



## Deterring Potential Chinese Aggression Against Taiwan

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Deterring Potential Chinese Aggression Against Taiwan” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on August 31, 2021. The symposium focused on China’s growing military capabilities and assertiveness with respect to Taiwan and measures the United States can take to prevent Chinese aggression against the island.*

Jennifer Bradley

*Jennifer Bradley is a Strategic Economist in the Plans and Policy Directorate at U.S. Strategic Command. The views expressed are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of USSTRATCOM, DoD, or the U.S. Government.*

China’s military modernization has been underway for three decades with the ultimate goal to field a “world class” military by 2049.<sup>1</sup> This includes a substantial nuclear modernization program improving both the technical capabilities of China’s arsenal and increasing the overall size of the force. Historically, conversations regarding deterring Chinese forceful unification with Taiwan have cordoned off the nuclear component of Chinese coercive capabilities. Whether this is due to U.S. conventional and nuclear superiority or faith in China’s commitment to minimum deterrence and its so-called “No First Use” nuclear policy is unclear. What is clear is that recent revelations of the full extent of the growth and diversification of China’s nuclear force requires a holistic reevaluation of China’s strategy, its impact on U.S. extended deterrence and the assurance of regional allies.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, China’s nuclear policy has been characterized by restraint. China has maintained a minimum deterrent achieved by a lean and effective force which was sufficient to deter nuclear attacks and nuclear blackmail by maintaining a secure second-strike capability.<sup>3</sup> China’s nuclear policy evolved as China’s security environment and national objectives changed. In the 1950s China’s national objective was the establishment of a new nation under the Chinese Communist Party in a security environment dominated by two nuclear armed superpowers. During this time, the United States attempted to blackmail China with nuclear weapons on two separate occasions spurring China to develop its own nuclear deterrent. In 1957, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai stated, “China is developing nuclear weapons to oppose nuclear threat, not to engage in a nuclear arms race with the nuclear

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021, Annual Report to Congress*, p. I, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Richard, “Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander United States Strategic Command Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services,” Senate Committee on Armed Services, April 20, 2021, p. 6, available at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Richard04.20.2021.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, et al., *China’s Evolving Nuclear Deterrent*, RAND, 2017, p. 20, available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1628.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1628.html).



states.”<sup>4</sup> On the very day that China tested its first nuclear weapon in 1964, the Chinese government declared, “China will not at any time or under any circumstances employ nuclear weapons first.”<sup>5</sup> This policy protected China’s national objectives and achieved China’s security objectives without straining the nation’s limited resources.

The reforms and opening ushered in by Deng Xiaoping changed the national objectives of China. He set China on the path of modernization with the national objective of attaining great power status in a security environment that was, generally, mostly benign. In addition to the role of deterring nuclear attack and safe-guarding China’s peaceful development, nuclear weapons were identified as “a pillar for China’s great power status” and “symbols clearly displaying China’s international position.”<sup>6</sup> To achieve this, China’s force remained small, focused on a minimum deterrent force capable of delivering a credible second strike.

Today, Xi Jinping has set ambitious national objectives for China, often referred to in shorthand as “the Chinese Dream.” In addition to setting milestones for China’s development, its objectives include leading “the reform of the global governance system”, altering aspects of the status quo viewed “as incompatible with the sovereignty, security, and development interests” of China and “full reunification” with Taiwan on Beijing’s terms.<sup>7</sup> China’s security environment to achieve these objectives has also deteriorated. And in turn, it appears the role of nuclear weapons in China is changing and expanding.

The discovery of two fields of ballistic missile silos in western China by commercial imagery are just the latest in a long list of developments to China’s nuclear force.<sup>8</sup> In addition to increasing its number of silos by a factor greater than 10, China has invested and deployed road mobile ICBMs with multiple independent reentry vehicles, intermediate-range ballistic missiles that include precision strike and lower yield warheads, development of a follow on SSBN capable of targeting “the U.S. homeland from Chinese littoral waters,” and expansion

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>6</sup> Project Everest, *Science of Military Strategy 2013*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, U.S. Air University, February 2, 2021, p. 290, available at [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw\\_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d).

