the CCP's *ultimate goal* of uniting Taiwan with the mainland, but to the extent that there is flexibility *in the timeline* that the CCP envisages for Taiwan's

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

³⁶ 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>.

³⁷ 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/>.

³⁸ Discussed in, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, op. cit., pp. 68-72.

³⁹ H.R. Trevor-Roper, "The Mind of Adolf Hitler," in, *Adolf Hitler, Hitler's Secret Conversations, 1941-1944*, Norman Cameron and R.H. Stevens, translators (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1953), p. xxi.

unification with the mainland,⁴⁰ deterrence may have an opportunity to function. It may be possible to compel China's leadership to decide, "not this year." As noted above, the plausible U.S. deterrence goal is not to reorder the CCP's worldview, but to compel the CCP leadership continually to decide that this is not the time to move, i.e., to control the CCP's calculation of the suitable timeline.

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

⁴⁰ As is suggested in, Michael Swaine, "Recent Chinese Views on the Taiwan issue," *China Leadership Monitor*, Issue 70, December 1, 2021 (Winter 2021), p. 1, available at https://www.prcleader.org/_files/ugd/af1ede_390855133e8d4a69b3dd014ed5bc66ac.pdf.

levels of risk in their behavioral choices.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² In this case, the United States would be the key 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—to be rightfully theirs—and they must act, perhaps 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, *and a rigid timeline pertains*, they have given themselves little or no room to conciliate—no space for deterrence to work.

If the basic CCP perceptions and political beliefs are properly characterized here, fundamental questions must

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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.

be asked: is there sufficient flexibility in the CCP's goal and timeline for deterrence 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? Do old notions that uncertainty about U.S. actions provides adequate U.S. deterrence credibility – with repeated U.S. expressions of a more or less ambiguous commitment – remain useful guidance? These fundamental questions seem to be only rarely aired, perhaps because past beliefs about deterrence are so convenient and comforting, i.e., U.S. deterrence requirements can be met by uncertainty and a "threat that leaves something to chance."

Yet, as noted, an approach to extending deterrence that relies heavily on uncertainty is a potentially coherent and logical strategy only for the deterrence dominant power. And, while during the Cold War, the United States essentially continued to follow a deterrence strategy predicated on uncertainty even as U.S. military dominance vis-à-vis the Soviet Union faded, the United States also took costly denial and punitive deterrence steps to preserve its position – steps *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 existing or readily apparent forms of deterrence advantage, 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 *2021 Annual Report of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* observes gravely that decades of “improvements in China’s military capabilities have fundamentally transformed the strategic environment and weakened the military dimension of cross-Strait deterrence,” and that, “Today, the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] either has or is close to achieving an initial capability to invade Taiwan—one that remains under development but that China’s leaders may employ at high risk—while deterring, delaying, or defeating U.S. military intervention. The PLA’s development of this capability has involved years of campaign planning and advancements in anti-access and area denial capabilities.”⁴³

A recent article appearing in the U.S. Army War College’s journal *Parameters* describes the situation more starkly: “The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is now powerful enough it probably could overrun Taiwan even if the United States intervened to defend Taipei. Both sides know this—or at least strongly suspect it..Chinese

⁴³ United States-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2021 Annual Report of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2021), p. 17. See also, Jason Sherman, “Report: Cross-Strait Stability Eroding; Robust Funding of INDOPACOM Priorities Urgent,” *InsideDefense.com*, November 17, 2021, available at <https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/report-cross-strait-stability-eroding-robust-funding-indopacom-priorities-urgent#:~:text=Go-Report%3A%20Cross%2DStrait%20stability%20eroding%3B%20robust,funding%20of%20INDOPACOM%20priorities%20urgent&text=Taiwan's%20ability%20to%20deter%20war,according%20to%20a%20new%20report>.

strategists have growing confidence the United States would lose a war over Taiwan.”⁴⁴ Indeed, in Pentagon war games involving an attack against Taiwan, the United States reportedly “has lost every time, more overwhelmingly each year.”⁴⁵

The United States, understandably, would like to continue enjoying the benefits of effective deterrence via uncertainty without expending the effort now needed to sustain an advantageous deterrent 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 vis-à-vis Moscow during the Cold War even as it lost military 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 and timeline it deemed to be of existential importance. The fundamental differences in the political contexts of the Cold War and the Taiwan Question degrade the value of the earlier U.S. Cold War deterrence experience that underlies most contemporary discussions of the subject. Commentary on deterrence and its requirements that misses the unique

⁴⁴ Jared McKinney and Peter Harris, “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter 2021), p. 25.

