

Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question

To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.

Sun Tzu, sixth century, B.C.

Introduction

Carl von Clausewitz wrote that the nature of war has enduring continuities, but its characteristics change with different circumstances.¹ Similarly, the basic nature of deterrence endures across time and place: a threatened response to an adversary's prospective provocation causes that adversary to decide against the provocation, i.e., the adversary is deterred from attack because it decides that the cost of prospective consequences would outweigh the gains. Effective deterrence shapes the calculations and thus the decision making of an adversary in a more benign direction than otherwise would have been the case.

While this threat-based nature of deterrence endures, its application must answer particular questions: who deters whom? from what action? by threatening what response? in what circumstances? in the face of what counterthreats?² Numerous factors can necessitate adapting a deterrence strategy for greatest effect, including the adversary's character, attention, military and non-military capabilities, values, will and health, the deterrence goal, the historical and cultural contexts, and the available channels of communication, *inter alia*.

For example, the most effective deterrent may be based on a threat to punish the adversary in a manner that aligns with the adversary's fears. Depending on the opponent and context, this threatened punishment could be communicated via a variety of possible channels and be based on a range of possible military and non-military threat instruments. In another case, the necessary deterrent threat may be to deny the adversary its specific political or military objectives.³ In yet another case, a combination of unique punishment and denial threats may be necessary to deter. In all of these cases, effective deterrence may require adjusting the instruments of deterrence as well as the means of communicating the

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ For an early discussion of the distinction between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial see, Glen H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 3-16, 33-40.

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needed threat and the basis for its credibility per the unique conditions of opponent, time, and place.

Understanding the basic threat-based nature of deterrence is no challenge. Illustrated children's books have been written on the subject.⁴ That simplicity is deceptive, however, because understanding how to adjust the character of deterrence strategies in practice across different adversaries and contexts is a significant challenge. Doing so is complicated by adversaries' divergent worldviews, values, goals, priorities, risk tolerances, motivations, levels of pragmatism and determination, channels of communication, and perceptions of U.S. credibility.⁵ The significance of meeting that challenge is of unparalleled value when the deterrence goal is the prevention of conflict and nuclear attack.

During the Cold War, U.S. nuclear deterrence strategies adjusted slowly given the enduring continuities of the U.S.-Soviet bipolar strategic environment. Thereafter, U.S. leaders adjusted to the dramatic systemic transformation brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact and a prevalent assumption that China would rise peacefully. The common belief was that the prospect for interstate nuclear crises and the need for nuclear deterrence was dwindling. The hope and expectation—shared by many senior officials and commentators alike—was that nuclear threats and the potential for nuclear employment belonged to the past, never to return.⁶ The West generally welcomed the sanguine expectations and claims that, because the Cold War had ended, interstate nuclear threats and the need for nuclear deterrence were largely a thing of the past. As then-Commander of European Command, General Philip Breedlove, remarked in 2016, “We embarked on a policy of ‘hugging the bear’ with what we perceived was a former adversary turned strategic partner.”⁷ These conditions and expectations led to what has been called a 30-year U.S. strategic “holiday from history” and serious thinking about deterrence policy vis-à-vis great nuclear powers.⁸

Suffice to say, however, neither China nor Russia took a comparable “holiday.” A primary task now is to understand how a third and dramatically different new strategic threat environment should shape U.S. understanding of opponents and contexts, and, correspondingly, U.S. deterrence strategies. Why? Because, “Nations as different as China and Russia have chosen to be strategic competitors as they seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models and pursue veto power over other nation's economic,

⁴ See Herbert Scoville and Robert Osborn, *Missile Madness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970).

⁵ The diversity of such variables and their significance to the functioning of deterrence is presented in, Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 1-77.

⁶ “The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future...” James Cartwright, Chair, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission, *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, May 2012), p. 6, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf. Renewed hostility with Russia is described as, “hardly more likely to be revived than the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between Catholics and Protestants in Europe.” Carl Kaysen, Robert S. McNamara, and George W. Rathjens, “Nuclear Weapons After the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Fall 1991), p. 96.

⁷ Philip Breedlove, “U.S. European Command Posture Statement 2016,” *EUCOM.mil*, February 25, 2016, available at <http://www.eucom.mil/media-library/article/35164/u-s-european-command-posture-statement-2016>.

⁸ Robert Gates, “We Need a More Realistic Strategy for the Post-Cold War era,” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/03/03/why-ukraine-should-force-a-total-overhaul-of-our-national-security-strategy/>.

diplomatic, and security decisions.”⁹ U.S. Strategic Command Commander, ADM Charles Richard, has rightly emphasized that these developments demand that the United States think anew about its approach to deterrence.¹⁰

Tailoring Deterrence

By definition, effective deterrence requires that U.S. deterrence strategies be sufficiently credible to different adversaries to shape their decision making decisively. However, given the great potential variation in adversaries, the United States must adjust the character of its deterrence strategies, i.e., “tailor” them as necessary to the unique characteristics of diverse adversaries and circumstances. 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 deterrence redlines to opponents may require wholly different approaches.