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021, Annual Report to Congress*, op. cit., p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Ma Xiu, Peter W. Singer, “China’s New Missile Fields are Just Part of the PLA Rocket Force’s Growth,” *Defense One*, August 11, 2021, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/08/chinas-new-missile-fields-are-just-part-pla-rocket-forces-growth/184442/>.

of its bomber capability which provides China with a regional triad.<sup>9</sup> The result is, at minimum, a doubling of the size of China's nuclear force in the next decade.<sup>10</sup>

The comprehensive development in China's nuclear force calls into question if the PRC believes that a nuclear posture of minimum deterrence is adequate to support its national goals and objectives in a dangerous security environment. In fact, the diversified development in both the quality and quantity of its nuclear force, as well as the increased flexibility, strongly suggests that China is moving away from minimum deterrence.<sup>11</sup> If China assesses that minimum deterrence is inadequate, what will they replace it with? How will this impact its No First Use policy? And finally, given China's use of other elements of national power for coercion, will nuclear weapons become another coercive tool? The recent video shared on an official Chinese Communist Party Channel may begin to answer that question. The video, now deleted, contained the threat to use nuclear weapons against Japan should it intervene in a conflict over Taiwan.<sup>12</sup>

This makes clear that the United States and our Indo-Pacific allies are facing an increased and uncertain conventional and nuclear threat from China. Because China's stated goals to change the status quo of the international system are at odds fundamentally with U.S. and allied vital national interests, this threat should not be expected to dissipate any time soon.

Currently the United States is reexamining its national policies to include its nuclear policy. The credibility of U.S. deterrence, extended deterrence and assurance is dependent on many of the choices currently being debated. What should be beyond debate is that China's continued expansion of its nuclear capabilities, coupled with a lack of transparency and a tradition of denial and deception, has injected increased uncertainty into the international environment.<sup>13</sup> It is imperative that U.S. policy decisions account, not only for the challenge China poses to U.S. and allied national interests, but hedge for the uncertainty surrounding China's future nuclear posture and policy. This requires continued support for U.S. recapitalization of the nuclear force, maintaining the triad and potentially increasing the flexibility of the force. This will ensure our policy choices support deterrence and extended deterrence while enhancing assurance and the strength of the alliances.

---

<sup>9</sup> Patty-Jane Geller and Peter Brookes, Factsheet, "China's Growing Nuclear Threat," The Heritage Foundation, May 3, 2021, available at [https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/FS\\_209.pdf](https://www.heritage.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/FS_209.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021, Annual Report to Congress*, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Patty-Jane Geller and Peter Brookes, Factsheet, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Cabot, "China's Nuclear Threat Against Japan: Hybrid Warfare and the End of Minimum Deterrence," *RealClear Defense*, August 6, 2021, available at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/06/chinas\\_nuclear\\_threat\\_against\\_japan\\_hybrid\\_warfare\\_and\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_minimum\\_deterrence\\_788893.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/08/06/chinas_nuclear_threat_against_japan_hybrid_warfare_and_the_end_of_minimum_deterrence_788893.html)

<sup>13</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, *Secrecy & Stratagem: Understanding Chinese Strategic Culture*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, February 2011, p. 24, available at [https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Mahnken%2C\\_Secrecy\\_and\\_stratagem\\_1.pdf](https://archive.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Mahnken%2C_Secrecy_and_stratagem_1.pdf).

In closing, as China's national objectives and perception of its security environment change, it has adapted its nuclear policy and force structure in order to support its goal. The change of China's posture and potentially, policy, to support its current ambitious national objectives has increased uncertainty and the potential for miscalculation in the region. This has a significant impact on U.S. deterrence, extended deterrence and the assurance of allies. Unlike the Cold War, the threat of a bolt out of the blue nuclear attack is not the primary deterrent challenge, though one for which we are still, and must be prepared. Today, the chief concern is the "risk of deterrence failure in regional wars under the nuclear shadow."<sup>14</sup> And China's nuclear shadow over Taiwan is increasing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jared Morgan McKinney

*Jared Morgan McKinney is the chair of the Department of Strategy and Security Studies at the Global College of PME, Air University, and reviews editor of the Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.*

In the 1970s, the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) established a convenient peace. In 1969, after a decade of worsening tensions, the PRC and Soviet Union had fought a border war, making the Sino-Soviet split, in the making for the past decade, obvious to all. We now know that in October 1969, China issued a nuclear "launching preparations" order,<sup>15</sup> a readiness status roughly equivalent to America's DEFCON 1. America's Defense Intelligence Agency—even after the crisis was defused—believed there to be a chance greater than one in ten of a Soviet "disarming" first strike on China,<sup>16</sup> indicating the tension approximated the uncertainty and fear felt during the U.S.-USSR Cuban Missile Crisis. Although fears of nuclear war fell after October 1969, the USSR undertook a massive build-up of troops on the border, raising prospects for conventional war.