⁴⁵ Maj. Gen. A. Bowen Ballard and Richard Amberg, “Team Biden Has No China Strategy: A Looming Catastrophe for the United States?,” *The Washington Times*, December 30, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/30/team-biden-has-no-china-strategy/>.

political context of the Taiwan Question 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 in this regard.

Unlike the U.S. extended deterrent to many 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 “tripwire forces” and thousands of forward-deployed nuclear weapons to buttress its credibility, the United States appears to have no serious “tripwire” forces on Taiwan and has eliminated virtually all of its forward-deployable, non-strategic nuclear weapons following the end of the Cold War.⁴⁶ Even the venerable submarine-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile (TLAM-N) was retired from service a decade ago. According to former senior Pentagon official, Mark Schneider:

⁴⁶ See, Susan J. Koch, *Case Study Series, The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2021), available at https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/documents/casestudies/cswmd_casestudy-5.pdf.

There is a serious question of whether or not the U.S. has any real capability to forward deploy nonstrategic nuclear weapons to the Asia Pacific on any timely basis. It is not only the small number of U.S. nonstrategic nuclear weapons and the lack of stealthy delivery systems. To forward deploy nuclear weapons, it is necessary to have certified aircraft and crews to operate nuclear weapons and nuclear-certified maintenance and security forces. It is quite possible that such a capability does not really exist. There is certainly nothing in the annual presentations to the Congress concerning U.S. fighter capability that suggests there are any high readiness units based in the U.S. for deployment to Asia to deter Chinese, Russian and North Korean first use of nuclear weapons.⁴⁷

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, by threat or employment, 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.⁴⁸ General Glen VanHerck, Commander of U.S.

⁴⁷ Mark Schneider, "Does the United States Have Any Real Capability to Forward Deploy Nuclear Weapons Rapidly Outside of NATO?," *RealClearDefense*, August 27, 2021, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/27/does_the_united_states_have_any_real_capability_to_forward_deploy_nuclear_weapons_rapidly_outside_of_nato_europe_791788.html.

⁴⁸ Senior Chinese military leaders have, in the past, made explicit threats regarding China's use of nuclear weapons if the United States were to intervene over the issue of Taiwanese independence, even if U.S. intervention was non-nuclear. See, for example, the statements by Major General Zhu Chenghu, then-Dean of China's National Defense University, quoted in, Danny Gittings, "General Zhu Goes Ballistic,"

Northern Command, has testified that, “militarily, China is advancing a modernization program that seeks to erode our military advantages and deter us from intervening in a regional conflict...” and, “will further diversify [its] nuclear strike options and potentially increase the risks associated with U.S. intervention in a contingency.”⁴⁹ The United States must, correspondingly, deal with the caution that context forces on Washington⁵⁰ – it has no readily-apparent deterrence advantage in this context. 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 deterrence advantages to mitigate its coercive effect beyond the capability to engage in a nuclear escalation process that could be self-destructive. To the extent that China’s nuclear buildup, theater and strategic, contributes to CCP confidence that it has greater freedom to move regionally, including against Taiwan, it is enormously destabilizing.

The Wall Street Journal, July 18, 2005, p. A13; Alexandra Harney, Demetri Sevastopulo, and Edward Alden, “Top Chinese General Warns US Over Attack,” *Financial Times*, July 15, 2005, p. 5; and, Joseph Kahn, “Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bomb if U.S. Intrudes,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2005, p. A8.

⁴⁹ U.S. Senate, Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, *Statement of General Glen VanHerck, Commander, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command*, June 9, 2021, pp. 4-5, available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/VanHerck%20Written%20Statement%20to%20SASC%206-09.pdf>.

⁵⁰ As early as 2012, analysts pointed to the great deterrent value PRC military planners may expect by confronting the United States with the prospect of China’s nuclear first-use threat in a local war. See, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, “Making China’s Nuclear War Plan,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 68, No. 5 (September 2012), pp. 60-62, available at <http://www.sagepub.com/comtent/68/5/45>.