Recognition of the need to tailor deterrence is not new. Decades ago, U.S. scholars of deterrence pointed in their own words to the need to adjust deterrence strategies to the specific opponent and circumstances.¹¹ As a relatively early academic discussion of the need to adjust deterrence strategies to the differing possible opponents and contexts rightly concludes, “If one does not threaten the right target for the right reasons, it may not matter how well one does it.”¹² To do so, of course, demands the hard work necessary to understand opponents, as well as possible, as the foundation on which to build a deterrence strategy that is calibrated to their unique characters and circumstances. This “hard work” is necessary because, as two deterrence scholars observed decades ago: “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.”¹³

This need to understand opponents and to tailor deterrence according to their unique characters and the pertinent contexts will likely shape the appropriate form and substance of deterrence threats, the source of their delivery, their timing, content, format, and the channels of their communication. The potential value of so tailoring deterrence cannot be overstated. The failure to understand the unique characteristics of diverse adversaries and adjust deterrence accordingly has, on numerous past occasions, led the United States to be shocked by unexpected foreign actions, including the failure of deterrence.¹⁴

For example, in August 1941, Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson reassured President Roosevelt that war with Japan was unlikely because “no rational Japanese could

⁹ Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, *Senate Armed Services Committee, Written Statement for the Record*, April 26, 2018, p. 3.

¹⁰ Amy McCullough, “Russia, China Push STRATCOM to Reconsider Strategic Deterrence,” *Air Force Magazine Online*, October 21, 2021, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/russia-china-push-stratcom-to-reconsider-strategic-deterrence/#>.

¹¹ See for example, Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 82-83.

¹² Peter Karsten, Peter Howell and Artis Frances Allen, *Military Threats: A Systemic Historical Analysis of the Determinants of Success* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. xii.

¹³ Gordon Craig and Alexander George, *Force and Statecraft*, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 188.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence*, op. cit., pp. 1-15.

believe an attack on us could result in anything but disaster for his country.”¹⁵ Four months later Japan launched a surprise attack against the United States at Pearl Harbor. Despite Acheson’s confident expectation, Japanese leaders apparently calculated that they had no acceptable alternative to war with the United States.¹⁶

On September 19, 1962, less than one month before photographic evidence proved that the Soviets had placed missiles in Cuba, Special National Intelligence Estimate 85-3-62, *The Military Buildup in Cuba*, essentially stated that the Soviet Union would not place missiles in Cuba because doing so “would indicate a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in US-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far....”¹⁷ Sherman Kent, then-head of the National Board of Estimates, stated of this mistake regarding missiles in Cuba, “We missed the Soviet decision to put the missiles into Cuba because we could not believe that Khrushchev could make a mistake.”¹⁸

The 1973 Yom Kippur War is a final illustration here of surprise flowing from misunderstanding opponents. On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated, surprise assault against Israel. Avner Cohen reports that: “The Arabs were not deterred from waging the 1973 war by the knowledge that Israel was in possession of nuclear weapons....”¹⁹ President Anwar Sadat apparently initiated the attack in the hope that it would “precipitate” superpower intervention.²⁰ For American leaders convinced that prudence in the face of great risk must lead to cautious behavior, the decision to strike against a putative nuclear-armed opponent was inexplicable. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger observed that, despite ample information about Arab troop movements, “no one believed” they would launch an attack because, “Our definition of rationality did not take seriously the notion of [Egypt and Syria] starting an unwinnable war to restore self-respect.”²¹

Not until relatively late in the Cold War, however, did U.S. deterrence policy focus on the unique character of the opponent and context. Rather, from the early 1960s through the mid-1970s, the United States declared its strategic deterrent to be based on an “assured destruction” threat to Soviet urban/industrial assets. In 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara quantified this threat as, “the destruction of, say, 25 percent of its population (55 million people) and more than two-thirds of its industrial capacity...Such a level of destruction would certainly represent *intolerable punishment to any industrialized nation*

¹⁵ Quoted in, Scott Sagan, “The Origins of the Pacific War,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), p. 906.

¹⁶ See, for example, Louis Morton, “Japan’s Decision for War,” *Command Decisions* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959). See also, Richard Betts, *Surprise Attack* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1982), pp. 133-137.

¹⁷ Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relived,” in, *Sherman Kent and the Board of National Estimates, Collected Essays* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1994), accessed at <www.cia.gov/csi/books/shermankent/toc.html> on August 9, 2000.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 342.

²⁰ See, R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 1235; and, Karl P. Mueller et al., *Striking First* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2006), p. 210.

²¹ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1982), p. 46.

and thus should serve as an effective deterrent.”²² He later observed that, “It is important to understand that assured destruction is the very essence of the whole deterrence concept.”²³

Secretary McNamara did *not* link this “assured destruction” deterrence threat with the Soviet leadership’s specific values and priorities. Rather, Secretary McNamara and senior DoD officials appear to have assumed urban/industrial targeting to be the basis for deterring the leaders of “any industrialized nation,” including the Soviet Union. Senior DoD officials said explicitly that the “assured destruction” metric was based on the “flat in the curve” for this form of threat, i.e., the point where additional nuclear weapons would have been of rapidly decreasing value for destroying additional societal targets, and thus would be “insignificant for deterrence.”²⁴

In short, this U.S. deterrence strategy was not obviously tailored to Soviet leadership values and priorities; it was instead based on a presumption that this type of threat would deter “any industrialized nation.” As such, it ignored or discounted the need to understand the unique character of the opponent and context and tailor deterrence accordingly.