In America, we remember that it was Nixon that went to China. In China, bringing Nixon to China is remembered as a technique to "foil" Soviet war plans that reflected China's strategic culture. An article in a Chinese military journal remarks that: "Chinese leaders put the wisdom of using softness to overcome hardness to use by not entering into direct conflict with the Soviet Union on the battlefield, but instead used superior diplomatic methods to achieve cooperation with the United States. This forced the Soviet Union to retreat in the face

---

<sup>14</sup> Brad Roberts, "Orienting the 2021 Nuclear Posture Review," *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer 2021) p. 134, available at [https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/1/2181/files/2019/03/Roberts\\_TWQ\\_44-2.pdf](https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/1/2181/files/2019/03/Roberts_TWQ_44-2.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969*, Center for Naval Analyses, November 2010, p. 51, available at [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/d0022974.a2.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/d0022974.a2.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> CIA, National Intelligence Estimate 11-13-73, *The Sino-Soviet Relationship: The Military Aspects*, September 20, 1973 (declassified June 2004), available at [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0001098218.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0001098218.pdf).

of difficulties and also avoided a large-scale armed conflict. It also won a stable international environment for China's subsequent development."<sup>17</sup> The cordial relations that developed between the United States and PRC during the 1970s helped calm the Cold War by incentivizing the USSR to pursue better relations with both the United States and China, lest it become the odd person out in a stable strategic marriage directed against the Soviet threat.

One issue made the U.S.-China rapprochement possible: the partial resolution of the Taiwan question. The United States agreed to end its mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China, to withdraw American soldiers, and to switch diplomatic recognition to the PRC. The agreement—called the Shanghai Communiqué—established peace between the United States and China for the first time since the creation of the PRC in 1949, when first ideological differences and then the Korean War prevented the establishment of diplomatic relations. At the time, Henry Kissinger assumed that China would reunify Taiwan in the not-so-distant future.<sup>18</sup> But Mao—and later, Deng—did not make this a priority, believing time to be on China's side, and other objectives (domestic stability and economic growth) more pressing. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which specified that any “effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means” would be a matter “of grave concern to the United States,” and that the United States would continue “to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character,” was sufficiently limited and ambiguous that it did not destroy the convenient peace established between the United States and China.

When the Cold War ended, the status quo of convenient peace was preserved, even after Beijing's crackdown on democracy protesters in 1989. The Taiwan issue was raised again in the 1995-1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis, when the dispatch of two Carrier Strike Groups to the region forced China to abandon any attempt at coercive diplomacy vis a vis Taiwan. Humbled by the experience, and impressed by the demonstration of modern warfare in the earlier Persian Gulf War, China began a massive drive for military modernization, including the development of anti-ship ballistic missiles, with the intention of reconfiguring its armed forces to win a potential war fought over Taiwan.<sup>19</sup> The EP-3 Incident, which followed in 2001, showed that there were some cracks in the U.S.-China relationship, but the convenient peace was still able to hold due to concessions from both sides. When the United States redirected its attentions to the Middle East for the following two decades, Chinese military

---

<sup>17</sup> Huaxia Contemporary Military Affairs, “珍宝岛事件到底因何而起？后来竟然改变了世界格局！” Translated by Matthew McGee.

<sup>18</sup> Mao Zedong to Henry A Kissinger, memorandum, “Memorandum of Conversation between Mao Zedong and Henry A. Kissinger,” October 21, 1975, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, National Security Adviser Trip Briefing Books and Cables for President Ford, 1974-1976 (Box 19), accessed at Wilson Center Digital Archive, available at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/118072>.

<sup>19</sup> Tai Ming Cheung, “Racing from Behind: China and the Dynamics of Arms Chases and Races in East Asia in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Arms Races in International Politics: From the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Thomas Mahnken, Joseph Maiolo, and David Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 247-69.

power continued to develop during a period the Chinese conceived as its “strategic opportunity”<sup>20</sup> to develop its capabilities in a relatively benign international environment.