The CCP understandably expresses 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.⁵¹ This may be bluster, but 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. As Herman Kahn observed about deterrence: “Credibility depends on being willing to accept the other side’s retaliatory blow. It depends on the harm he can do, not [only] on the harm we can do....It depends on [U.S.] will as well as capability.”⁵² The basic facts of the engagement hardly point to greater apparent 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 was the undisputed dominant power in the Taiwan Strait. As the authors of the *Parameters* article quoted above observe in this regard, “In previous decades, the United States enjoyed clear military superiority over China, and thus American deterrence capabilities were more credible.”⁵³ Given this past U.S. power position, reliance on “strategic ambiguity” and uncertainty to deter was a logical option once the United States proclaimed its commitment to Taiwan’s undisturbed autonomy. The CCP could reasonably be expected to be cautious and thus deterred by uncertainty given the

⁵¹ As is suggested in, “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>.

⁵² Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 32.

⁵³ McKinney and Harris, “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan,” *op. cit.*, p. 25.

significant U.S. local and strategic 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 – without now the deterrence advantages needed for that to be a credible deterrent option. 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.

It must be noted that decision making is not always driven by a rigorous rationality. A foreign leadership may be deterred or undeterred for no apparent logical reason. But deterrence theory and policy planning must posit some level of rationality in the expectation of leadership calculations; a presumption of irrationality in leadership decision making provides no basis for bounding expected outcomes, i.e., a truly irrational opponent cannot be expected to respond in any predictable fashion to any form of deterrent threat.⁵⁴ If attributing reason to the opponent, in this case the CCP, calls into question U.S. deterrence planning, it is the deterrence planning that must be reconsidered.

These are the harsh deterrence realities imposed by the context of this case, particularly its political background. Some commentators point to currently larger raw number of U.S. strategic nuclear weapons to suggest that concern over China's growing nuclear arsenal is of little relevance – as if that ratio somehow is enduring and predictably

⁵⁴ For a discussion of rationality and its application to deterrence theory and policy see, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, op. cit., pp. 7-15, 23-27.

decisive in deterrence considerations.⁵⁵ It is neither and, in this case, those numbers do not alter the harsh deterrence realities because they do not decide military or deterrence advantage.

What to Do?

This type of realistic discussion leads some commentators to declare prematurely that deterrence in this case is not possible.⁵⁶ That conclusion may be too pessimistic. There are mutually reinforcing denial and punitive deterrence steps the United States could take to help restore its position in this case. These need not necessarily mirror those U.S./NATO measures undertaken to deter Moscow during the Cold War, e.g., the local stationing of large numbers of U.S. “tripwire” forces, including integrated nuclear forces. But these steps must serve the *same purpose* – restoring the U.S. deterrence position. Potential deterrence tools that the United States may be able to exploit are political, economic and military, and could be pursued simultaneously and in concert with allies.⁵⁷ CCP international behavior over the

⁵⁵ See, for example, John Isaacs, “The Pentagon’s China Report: Reading Between the Lines,” *National Interest Online*, November 28, 2021, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/pentagon-s-china-report-reading-between-lines-197078>. See also, Walter Pincus, “What the Chinese Think They Know About U.S. Nuclear Strategy,” *The Cipher Brief.com*, December 21, 2021, available at <https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column/fine-print/what-the-chinese-think-they-know-about-us-nuclear-strategy>.

⁵⁶ Andrew Latham, “The U.S. can’t deter an attack on Taiwan,” *The Hill Online*, Nov. 22, 2021, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/582641-the-us-cant-deter-an-attack-on-taiwan>.

⁵⁷ This author and National Institute colleagues David Trachtenberg and Matthew Costlow have undertaken a lengthy study to identify and assess multiple political, economic and military options for this deterrence purpose. The report will be published in mid-2022.

past few years has been so egregious that it has heightened concerns among its neighbors near and far, and has created opportunities for the formation of a new “coalition of the willing” that could exploit political, economic and military tools to restore deterrence. That said, doing so will be a serious task – the coalition must work to ensure that a CCP-recognized redline exists to preserve Taiwan’s autonomy, and that the CCP calculates that violating that redline is its most miserable option, i.e., calculate that violating the coalition’s redline would not just be costly, but would entail consequences *more* intolerable than allowing Taiwan to remain autonomous. That is a formidable deterrence goal.