However, recognition of the value of tailoring deterrence to the opponent and circumstance appears to have consciously shaped U.S. policy later in the Cold War. For example, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown stated openly that the Carter Administration’s “Countervailing Strategy” and the 1980 Presidential Directive-59 were designed to take the Soviet leadership’s values and priorities specifically into account.²⁵

Secretary Brown had directed immediate implementation of recommendations contained in the 1978 Nuclear Targeting Policy Review.²⁶ Its basic conclusion illustrates these early efforts to tailor U.S. strategic deterrence: “The Nuclear Targeting Policy Review has emphasized the importance of implementing a nuclear strategy and developing supporting capabilities that will deter the Soviet Union from using their military power not only by threatening the Soviet Union but also by making Soviet military victory, *as seen through Soviet eyes*, as improbable as we can make it...Our objective is not to create war fighting capabilities, but to strengthen deterrence.”²⁷ A key conclusion of this effort to tailor deterrence was that, “Among the most important characteristics that we should build into our strategic plans and capabilities are flexibility and endurance.”²⁸

Shortly thereafter, under the Reagan Administration, the 1983 bipartisan *Report of the President’s Commission on Strategic Forces* (“Scowcroft Commission”) essentially presented the need to tailor deterrence to the specific “set of beliefs in the minds of the Soviet leaders,

²² Draft Memorandum for the President, Secretary of Defense [Robert S. McNamara] to the President [Lyndon B. Johnson], Subj: Recommended FY 1966-FY 1970 Programs for Strategic Offensive Forces, Continental Air and Missile Defense Forces, and Civil Defense, December 3, 1964, p. 4. (Originally classified; sanitized and declassified on January 5, 1983); cited hereafter as *1964 DPM*. (Emphasis added).

²³ Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 53.

²⁴ Alain Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith, *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program, 1961-1969* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 67; and *1964 DPM*, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁵ See the discussion in, Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and Strategic Planning* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1984), pp. 71-72.

²⁶ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs, Memorandum from Leon Sloss, Director Nuclear Targeting Review to the Director of the Joint Staff, et al., December 13, 1978, p. 2. (Declassified on October 24, 2013.)

²⁷ *Ibid.* (Emphasis added).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

given their own values and attitudes.”²⁹ This was the tailoring of U.S. strategic deterrence plans, although the catchword “tailoring” itself came into play only much more recently.

Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. deterrence policy has increasingly emphasized the need to tailor deterrence strategies to the specific opponent and circumstances for any given deterrence engagement.³⁰ The aspiration to do so is now a well-established principle of U.S. deterrence policy. The acceptance in U.S. policy of the need for deterrence tailoring was highlighted in DoD’s 2004 *Strategic Deterrence Joint Operating Concept* and more recently in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*.³¹ The ubiquitous observation reflecting this development in U.S. deterrence policy is that, for deterrence, “one size does not fit all.”³²

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.

Deterring Aggression in the Taiwan Strait

During the Cold War, the need to adjust deterrence to different opponents and contexts was limited because the U.S. focus was largely on a single threatening superpower, i.e., the Soviet Union. To the extent that other powers were considered, they were deemed to be lesser included cases.³³ A prominent deterrence challenge now confronting Washington, however, 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 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from deciding to conquer 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.”³⁴ China’s recent harsh repression in Hong Kong in violation of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration looms large in the background.

²⁹ Brent Scowcroft, Chair, *President’s Commission On Strategic Forces*, April 6, 1983, p. 3.

³⁰ 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, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, op. cit., pp. 87-114.

³¹ The 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) culminated a decades-long road to the elevation of tailoring deterrence to a fundamental principle of U.S. policy. 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>.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³³ James Anderson, “China’s Arms Buildup Threatens the Nuclear Balance,” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2020, at <https://nyti.ms/3f6A4NH>; and, Rachel Cohen, “USAF Rethinks Relationship Between Conventional, Nuclear Weapons,” *Air Force Magazine Online*, August 19, 2020, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/usaf-rethinks-relationship-between-conventional-nuclear-weapons/>.

³⁴ 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 mainland; that is a much heavier political burden than deterrence can or should be expected to bear. The goal of bringing Taiwan under CCP governance, by force if necessary, appears to be an essential part of the CCP's broader program of national rejuvenation. China's President and the General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, has staked his rule on achieving "socialism with Chinese characteristics," a program that includes transforming China into a moderately prosperous society with the elimination of extreme poverty by the centennial of the CCP's founding in 2021, and for China to be a prosperous, powerful, and *unified* country by its centenary in 2049. Xi's subjugation of Hong Kong reflects his definition of, and willingness to pursue, this goal at the expense of the West's good will.

For the CCP and Xi Jinping in particular, similarly controlling Taiwan appears to be a matter of *existential* importance. Effective U.S. deterrence in this case is for China's leadership to conclude, when considering its options for Taiwan, that the risks/costs of attempting to conquer Taiwan militarily are intolerable compared to the relative greater safety of deciding, "not this year." Deterrence surely cannot solve all geopolitical problems, but it may be able to accomplish that much.

Numerous commentators and academics present their competing opinions on how the United States should pursue deterrence in this case—there seems to be a daily publication on the subject. In most cases, however, this advice is derived from jargon and principles taken from America's Cold War deterrence experience. That is understandable, but a mistake.

The current deterrence challenge posed by China and the Taiwan Question is unprecedented and commentary on the subject that is derived from U.S. Cold War deterrence 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 tailor a U.S. deterrence strategy in light of that understanding.

The Taiwan Question

China's leadership considers Taiwan to be a renegade part of China but, in the past, referred to "one country, two systems," suggesting some level of tolerance of a democratic Taiwan. However, the CCP's tolerance of a successful, democratic Taiwan appears to be at an end, and China's extreme pressure on Taiwan, backed by increasingly bellicose military threats, suggests a growing deterrence challenge—particularly following China's brutal imposition of control over Hong Kong, which also earlier enjoyed the apparent freedom of "one country, two systems." Xi Jinping has stated that "unification" cannot be put off indefinitely.³⁵ Indeed, ADM John Aquilino said in his confirmation hearing for Commander of Indo-Pacific Command that China's use of force in this regard is "much closer to us than most think."³⁶

³⁵ Quoted in, Keith Griffith, "Nine US Generals Send '36-Star Memo' Begging Spy Chiefs to Declassify Intelligence," *Dailymail.com*, April 27, 2021.

