

## Conclusions

The process of tailoring deterrence is not static. Conclusions drawn from the process are, by their very nature, subject to changes in leadership and context. Yet, even with this caveat, deterrence strategies that are built on an understanding of the opponent and context are more likely to succeed than those that assume all opponents and contexts to be essentially the same for deterrence purposes. The problem with this latter approach, of course, is that opponents and contexts do differ greatly in ways that are pertinent to the functioning of deterrence.

The United States can begin to pursue a deterrence policy that is tailored to the unique character of the Taiwan Question and also is adaptable when the context shifts. The victory denial deterrence strategy suggested here—informed by long-standing CCP perceptions, goals and policies, and the courses of action that the CCP leadership may feel free (or not free) to take—offers an approach to tailor deterrence to the unique realities of the Taiwan Question. While some past U.S. approaches to deterrence essentially did not account for the uniqueness of opponents and circumstances, they certainly were convenient, and often comforting. However, they did not account for the many potential factors likely to determine whether deterrence will work, in what circumstances, for what stakes, and in the face of what counterthreats.<sup>1</sup>

Since the adequacy of U.S. deterrent threats is determined in Beijing, and not in Washington, this study's methodology included dozens of interviews with noted experts on China's leadership, its goals, perceptions, defense strategy, economy, and a host of other pertinent factors. The experts interviewed, and a summary of findings from these interviews, are presented in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively. This information provided a valuable basis for subsequent analysis and offers a model for constructing a tailored deterrence strategy against China and others. Far from the standard "rational actor" model, the interviews revealed attributes, values, and perceptions of China's leadership that are likely to shape how, or if, deterrence functions vis-à-vis the Taiwan Question—findings that directly impact the deterrence "problem" that a U.S. deterrence strategy must solve.

The problem of how to deter China from invading Taiwan might seem to fit the traditional Cold War era paradigm of extending deterrence across the ocean against a determined foe—but, in fact, the deterrence challenge facing Taiwan, the United States, and its allies is far more severe than the challenge facing NATO during the Cold War. Unlike the Soviet Union, which had no existential imperative to conquer Western Europe, China has based its ruling authority on nationalist credentials that involve the unification of Taiwan with the mainland. CCP leaders appear to believe the failure to do so, via force if necessary, would constitute an existential threat to the CCP.

This political background alone is a sufficiently severe deterrence problem for the United States to temper any deterrence optimist. But, upon further investigation, the deterrence challenge becomes even more difficult. Not only do Taiwan, the United States, and its allies

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<sup>1</sup> To again summarize 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.



face a determined CCP leadership, but that leadership appears to view the U.S. commitment to Taiwan as fragile, and the balance of power and wills as clearly favoring itself.

With China's crash nuclear buildup, and the U.S. homeland almost wholly vulnerable to nuclear threats by China, the CCP may believe that it has "escalation dominance" against the United States, allowing it to rely on threats of limited nuclear employment to either deter U.S. intervention entirely or to compel the United States to concede early in a conflict. Under *these* circumstances, deterrence is likely to be incredibly difficult and perhaps impossible. But China's apparent great deterrence advantage in this context—its perceived greater stake—is also potentially its greatest vulnerability and point of leverage for a prospective U.S. deterrence strategy.

Given the CCP's perception that failure is not an option in unifying Taiwan with the mainland, a "victory denial" strategy may be the most effective, plausible approach to deterrence. During the Cold War, the U.S. victory denial deterrence strategy against Moscow emphasized maintaining capabilities sufficient to deny the Soviet leadership any plausible definition of "victory" at any level of conflict. This bipartisan deterrence strategy stood in contrast to notions of strategic superiority and escalation dominance that became increasingly implausible and incredible as the Cold War dragged on.

The size and scope of today's deterrence problem demands an equivalent U.S. and allied deterrence effort, spread across multiple domains, and tailored to communicate the most effective deterrence signals possible to the CCP leadership. In short, a victory denial deterrence strategy must be adapted to the unique characteristics of the Taiwan Question to include not only traditional military tools, but also diplomatic and economic deterrence levers as well.

If the United States and allies recognize the severity of the deterrence challenge and the potential value of a victory denial deterrence strategy, then they can begin the process of aligning deterrence policy, declaratory policy, and funding priorities to meet U.S. political goals for the Taiwan Question and beyond. Doing so could greatly improve the prospects for the credible deterrence of China and possibly elsewhere.