In the 2020s, U.S.-China relations are entering a new era. The convenient peace—which could hold during the Cold War, and then during a period of relative Chinese weakness and other American priorities—seems less convenient today. Taiwan has once again become a focal point of contention. The ambiguity that allowed Taiwan to be an “agree to disagree” issue is being eroded. In part, this reflects the CCP’s apparent timeline for reunification (likely 2049). In part, it reflects the reality that many American elites were never comfortable with severing the defensive relationship with Taiwan, and that absent a Great Power or Middle East threat, doing so felt—and feels—like unnecessary appeasement.

This is the context for the increasing tension that defines the Taiwan issue today. How can a Chinese invasion of Taiwan be deterred in this decade?

Relying on a deterrence-by-denial strategy is not viable in the short to medium term because of asymmetries in geographic location and relative commitment disparities between the United States and China vis a vis Taiwan, as well as China’s ever-increasing A2/AD capabilities, which now give it de facto sea control out to the First Island Chain.<sup>21</sup> At best, a “successful” U.S. denial campaign in response to a Chinese invasion would result in a major war that would likely escalate horizontally quickly, to the detriment of all participants, and indeed, the world. Threatening such a war over a non-vital interest is not credible. At best, such a deterrence strategy relies on “a threat that leaves something to chance.” The United States has to threaten going to the brink in order to deter an invasion. But it is far from difficult to imagine a Chinese leader, increasingly pressured by audience costs and internal ambitions to fulfill the “China Dream,” taking a risk and calling for the cards to be put on the table. Were this to occur, the United States would then have to choose between a Great Power war of potentially incalculable cost and standing aside. In the actual event, compromise over Taiwan, unjust though it may be in an ideal world, may then appear more convenient, as indeed it was in the 1970s.

A deterrence-by-punishment strategy allows the United States to avoid the thorny conundrum outlined above. Instead of seeking to deter a Chinese invasion by literally interdicting and repelling it, the United States would work to deter a Chinese invasion by creating such conditions that credibly suggest that the costs of such an invasion would outweigh the benefits. Getting the equation here may be tricky, but it is far from impossible.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Academy of Military Science, Zhanlue Xue, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2021 (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), pp. 13, 98.

<sup>21</sup> J Michael Dahm, *Introduction to the South China Sea Military Capability Studies* (The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2020), available at <https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/IntroductiontoSCSMILCAPStudies.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> The full argument is introduced in: Jared Morgan McKinney and Peter Harris, “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan,” *Parameters* vol. 51, no. 4 (Winter 2022-2021), pp. 23–36.

The obvious place to start is that Taiwan needs to be able to offer a robust defense, preventing a *fait accompli*. Unfortunately, Taiwan in significant ways is not taking the China threat seriously, meaning that not even this first step is guaranteed for the 2020s.<sup>23</sup> Credible experts have shown how Taiwan could choose a different path, but so far not much seems to be changing.<sup>24</sup>

The second step would be for Taiwan to develop the societal will and means to credibly threaten long-term guerilla resistance in response to a Chinese occupation. In theory, the means are well known.<sup>25</sup> In practice, malaise and poor morale signal that this is not happening today.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, the United States and its allies would need to be prepared to threaten significant economic sanctions, akin to those imposed on Russia after its seizure of Crimea. The Chinese most likely expect such a response to be the floor, a default response regardless of what other decisions factor into a U.S. response. The response of regional actors, including a successful effort to double Japan's defense budget from 1 percent to 2 percent of GDP (something proposed by the LDP, but currently a pipe dream), would also lock-in additional long-term costs, some of which significantly improve the position of the United States and its allies.

Beyond these steps, Taiwan should seek to threaten what might be called mutual technological destruction (MTD). If China invades Taiwan, Taiwan immediately destroys the physical capital of its semiconductor industry (particularly that of TSMC) and seeks to limit China's ability to acquire the industry's human capital. Taiwan would also target (with ballistic and cruise missiles) China's leading semiconductor foundries on the mainland, and the United States would implement a preplanned semiconductor embargo, coordinated with South Korea, Singapore, and Japan, leaving China with limited production capacity for any chips whatsoever, and essentially no access to leading generation chip designs.