³⁶ Quoted in, *Economist* Editorial, "China and Taiwan: Something Wicked This Way Comes," *The Economist* (UK), May 1, 2021, available at <https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2021-05-01>.

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. China's leadership 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.”³⁷ 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.³⁸ Most recently, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin reportedly expressed this approach to deterrence by observing that the United States would continue to *avoid* setting “redlines” regarding Taiwan.³⁹ 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 an attack on Taiwan *might* be very powerful. The long-standing U.S. expectation that uncertainty provides decisive deterrent effect presumes that China’s 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, i.e., 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: China’s 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. China’s fear of the *possibility* of a very strong U.S. reaction will render the U.S. deterrent sufficiently potent and credible to be effective rather than the alternative possibility that China will instead *be reassured* by 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

³⁷ 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>.

³⁸ 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>.

³⁹ 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/>.

“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 China’s expectations regarding U.S. capabilities, decision making, will and determination.

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 predict future CCP calculations confidently, 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.”⁴⁰

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,”⁴¹ i.e., the fear of uncertainty.

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.”⁴² 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.”⁴³

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 retaliation?”⁴⁴ This harsh deterrence reality continued to the end of the Cold War. It essentially compelled the United States to rely heavily on Soviet uncertainty about possible U.S. behavior for deterrent effect rather than the logic of a U.S. nuclear

⁴⁰ Colin S. Gray, *Nuclear Strategy and National Style* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Press, 1986), p. 146.

⁴¹ See, Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp.187-188.

⁴² Joseph S. Nye, “The Role of Strategic Nuclear Systems in Deterrence,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Spring 1988), p. 47. (Emphasis added).

⁴³ McGeorge Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1969), pp. 17-18.

⁴⁴ 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.

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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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 enemy in doubt” about “the escalation process.”⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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?”⁴⁹ 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. Khrushchev should be deterred, he said, because the United States just might

⁴⁵ See, Henry Kissinger, “The Future of NATO,” in, *NATO, The Next Thirty Years*, Kenneth Myers, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), p. 8.

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Information Series, February 1974), p. 16.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 228.

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.’”⁵⁰ Secretary Rusk had put into practice the proposition that the United States could rely on Soviet uncertainty regarding U.S. reason to deter 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 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 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 logical 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.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also, Arnold Beichman, “How Foolish Khrushchev Nearly Started World War III,” *The Washington Times*, October 3, 2004, p. B 8.

⁵¹ 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.

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 conventional defense in Europe and the possibility of successfully meeting a conventional attack with conventional forces."⁵² 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 sought to ameliorate 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.⁵³ At the strategic level, the United States added limited nuclear options (LNOs) to its deterrence planning,⁵⁴ despite sharp domestic criticism that it was unnecessary to do so.⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶

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 manifestly illogical given the likely

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Amy Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons* (Congressional Research Service, September 6, 2019), available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>.

⁵⁴ 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), pp. II-3-II-4; and, James Schlesinger, *Annual Defense Department Report FY 1975* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, March 4, 1974), pp. 32, 42.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ *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.

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 Soviet 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, officials in China have stated openly that they have no room to conciliate on the Taiwan Question. China's leadership appears unanimous in the view that Taiwan is part of China and an issue of national sovereignty;⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ China's leaders and spokespersons have said that Taiwan is an internal affair that does "not tolerate external interference,"⁵⁹ that "there is zero room for compromise and not an inch to give," and warned the United States "not to play with fire on the Taiwan issue."⁶⁰ Most recently, the spokesperson for China's 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."⁶¹ 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."⁶²

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*. China's 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."⁶³ 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."⁶⁴

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

⁵⁷ 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>.

⁵⁸ 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 mainland.

⁵⁹ Quoted in, Rod McGuirk, "Australia security official warns staff of 'drums of war,'" *Associated Press*, April 27, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-australia-asia-ad208abfcda26414a8266ea0ba432938>.

⁶⁰ Quoted in, Keith Griffith, "Nine US Generals Send '36-Star Memo' Begging Spy Chiefs to Declassify Intelligence," *op. cit.*

⁶¹ 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=uxbnldblng>.

⁶² "China Vows No Concession on Taiwan After Biden's Comments," *AP News*, October 22, 2021, available at <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-china-beijing-taiwan-f4fdeb6e15097d55f5d4c06b5f8c9c29>.

⁶³ 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/>.

⁶⁴ 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>.

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.”⁶⁵ ADM Richard has testified that China’s “intent is to achieve the military capability to reunify Taiwan by 2027 if not sooner.”⁶⁶ Taiwanese intelligence reportedly has claimed that China’s leaders have discussed making this move circa 2024.⁶⁷ Others have suggested even sooner.⁶⁸

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,⁶⁹ it was Hitler’s “irrevocable decision to solve the problem of German ‘living-space’ before 1945 at the latest.”⁷⁰ 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 unification with the mainland,⁷¹ 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 CCP leaders’ beliefs are historically correct, but whether they are strongly and widely held—which certainly appears to be the case.

⁶⁵ Helen Davidson, “China Could Invade Taiwan in Next Six Years, Top Admiral Warns,” *The Guardian* (UK), March 9, 2021, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/china-could-invade-taiwan-in-next-six-years-top-us-admiral-warns>.

⁶⁶ Quoted, Bryant Harris, “U.S. nuclear commander warns of deterrence ‘crisis’ against Russia and China,” *Defense News Online*, May 4, 2022, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/05/04/us-nuclear-commander-warns-of-deterrence-crisis-against-russia-and-china/>.

⁶⁷ 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>.

⁶⁸ 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/>.

⁶⁹ Discussed in, Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, op. cit., pp. 68-72.

⁷⁰ 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.

⁷¹ 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.prclleader.org/_files/ugd/af1ede_390855133e8d4a69b3dd014ed5bc66ac.pdf.