The United States must not be alone in trying to re-establish the conditions necessary for deterrence. Other countries, notably Japan, would likely be grievously affected by a CCP conquest of Taiwan. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has observed that, “When there is a threat over Taiwan and its democracy, it is a dire challenge to all of us, especially to Japan.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the prospect that such a development could so shift the Japanese security landscape that it would spur Japan (and South Korea⁵⁹) toward nuclear proliferation may be, should be, a powerful element in a CCP calculation that violating the coalition’s redline regarding Taiwan would entail more

⁵⁸ Quoted in, Joel Gehrke, “Japan’s Shinzo Abe Warns China: Invasion of Taiwan Would be ‘Suicidal,’” *Washington Examiner Online*, December 14, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/japans-shinzo-abe-warns-china-invasion-of-taiwan-would-be-suicidal>.

⁵⁹ Almost 70 percent of the South Korean public reportedly already believes that South Korea should have its own independent nuclear capability. See Nam Jeong-ho, “The Case for Nuclear Armament,” *JoongAng Ilbo Online* (South Korea), December 21, 2021, available at <https://south-korea.timesofnews.com/breaking-news/the-case-for-nuclear-armament.html>.

intolerable consequences than would continuing to tolerate Taiwan's autonomy.⁶⁰

While political and economic deterrence measures have the potential to contribute to that CCP calculation significantly, an adequate U.S. deterrent position will likely require U.S. and allied capabilities sufficient to deny China any anticipation of a prompt military victory over Taiwan, a rapid *fait accompli*, and to deny China any expectation that its nuclear threats will paralyze U.S. and allied support for Taiwan if it is attacked. Doing so does not necessarily demand U.S. "escalation dominance" in this case—which may be infeasible in any event; it does, however, demand that the United States and allies work to ensure that the CCP does not believe that China has escalation dominance.⁶¹ In short, the United States must be able to integrate thinking about conventional and nuclear deterrence forces to foreclose a CCP "theory of victory" for the Taiwan Question.⁶² Simply acknowledging the deterrence

⁶⁰ Chinese publications have emphasized concern about the prospect of Japanese nuclear proliferation. See, for example, Lian Degui, "World Should Keep a Vigilant Eye on Japan's Nuclear Weapons Pursuit," *Global Times Online* (China), December 20, 2021. This point about the possible deterrent effect of nuclear proliferation is discussed in McKinney and Harris, "Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan," *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶¹ "Escalation dominance" is a long-standing term of art meaning that one party in a confrontation has the capabilities necessary to win militarily at any plausible level of escalation, and therefore should be able to deter an opponent from initiating military provocations or "climbing" the escalation ladder because, "In the absence of enforceable or acceptable adjudication, the side most afraid of a strike will tend to get the worst of the bargain." See, Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Press, 1965), p. 10.

⁶² Colin Gray discussed a "victory denial" deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Moscow during the Cold War. See Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning*, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-76. More recently see, Brad Roberts, *On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue, Livermore Papers of Global Security*, No. 7 (June 2020), pp. 42-57; Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in*

challenge facing the West is the needed first step, including, as Herman Kahn observed, coming to grips with the reality that the *credibility* of a U.S. deterrence strategy is determined in large part by the level of obvious fear in Washington induced by the prospect and extent of “the other side’s [likely] retaliatory blow.”⁶³

Unless/until the stark deterrence problem confronting the United States is recognized for what it is, any recommendations for restoring the U.S. deterrence position that call for serious rethinking and efforts undoubtedly will fall on deaf ears. In this regard, labeling the post-Cold War relationship with the CCP a “competition,” as many do,⁶⁴ *obscures our understanding* of where we are today.⁶⁵ The word “competition” substitutes a *benign euphemism* drawn from sports – as if U.S.-Chinese relations are reliably rules-based and refereed by impartial officials with authority and power. In fact, there are *no reliably enforced rules and no such referees*. Instead, there are serious conflicts of interest, conflicting perceptions and goals, with the potential for great violence, possibly including nuclear weapons. That is the current reality we *must* recognize if we are to take the steps likely needed to restore deterrence.

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

the 21st Century (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271.

⁶³ Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, op. cit., p. 32.

⁶⁴ See for example, Congressional Research Service, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*, updated, December 21, 2021, available at <https://news.usni.org/2021/12/27/report-to-congress-on-great-power-competition-2>.

⁶⁵ See the discussion of this point in, Keith Payne, *Redefining Stability for the Post-Cold War Era*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021), pp. 44-45.

posed by the shifting correlation of forces and the political background of the Taiwan Question. Changes in declaratory verbiage suggest action, but alone 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?”⁶⁶ And, “Usually the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing.”⁶⁷ 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 renewed U.S. deterrence considerations.