Such a program would destroy Taiwan's economy. But it would also radically harm China's economy. Joined with the other ways to impose costs (a robust defense, a lasting insurgency,

---

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Porter and Michael Mazarr, "Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way," Lowy Institute, May 20, 2021, available at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/countering-china-s-adventurism-over-taiwan-third-way>; Robert D Blackwill and Philip Zelikow, "The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War" (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Heino Klinck, "Taiwan's Turn – Deterring and Derailing an Existential Threat," *Information Series #508* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, November 11, 2021), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/heino-klinck-taiwans-turn-deterring-and-derailing-an-existential-threat-no-508-november-11-2021/](https://nipp.org/information_series/heino-klinck-taiwans-turn-deterring-and-derailing-an-existential-threat-no-508-november-11-2021/).

<sup>25</sup> Otto C Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2020), available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=838149>.

<sup>26</sup> Kathrin Hille, "Taiwanese Shrug off China Threat and Place Their Trust in 'Daddy America,'" *Financial Times*, September 22, 2021, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/b0e3fa00-42af-4914-9323-38c75ac46d67>; Joyu Wang and Alastair Gale, "Does Taiwan's Military Stand a Chance Against China? Few Think So," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2021, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/taiwan-military-readiness-china-threat-us-defense-11635174187>.

general economic sanctions, and regional adjustments to the balance of power), the overall package of tailored deterrence could threaten such costs that, except in the most desperate of circumstances, a Chinese invasion of Taiwan would be better delayed than undertaken. But only, that is, if the threat were credible. Could Taiwan credibly threaten to destroy its own economy?

The credibility of an incredible threat is at the center of the plot of China's most successful work of science fiction, *The Three Body Problem* by Liu Cixin.

In Liu's trilogy, an alien race, the Trisolarans, launch an invasion of earth. Earth has no way to deny the Trisolarans a successful invasion, as it is multiple ages behind technologically. Eventually, however, Luo Ji, a Chinese sociologist, discovers a form of deterrence by punishment, called "dark forest" deterrence. The discovery is based on the insight that the universe is in a Hobbesian state of war by default, where the very ability to communicate with other life forms implies a technological capacity—sooner or later—to threaten other races. Not willing to take this risk, one alien group or another strikes first. When Luo Ji realizes this, he sees that Earth would only need to threaten to reveal Trisolaris' position to the galaxy, and it would be able to threaten the "complete destruction of both the deterrer and the deteree" because any such action would also give away the location of Earth.<sup>27</sup> The question then becomes whether such a threat could be credible. Would Earth destroy itself—an action entirely without profit or purpose—in a situation where deterrence had failed? In the novel, for such a threat to work, it is said that 80 percent probability of carrying out the action was required. To credibly promise such destruction, the power to make such a decision was handed to a single individual, called a Swordholder. Luo Ji fulfilled this mission first for 50 years. But towards the end of his tenure, the whole deterrence system came under heavy criticism for being "mundicidal," resting as it did on the threat to destroy two worlds. Luo Ji was therefore replaced by a Swordholder more suitable for an age that perceived itself as "on the cusp of achieving universal peace and love" and in which, it was thought, "deterrence is no longer so important."<sup>28</sup> The new Swordholder lasted fifteen minutes only, for the Trisolarans, who had already assessed her credibility, immediately ordered an attack on earth. The new Swordholder had never thought the unthinkable,<sup>29</sup> and so she could not deter. The attack succeeds, and the Earth is conquered.

Assuming a device for technological destruction were created, could a modern Taiwanese leader serve as a credible Swordholder? Would she understand that the world Taiwan lives in is not one of peace and love, but of Hobbes' state of nature? Would she be willing to think the unthinkable, or at least convince the Chinese that she did?

---

<sup>27</sup> Cixin Liu, *Death's End*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Thor, 2016), p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.



Taiwan has more agency for deterring a Chinese attack than analysts seem to realize. As deterrence by denial, which relies upon the United States, becomes less viable, and hence less credible, Taiwan should commit itself to a deterrence-by-punishment strategy that requires it—and not the United States—to take the decisive actions. In 1993, Taiwan spent 5 percent of its GDP on its military. Today, it spends approximately 2 percent.<sup>30</sup> This decline in spending relative to GDP began during the post-Cold War period of peak American power. But even as the unipolar world ends, Taiwan has not awoken to the new reality.