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 China's leadership appears to consider an existential requirement for its governing legitimacy—uniting by force, if necessary, a part of China, i.e., Taiwan, deemed to have been unfairly wrested from the motherland. The apparent CCP perspective that Taiwan is a part of China and must be reunited or risk the loss of legitimacy to rule is of enormous significance for deterrence. Multiple studies show that decision makers who consider themselves aggrieved and responding to the prospect of loss may accept increased levels of risk in their behavioral choices.⁷² 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.”⁷³ 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: China's leadership believes 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 its leadership 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 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? Does the old notion 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 Soviet 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 in U.S. policy regarding*

⁷² 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.

⁷³ 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.

Taiwan. Perhaps more importantly, the United States never had to contend with a Soviet leadership that was driven by the nationalist myth 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.”⁷⁴

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 strategists have growing confidence the United States would lose a war over Taiwan.”⁷⁵ Indeed, in Pentagon war games involving an attack against Taiwan, the United States reportedly “has lost every time, more overwhelmingly each year.”⁷⁶

Pertinent developments in Asia include not simply a steady, and in some areas rapid, expansion of China’s conventional and nuclear capabilities but, equally important for deterrence considerations, China’s apparent increased willingness to confront the West to advance its goal of changing the existing international order led by the United States and the

⁷⁴ 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, Phillip C. Saunders and Kevin McGuiness, *The Changing Balance of Military Power In the Indo-Pacific Region*, The Hoover Institution (26 May 2021), available at <https://www.hoover.org/research/changing-balance-military-power-indo-pacific-region>; and, 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>.

⁷⁵ 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.

⁷⁶ 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/>.

West. This appears to include a desire to hasten the resolution of the Taiwan Question. As one well-regarded academic commentator now observes regarding China: “Its leaders are becoming more provocative and have made it exceedingly clear that unification with Taiwan is a pressing goal.... China will increasingly challenge U.S. commitments, and the probability of war will rise.”⁷⁷ This academic’s recommendation is that, because China’s rise in relative power has placed U.S. deterrence capabilities relevant to Taiwan in doubt, the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is overly dangerous and the United States should be “letting go of Taiwan, and accepting that the United States is no longer the dominant power it once was in the region.”⁷⁸

A problem with this and similar recommendations—beyond the likely disastrous consequences for the people on Taiwan—is that so conceding in Asia and “letting go of Taiwan” would jeopardize U.S. credibility and alliances in the Indo-Pacific region, and undoubtedly have repercussions for U.S. alliances worldwide, including NATO.⁷⁹ One of the most problematic U.S. response options to China’s threat at this point is to take steps towards isolationism that would undermine U.S. credibility and threaten to unravel U.S. alliances worldwide. A step that may now seem most prudent to some at one level, i.e., “letting go of Taiwan,” could have broader consequences that are so disadvantageous as to be unrecoverable strategically.

The United States, understandably, would like to continue enjoying the benefits of effective deterrence via uncertainty without expending the effort now needed to restore its 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 political context of the Taiwan Question is unlikely to be helpful.

⁷⁷ Charles L. Glaser, “Washington Is Avoiding the Tough Questions on Taiwan and China: The Case for Reconsidering U.S. Commitments in East Asia,” *Foreign Affairs Online*, April 28, 2021, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2021-04-28/washington-avoiding-tough-questions-taiwan-and-china>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ See the discussion in, Lt. Col. Matthew R. Crouch, “Eliminate ambiguity over Taiwan, or risk unravelling regional credibility,” *Defense News*, May 4, 2021, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/05/04/eliminate-ambiguity-over-taiwan-or-risk-unravelling-regional-credibility/>.

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.

China's expansionism and goal of overturning the existing international political order corresponds with its rapidly growing military capabilities, nuclear and non-nuclear. Defense Intelligence Agency Director LTG Scott Berrier said in recent Senate testimony that China has "accelerated its nuclear expansion and is on track to exceed our previous projection," including increasing "the threat to the U.S. homeland."⁸⁰ ADM Richard has described China's nuclear buildup as a "breathtaking" and "unprecedented expansion," and has expressed concern that the combination of China's capabilities now threatens to enable China to deter the United States: "...you add all of this together, and they can do any plausible nuclear employment strategy regionally. This will backstop their conventional capability and will potentially constrain our options, that is, we will be the ones that are getting deterred if I don't have the capability to similarly deter them."⁸¹

In September 2020, China's Air Force apparently released a video of a simulated attack against America's Anderson Air Force Base on Guam by a reportedly nuclear-capable H-6 heavy bomber.⁸² The video was released as China carried out military drills near Taiwan. U.S. officials described the video as an example of China's efforts intended to coerce others in the region.⁸³ Collin Koh, a research fellow at Singapore's Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, commented that, "The video is meant to warn the Americans that even supposedly safe, rearward positions such as Guam may come under threat when conflicts over regional flashpoints, be it Taiwan or South China Sea, erupt."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Quoted in, Bill Gertz, "China nuclear buildup faster than expected, U.S. now believes," *Washington Times Online*, April 29, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/apr/29/china-nuclear-buildup-faster-expected-us-now-belie/>.

⁸¹ See *Statement of Charles A. Richard, Commander, United States Strategic Command Before the Senate Committee On Armed Forces*, April 20, 2021, p. 6. See also Bill Gertz, "China Engaged in 'Breathtaking Nuclear Expansion'," *The Washington Times*, April 21, 2021, available at https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/apr/21/adm-charles-richard-warns-over-china-nuclear-expan/?utm_source=RSS_Feed; and, Jamie McIntyre, "'We will be the ones deterred': STRATCOM commander on China's 'breathtaking' nuclear buildup," *Washington Examiner* (Daily on Defense Newsletter), April 23, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/we-will-be-the-ones-deterred-stratcom-commander-on-chinas-breathtaking-nuclear-buildup>.