Conclusion

For decades, the United States has acted as if China would shed its appetite to reorder the world in its image – status-quo powers often cling to the self-serving belief that the rising non-status quo power will follow their preferred values, norms and behaviors. The British held out that hope regarding National Socialist Germany far beyond the point when it obviously was fallacious. The expectation that a determined non-status quo power somehow will moderate its outlook and “join the community” of peaceful nations often is frustrated; it clearly has not happened in the case of post-Cold War China. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, recently observed that a goal of China’s

⁶⁶ Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* op. cit., pp. 213-214.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

military buildup is “to revise the global rule set.”⁶⁸ The then-Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff observed that, “Beijing’s long-term goal is to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People’s Republic of China (PRC)...at the center and serving Beijing’s authoritarian goals and imperial ambitions.”⁶⁹

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. The fundamental deterrence questions that must be addressed by the United States are: is there space for deterrence to operate in principle and, if so, what form of deterrence advantage might the United States preserve, or more likely regain, to support the credible deterrence strategy needed to uphold the U.S. position expressed in the 1979 TRA? And, how can the United States achieve that position? What plausible deterrence levers now exist that may be exploited as the basis for an informed, or tailored, U.S. deterrence strategy?

While deterrence advantage is not synonymous with military dominance, identifying that advantage and moving toward it is likely to involve considerable effort—much as it did in Europe during the Cold War. More costly,

⁶⁸ Nancy A. Youssef, “China Aims to ‘Revise the Global Rule Set,’ Top U.S. General Says: Gen. Milley, Speaking at the WSJ CEO Council Summit, Warned that China’s Aims Could Lead to More Instability,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, December 7, 2021, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-aims-to-revise-the-global-rule-set-top-u-s-general-says-11638914747>.

⁶⁹ Peter Berkowitz, “The Pattern and Purpose of China’s Actions,” *RealClearPolitics*, October 25, 2020, available at https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/10/25/the_pattern_and_purpose_of_chinas_actions_144522.html.

however, would be a successful CCP military campaign to forcefully take and occupy Taiwan. The negative consequences for the United States of a successful CCP campaign against Taiwan would be far beyond the consideration of Taiwan alone. These consequences would not likely be existential, but they would be disastrous and systemic—advancing the success of China’s expansionism globally, contributing to the unraveling of U.S. alliances in Asia and globally, possibly motivating a cascade of nuclear proliferation, and curtailing the West’s ability to operate freely in key areas of the Pacific.

Viewing the prospective costs of a CCP conquest of Taiwan as being of monumental significance only for Taiwan is akin to the view of Germany’s 1938 expansionism at the expense of Czechoslovakia as being of great significance only for Czechoslovakia. The mistake of that parochial perspective among Western audiences was catastrophic. The West’s 1938 capitulation to Germany in Munich, i.e., essentially abandoning Czechoslovakia to Hitler’s expansionist claims, certainly contributed to his underestimation of the Western allies’ likely response to Germany’s later attack on Poland (“Our enemies are little worms, I got to know them in Munich.”⁷⁰). Whatever may have been the possibility for deterrence to change Hitler’s calculations regarding an attack on Poland in 1939 was lost at Munich in 1938.⁷¹

It is, however, an open question whether U.S. policy makers will recognize and respond adequately to the

⁷⁰ Quoted in, Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, Vol. III, *The Chronicle of a Dictatorship, 1939-1940* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), p. 1663.

⁷¹ Had the West helped to resist Hitler at Munich and thereby essentially compelled Germany to go to war with Czechoslovakia over the Sudetenland, senior German military officers, including the Chief of the General Staff, Franz Halder, were prepared at that time to undertake a coup against the National Socialist regime.

challenge now facing the United States and the demands for innovative U.S. deterrence 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 so is worth the price tag. It seems self-evident that effective deterrence is well worth the cost, but the United States has had persistent and strong internal political calls for deterrence without undue effort, i.e., deterrence is easily understood, functions reliably on the basis of uncertainty, and its requirements are relatively modest. For those commentators who remain wedded to such comforting thoughts about deterrence, the preferred 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 a credible deterrence position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The question is whether the current generation of U.S. leaders will take the steps necessary to do the same vis-à-vis China and accept the expense involved, or cling to fanciful notions of easy 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.

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