Taiwan needs to make swords. Even more than that, it needs a Swordholder.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chad Sbragia

*Chad Sbragia is a Research Analyst with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China. The views presented here are his and do not necessarily represent the views of DoD, its components, or IDA.*

I'd like to briefly tackle the topic associated with "the stakes involved for China, the United States, and regional allies with respect to possible Chinese military action against Taiwan." My aim is to re-frame some of China's aspirations and draw out some implications for the United States to argue that Washington and our allies and partners must rethink what "Deterring Potential Chinese Aggression Against Taiwan" really means.

The call is for Washington to consider a new paradigm that encompasses deterring Chinese aggression against Taiwan but in context of broader conditions, and to recognize China already has.

The bottom line is that a paradigm concentrated exclusively on deterring potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan is no longer sound, and probably hasn't been for two decades. In hindsight, the premise and assumptions that set this paradigm were malformed at origin and have never recalibrated or adjusted with the change in dynamics. In a contemporary context, the existing paradigm is convenient because it is reductionist; but perhaps catastrophically so.

It is now clear that this framing is inappropriate as U.S.-China systemic rivalry intensifies. The United States cannot continue to ignore that the combination of strategic, political, and military objectives and tools needed create this deterrent effect results in unresolvable contradictions.

---

<sup>30</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "Military Expenditure by Country as Percentage of Gross Domestic Product, 1988-2020," available at <https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/Data%20for%20all%20countries%20from%201988-2020%20as%20a%20share%20of%20GDP%20%28pdf%29.pdf>.

What must be deterred, the subject and object of deterrence, and why deterrence is necessary, in current form, is overly narrow, fails to address contextual imperatives, and distorts both strategic guidance and war planning constructs.

The starting line is that CCP unification of Taiwan is not an isolated end in itself, but one goal of a broader range of interconnected goals.

Specifically, the CCP has established mid-century goals to achieve the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation—which includes unification of Taiwan—that altogether set conditions to achieve even longer-range national aspirations beyond 2050. Thus, in Beijing’s view, unification of Taiwan is a non-negotiable necessity for Beijing’s agenda, one of many, and the United States remains an omnipresent and often intrusive obstacle for China to achieve those ends.

However, while unification is an imperative, it is also inextricably linked to other national goals, so Beijing calibrates how Taiwan is unified by the degree to which it impacts those other goals, such as disrupting China’s developmental targets or generating security alignments hostile to CCP modernization.

This calculus manifests throughout CCP strategies, including China’s military theory and strategy of Active Defense, which is defined as the dialectical unity of war restraint and war winning, and key enrichments like the concept of effective control.

There are critical implications of the cross-strait conditions that should inform any U.S. paradigm about deterrence that includes potential use of force, and I’ll offer two points of many.

Point 1: When and why the CCP will choose force is not a single driver.

- First, the absolute imperative of Taiwan unification with the mainland by mid-century puts conflict on a count-down timer if Taipei doesn’t accede. The implication is that deterrence diminishes over time and ultimately reaches a zero axis at some point, so that while U.S. deterrence is important it is neither a sustainable condition nor permanent solution. Deterrence fails slowly.
- Second, Beijing’s preference is for a willing or peaceful unification because it imposes the least cost on its other national goals but, even then, the necessity to unify will trump Beijing’s patience by mid-century. The implication is that U.S. deterrence through cost imposition still matters and, if the United States can sustain an advantage, Washington’s deterrent threat can constrain Beijing’s choices to exploit

perceived opportunities to use force. In fact, this element is crucial, but by definition is an expansion of deterrence beyond Taiwan.

This is why Beijing's gambit is to modernize its capacities so as to be so overwhelming that Taiwan can't resist, and that as U.S. power weakens, Washington's capabilities to impose cost are so marginalized so as to be ineffective. Here, the U.S. capacity to generate deterrence matters, but only to the degree that Washington can maintain a relative advantage and then only as a diminishing delay, and increasing as a function of systemic rivalry, not Taiwan.