⁸² Yew Lun Tian, "China Air Force Video Appears to Show Simulated Attack on U.S. Base on Guam," *Reuters*, September 21, 2020, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-usa-security/china-air-force-video-appears-to-show-simulated-attack-on-us-air-base-on-guam-idUSL3N2GI0J2>.

⁸³ Tom O'Connor, "U.S. Calls Video Showing China Bombing U.S. Air Force Base 'Attempt to Coerce, Intimidate,'" *Newsweek Online*, September 23, 2020, at <https://www.newsweek.com/us-call-video-show-china-bombing-air-base-coerce-intimidate-1533894>. See also, Ben Blanchard, "U.S. base commander calls Chinese Guam attack video 'propaganda,'" *Reuters*, September 15, 2020, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-security-guam/u-s-base-commander-calls-chinese-guam-attack-video-propaganda-idUSKCN26G01Z>.

⁸⁴ Quoted in, Yew Lun Tian, "China air force video appears to show simulated attack on U.S. base on Guam," op. cit.

More recently, and in the context of Russian nuclear threats regarding possible Western intervention in Ukraine, the CCP has warned that any country that would support Taiwan in the event of a conflict there would face the “worst consequences” and that “no one and no force” could stop China.⁸⁵ In this context, such a statement can only be seen as a thinly veiled coercive nuclear threat.

Indeed, China appears to seek the capability, including via the threat of nuclear escalation, to prevent the United States from intervening militarily to support its allies, partners and interests in the event of a conflict with China.⁸⁶ The *2021 Annual Threat Assessment* by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence suggests this obliquely in the comment: “China is building a larger and increasingly capable nuclear missile force that is more survivable, more diverse, and on higher alert than in the past, including nuclear missile systems *designed to manage regional escalation* and ensure an intercontinental second-strike capability.”⁸⁷ Randall Schriver, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs, sees this as “part of Beijing’s win-without-fighting strategy. To make everyone believe that they climb the escalation ladder all the way to nukes if they have to.”⁸⁸ This appears to be an unprecedented type of coercive nuclear threat now confronting the United States in both Europe and Asia,⁸⁹ and confirms ADM Richard’s emphasis on the need for renewed U.S. thinking about how to deter.

General Glen VanHerck, Commander of U.S. Northern Command, describes the general situation as follows:

If our competitors believe that they can destroy our will or ability to surge forces from the United States because of a perceived inability to defeat their attacks, they will be emboldened to aggressively pursue their strategic interests. In essence, this

⁸⁵ See “China Warns of ‘Worst Consequences’ For Any Country That Supports Taiwan Militarily,” *Fox News*, March 13, 2022, available at <https://www.foxnews.com/world/china-worst-consequences-taiwan-military-support-warning>.

⁸⁶ This deterrence challenge was identified implicitly by Yale professor Paul Bracken in recent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee: “...the United States could be fighting on the doorstep of nuclear weapon states—areas bristling with much larger numbers of weapons than today—[this] is the real deterrence challenge.” Quoted in, Bill Gertz, “Nuclear Deterrence For China Needs Upgrade,” *Washington Times (Inside The Ring)*, April 29, 2021, p. A11, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/apr/28/nuclear-deterrence-for-china-needs-upgrade/>. See also, Gerald Brown, “Deterrence, Norms, and Uncomfortable Realities of a New Nuclear Age,” *War On The Rocks*, April 20, 2020, p. 1, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/deterrence-norms-and-the-uncomfortable-realities-of-a-new-nuclear-age/>; and, Richard D. Fisher, Jr., “Taiwan and Nuclear Arms Control Instability,” *Taipei Times Online (Taiwan)*, June 22, 2020, available at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/06/22/2003738629>; and, Patrick Tucker, “US Nuclear Fears Are Shifting From A Clear Russian Threat to a Murkier Chinese One,” *DefenseOne*, April 20, 2021, available at <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/04/us-nuclear-fears-are-shifting-clear-russian-threat-murkier-chinese-one/173501/>.

⁸⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, April 9, 2021, p. 7. (Emphasis added).

⁸⁸ Quoted in, *Economist* Editorial, “China and Taiwan: Something Wicked This Way Comes,” *The Economist* (UK), May 1, 2021, available at <https://www.economist.com/weeklyedition/2021-05-01>.

⁸⁹ This point is discussed at length in, Keith Payne, *Redefining “Stability” for the New Post-Cold War Era, Occasional Paper*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021). See also, Bradley Roberts, *On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue*, Livermore Papers of Global Security, No. 7 (June 2020), pp. 42-57; Christopher Ford, “Strengthening Deterrence and Reducing Nuclear Risks: The Supplemental Low-Yield U.S. Submarine-Launched Warhead,” *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Vol. 1, No. 4 (April 24, 2020), p. 2; and, Bradley Thayer, “Get Ready for a New Arms Race,” *The National Interest*, May 21, 2020, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/get-ready-new-arms-race-why-nuclear-strategic-stability-won%E2%80%99t-work-china-156676>.

situation creates an opportunistic gap between our nuclear strategic deterrent and conventional deterrent capability for potential adversaries to exploit. This opportunity creates intent and, perversely, an incentive for adversary action.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹ 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:

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.⁹²

In contrast, China claims to follow a nuclear “no first-use policy,” but appears to 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.⁹³ Indeed, former senior Pentagon official, Dr. Mark Schneider, has closely examined China’s declared no first use policy and concludes that it is entirely “propaganda,” while senior US military officials

⁹⁰ Glen D. VanHerck, “Deter in Competition, Deescalate in Crisis, and Defeat in Conflict,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Number 101 (2nd Quarter 2021), p. 6, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2553378/deter-in-competition-deescalate-in-crisis-and-defeat-in-conflict/>.

⁹¹ 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.

⁹² 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.

⁹³ China claims to follow a nuclear no first-use policy but appears to leave open the option for nuclear first use in the case of Taiwan. See, U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2013* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2013), p. 30, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2013_China_Report_FINAL.pdf. For an extensive examination of China’s nuclear first-use doctrine, see Mark Schneider, *The Nuclear Doctrine and Forces of the People’s Republic of China* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 2007), pp. 5-8.

reportedly have described it as “ambiguous.”⁹⁴ ADM Richard has said that, “I see China developing a stack of capabilities that would be inconsistent with a no first use policy,”⁹⁵ and that one could “drive a truck through” the loopholes in China’s declared no first-use policy.⁹⁶

The United States now faces the likelihood of an opponent with both local conventional force advantages and a nuclear first-use escalation threat in the event of a conflict over Taiwan.⁹⁷ General Glen VanHerck 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.”⁹⁸ In April 2021, Gen. Berrier testified that, “China probably seeks to narrow, match, or in some places exceed U.S. qualitative equivalency with new nuclear warheads and their delivery platforms,”⁹⁹ and the 2021 DoD report on China’s military developments emphasized the extent of—and rapid pace of—China’s strategic nuclear buildup.¹⁰⁰

ADM Richard has provided the most concise yet far-reaching observation with regard to the deterrence challenge facing the United States presented by these developments in China (and Russia). He notes that: “We are facing a crisis deterrence dynamic right now that we have only seen a few times in our nation’s history,” and that, “The war in Ukraine and China’s nuclear trajectory—their strategic breakout—demonstrates that we have a deterrence and assurance gap based on the threat of limited nuclear employment.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Rachel Cohen, “USAF Rethinks Relationship Between Conventional, Nuclear Weapons,” *Air Force Magazine Online*, August 19, 2020, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/usaf-rethinks-relationship-between-conventional-nuclear-weapons/>.

⁹⁵ Quoted in, Bill Gertz, “China’s ‘No First Use’ Policy In Doubt,” *Washington Times (Inside the Ring)*, Sept. 17, p. A9. See also, Marshall Billingslea, “Arms Control and the New START Treaty,” *Information Series*, No. 472 (December 8, 2020), pp. 5-6.

⁹⁶ See, US Strategic Command and US Northern Command SASC Testimony, As Delivered, Washington, D.C., February 13, 2020, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/20-24_02-13-2020.pdf. Senior Chinese General, Li Zuocheng recently stated that “we do not promise to abandon the use of force,” and that “the people’s armed forces” will “take all necessary steps” and “all necessary measures” to control the situation in the Taiwan Strait.” See, Yew Lun Tian, “Attack on Taiwan an Option to Stop Independence, Top China General Says,” *Reuters*, May 29, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-taiwan-security/attack-on-taiwan-an-option-to-stop-independence-top-china-general-says-idUSKBN2350AD>.

⁹⁷ 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,” *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. See also, Nan Li, “China’s Evolving Nuclear Strategy: Will China Drop ‘No First Use’?” *China Brief*, The Jamestown Foundation (12 January 2018).

⁹⁸ 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>.

⁹⁹ Quoted in, Shannon Bugos, Julie Masterson, “New Chinese Missile Silo Fields Discovered,” Arms Control Association (September 2021), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-09/news/new-chinese-missile-silo-fields-discovered>.

¹⁰⁰ Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Report on the Military and Security Developments of the People’s Republic of China*, (2021), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>, p. viii.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in, Harris, “U.S. nuclear commander warns of deterrence ‘crisis’ against Russia and China,” op. cit.

The United States must, correspondingly, deal with the caution that this nuclear context forces on Washington¹⁰²—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 China’s possible 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 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.¹⁰³ This may be bluster, but the potential for China’s 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.”¹⁰⁴ The basic facts of the engagement hardly point to greater apparent U.S. will to engage in a competition of threats, potentially including China’s nuclear threats, in the absence of a U.S. deterrence posture that helps 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.”¹⁰⁵ 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 the peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Question. 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, 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.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, recognizes this deterrence problem confronting the United States in the Taiwan Strait, and concludes therefore that the United States must now shed the policy of intentional ambiguity in favor of a deterrence position

¹⁰² 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/content/68/5/45>.

¹⁰³ 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>.

¹⁰⁴ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 32.

¹⁰⁵ McKinney and Harris, “Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan,” op. cit., p. 25.

that leaves no doubt about the scope and depth of the U.S. defense commitment: “The policy of ambiguity worked extremely well as long as the U.S. was strong enough to maintain it, and as long as China was far inferior to the U.S. in military power. But those days are over. The American policy of ambiguity toward Taiwan is now fostering instability in the Indo-Pacific region, by encouraging China to underestimate American resolve, while making the government in Taipei unnecessarily anxious...There must no longer be any room for doubt in our resolve concerning Taiwan, and in our determination to defend freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.”¹⁰⁶ The deeper question, of course, is whether any rhetorical change in the U.S. position is sufficient to establish credible deterrence in the absence of a corresponding change in the material components of the U.S. deterrence position.

It must be noted in this regard that history demonstrates repeatedly that pertinent leadership decision making is not always driven by rigorous attention or 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 attention and rationality in the expectation of leadership calculations; a presumption of ignorance and/or irrationality in leadership decision making provides no basis for bounding expected outcomes, i.e., a truly inattentive or irrational opponent cannot be expected to respond in any predictable fashion to any form of deterrent threat.¹⁰⁷ If attributing attention and 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 the 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 decisive in deterrence considerations.¹⁰⁸ It is neither and, in this case, those numbers do not alter the harsh deterrence realities because they do not determine military or deterrence advantage.