- Third, the two aforementioned conditions for a Chinese use of force—the time constraint or CCP opportunism due to a perceived advantage in balance of power—are joined by a third, which is Beijing's necessity to prevent a permanent loss of Taiwan in the interim. Even if the clock has not run out or Beijing still assesses it is not strong enough to deter U.S. intervention, the CCP remains compelled to militarily coerce Taipei if conditions arise that may result in a permanent loss.

For example, consider a Taiwan declaration of independence or the stationing of foreign troops in Taiwan that could prevent forced unification. The implication is that China will use force to prevent a permanent loss of Taiwan, even if Beijing concludes China will lose. Thus, the United States both (1) cannot assume China will be restrained by an unfavorable correlation of forces and that (2) the United States must also consider constraint of external conditions that may lead Beijing to use force.

This is why I find arguments about when China can or will use force one dimensional; China will use force by 2050, when China perceives an advantage, or when Beijing perceives a permanent loss is imminent. War could happen tomorrow and increases in likelihood every day.

Point 2: Dynamics of changing capacities and systemic rivalry.

- First, let's discuss scale and intensity. If you pay attention to the Defense Department's annual report to Congress on *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, you'll note that DoD's first annual report to Congress in 2000 assessed the "PRC's armed forces at that time to be a sizable but mostly archaic military that was poorly suited to the CCP's long-term ambitions" and "lacked the capabilities, organization, and readiness for modern warfare."<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020, Annual Report to Congress*, p. i, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

China's composite national power has undergone an eye-watering increase, as the 200-page DoD 2020 report contends, yet the paradigm to deter potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan has remained essentially unchanged.

While in the past the deterrent effect from America's military power could serve to deter China's aggression against Taiwan, the implication now is that the scale and intensity of force necessary to stop China is escalating so high that conflict ceases to be constrained around Taiwan and transforms into great power war. This is a different paradigm, and in fact negates the former.

- Second, war termination criteria become untenable and protracted war emerges. As the scale and intensity of conflict crosses a threshold into great power war, it changes the underlying conditions to achieve war termination. Previously, the simple calculus was that Beijing ventured military coercion and either succeeded or not. Now, the implication is that the force necessary by either side to prevail definitively, but short of near total or nuclear war, is improbable and the crisis degenerates into protracted conventional great power conflict.
- Third, the corollary is that any conflict with the United States that may generate such conditions re-frames crisis not as a war of unification, but determinant of great power preeminence. The implication is that crisis over Taiwan cannot be bifurcated from the larger U.S.-China systemic rivalry and Beijing's pursuit of preeminence within the global system. A Taiwan-related crisis, therefore, may not only result in unification or defense of Taiwan, but may settle all accounts between the two powers. This seems to be the trajectory of China's thinking.

Surveys of Chinese literature on conflict, Taiwan, military exercises, future warfighting concepts, and tasks for the PLA and the CCP's foreign affairs establishment are clear that Beijing increasingly focuses on defeat of the United States as the priority task, with compellence of Taipei a central, but definitively secondary, matter.

The call is for a paradigm that matches the conditions. More simply, we are continuing to develop a deterrence calculus that solves for "X," when the veracity and efficacy of solving for "X" is questionable. We must think about solving for "Y."

In other words, whereas previously Taiwan was both the subject and object of potential crisis, now the subject of any conflict is U.S.-China strategic rivalry even if the object is Taiwan. This reframes the paradigm around U.S.-China competition and accounts for Taiwan, or any other conditions that may result in conflict, as merely a catalyst. The implications for use of force, posture objectives, scale and intensity, and war termination change under this paradigm, and merit further consideration.

There are other implications for a poorly framed paradigm, such as how Taiwan’s political situation will bear on U.S. response options, or the attractiveness of the defense of Taiwan to our allies and partners rather than the defense of the U.S. role in the Indo-Pacific and its alternative, which is dominance by Beijing.

The underlying issue is that when the United States assumes political and military risks, stakes its legitimacy, and involves allies, it must do so based on a combination of strategic and political objectives. Strategic, to make clear the circumstances for which conflict is necessary; political, to define the governing framework to sustain the outcome both domestically and internationally.

As Henry Kissinger noted, the United States often fails because of its inability to define attainable goals and to link them in a way that is sustainable by the American political process. The military objectives are often too absolute and unattainable and the political ones too abstract and elusive. The failure to link them to each other has involved America in conflicts without definable terminal points and caused us internally to dissolve unified purpose in a swamp of domestic controversies.