What to Do?

This type of realistic discussion leads some commentators to declare that deterrence in this case is not possible: “If the United States can’t deter Beijing, it is likely that sometime within the next six years Taiwan will be ‘liberated’ by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). And as

¹⁰⁶ Shinzo Abe, “A clear U.S. defense of Taiwan: Russia’s war on Ukraine makes a pledge of action against a Chinese invasion of Taiwan necessary,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 2022, p. A11, available at <https://news.yahoo.com/op-ed-u-must-clear-100043615.html>.

¹⁰⁷ 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.

¹⁰⁸ 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>.

things currently stand, the U.S. can't deter Beijing. So, within the next six years, Taiwan will be 'liberated.'"¹⁰⁹

That conclusion, while understandable, 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 diplomatic, economic and military, and could be pursued simultaneously and in concert with allies, as is discussed in detail below. CCP international behavior over the past few years has been so egregious that it has heightened concerns among its neighbors, and has created opportunities for the formation of a new "coalition of the willing" that could exploit diplomatic, economic and military tools to restore deterrence. That said, doing so will be a serious task—the coalition must work to ensure that the CCP recognizes that a redline exists to deter its decision to attack Taiwan, and that the CCP calculates that violating that redline is its most miserable option, i.e., 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."¹¹⁰ Indeed, the prospect that such a development could so shift the Japanese security landscape that it would spur Japan (and South Korea¹¹¹) 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 intolerable consequences than would continuing to tolerate Taiwan's autonomy.¹¹²

While diplomatic 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

¹⁰⁹ 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>.

¹¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹¹ 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>. See also, Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "South Koreans Overwhelmingly Want Nuclear Weapons to Confront China and North Korea, Poll Finds," *Washington Post Online*, February 21, 2022, available at <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/south-koreans-overwhelmingly-want-nuclear-weapons-to-confront-china-and-north-korea-poll-finds/arAAU8M7P?ocid=BingNewsSearch>.

¹¹² 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, available at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1242888.shtml?id=11>. 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.

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 likely is 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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ Simply acknowledging the deterrence 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 prospective “hurt” from “the other side’s [likely] retaliatory blow.”¹¹⁵

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,¹¹⁶ *obscures our understanding* of where we are today.¹¹⁷ The word “competition” substitutes a *benign euphemism* drawn from sports—as if Sino-U.S. 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.

Neither variations in the repeated U.S. affirmations of the U.S. commitment to Taiwan—including more or less ambiguity—nor new labels for U.S. deterrence strategies can address the structural challenge to U.S. deterrence goals posed by the shifting correlation of forces and the political background of the Taiwan Question. Changes in 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

¹¹³ “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.

¹¹⁴ 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, Roberts, *On Theories of Victory, Red and Blue, Livermore Papers of Global Security*, op. cit., pp. 42-57; and, Bradley Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35, 99, 103-104, 192-194, 260-262, 268-271.

¹¹⁵ Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, op. cit., p. 32.

¹¹⁶ 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>.

¹¹⁷ 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.

opponent of its own willingness to go to war if the situation demands it?”¹¹⁸ And, “Usually the most convincing way to look willing is to be willing.”¹¹⁹ The basic structure of the deterrence equation in this case appears to argue that China is the more willing and that ambiguity and 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 military buildup is “to revise the global rule set.”¹²⁰ 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.”¹²¹

If the United States is to deter by design in this case, it must recover a deterrence posture 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 deterrence posture 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 the deterrence posture now needed and moving toward it is likely to involve considerable effort—much as it did in Europe during the Cold War. More costly, however, would be a successful CCP military campaign to conquer 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

¹¹⁸ Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, op. cit., pp. 213-214.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹²⁰ 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>.

¹²¹ 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.

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.”)¹²² 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 1938.¹²³

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. 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 a deterrence posture 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. 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.

¹²² 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.

¹²³ 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.

Recommendations

- Recognize that for the CCP, continued political independence for Taiwan is deemed an intolerable option. Consequently, the deterrence task is *not* simply to pose a generalized, ambiguous deterrent threat to China in this case. It is to establish a deterrence strategy that entails costs, as calculated by China, that are more intolerable if it attacks Taiwan than if it allows Taiwan to remain autonomous.
- Recognize that any generalized deterrent threat of cost may not be adequate vis-à-vis a highly-motivated opponent such as China in this case.
- Recognize the significant deterrence challenge facing the United States with regard to the Taiwan Question and that a deterrence strategy most likely to support U.S. political goals must be tailored in full recognition of the unique political-military realities of the Taiwan Question.
- Recognize that the basic deterrence conditions in this case appear to argue that the uncertainty of “strategic ambiguity” will not work in favor of the United States. In the absence of a revised deterrence posture tailored to the opponent and circumstances, 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.
- Address the key political-military background questions that must now inform U.S. considerations of how to deter and the capabilities needed for deterrence:
 - How does the CCP leadership define cost and what value does it place on changing the status quo on Taiwan?
 - How does the CCP define the cost of enduring the status quo?
 - Does the CCP envisage a tolerable alternative to changing the status quo on Taiwan?
 - How tolerant of risk is the CCP leadership likely to be when it makes decisions regarding the Taiwan Question?
 - How can the United States deter in the context of China’s nuclear escalation threat when the United States has no apparent deterrence advantages to mitigate the coercive effect of that threat beyond the capability to engage in a nuclear escalation process that could be self-destructive?

