



DETECTING CHINA IN THE TAIWAN STRAIT

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait” hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on June 21, 2022. The symposium highlighted the rollout of National Institute’s recent report on the topic, which was printed as a special issue of the Journal of Policy & Strategy and is available on the Institute’s website at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Special-Issue-final.pdf>.

Keith B. Payne

Keith B. Payne is President of the National Institute for Public Policy, Professor Emeritus in Missouri State University’s Defense and Strategic Studies graduate program and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy.

We have a great set of speakers today and I look forward to their remarks. I should start by observing that my remarks are my personal views alone.

The need to tailor U.S. deterrence strategies to particular opponents and contexts is now widely accepted. This may seem like a recent development, but it took 35 years to get to this understanding of deterrence. U.S. deterrence strategies must take into account opponents’ worldviews in the context of a particular deterrence engagement, e.g., their:

- unique goals and values,
- determination,
- willingness to inflict and absorb hurt in pursuit of their goals,
- reliable communication channels,
- perceptions of power relations, and many other factors.

As this list suggests, the basic principles of deterrence are relatively simple, but the real-world application of deterrence is extremely complex. And speculation without understanding the opponent and political context is more likely to mislead than enlighten. Uninformed approaches to deterrence have failed to prevent war in the past and will likely do so again.

For the deterrence study we are discussing, the first step was to recognize the specific realities of the deterrence challenge in the Taiwan Strait. The second step was to identify how the United States may best approach this challenge, in cooperation with allies and partners.

In line with the need to tailor deterrence, we first sought to understand the key political decision-making factors pertinent to this opponent and context, e.g.:

- China’s goals and worldview?
- China’s dedication to its goals?
- The value China attaches to the unification of Taiwan: Absolute or discretion?
- The cost China attaches to the Status Quo on Taiwan?



- The flexibility (or not) of China's goal and timeline?
- If there is a tolerable alternative to the unification of Taiwan?
- China's willingness absorb cost and inflict cost to achieve its goal?

To help gain this understanding, this study included extensive interviews with 21 outstanding Sinologists and regional area experts. This investigation of China's views led to three key conclusions:

- First, China deems the status-quo on Taiwan to be intolerable;
- Second, in this case, the fundamental deterrence question is not simply identifying a U.S. deterrence threat that is costly for China. If the perpetual political independence of Taiwan is an intolerable future for China, then the deterrence sanction needed to prevent China from "solving" its Taiwan problem forcefully must be more intolerable for China than enduring the status quo. The basic U.S. deterrence challenge in this case follows from the existential value China appears to attach to incorporating Taiwan, by force if necessary.
- Third, given the above two points, the deterrence policy question is: Can the United States credibly present China with the consequences for a decision to conquer Taiwan that are more intolerable than enduring a continuation of the status quo on Taiwan? This is a deterrence challenge beyond our Cold War experience.

As all here know, for decades, the general U.S. policy has been "strategic ambiguity," which entails a contemporary deterrence problem for the United States.

In the absence of some form of U.S. deterrence advantage there is no logical reason whatsoever to believe that China will be any more deterred by uncertainty than is Washington. Ambiguity with regard to commitment may be an adequate approach to deterrence for the side with significant advantages in manifest power and position—which was the case for the United States regarding the Taiwan Strait for past decades.

However, strategic ambiguity no longer may serve U.S. deterrence needs because China appears to have shifted the correlation of forces over the past two decades in its favor in many ways. Past U.S. deterrence advantages are going or gone. The United States now faces an opponent with both local conventional force advantages and a nuclear first use escalation threat in the event of conventional conflict over Taiwan. There now is no apparent reason for China to be more cautious than is the United States in a Taiwan crisis. Indeed, there are reasons to expect China to be less cautious than the United States.

There is some past precedent for the United States in this regard. During the Cold War, as the Soviet Union pursued massive increases in its conventional and nuclear capabilities, the U.S. extended deterrent for NATO countries appeared increasingly problematic. The shifting correlation of forces meant that the U.S. deterrence commitment was increasingly risky for the United States, and its credibility increasingly open to question.

In response, the United States took extensive and expensive steps to shore up the credibility of its extended deterrence for NATO, including many thousands of forward

deployed U.S. forces in Europe, and thousands of nuclear weapons. Comparable steps do not appear on the horizon to restore the U.S. deterrence position in the Taiwan Strait.

In addition, for deterrence to function in any context the opponent must decide that some level of conciliation to U.S. interests is tolerable. Yet, China's officials have stated openly that the incorporation of Taiwan is an existential matter for China, and they have no room to conciliate on the Taiwan Question, i.e., the status quo is intolerable.

These are the harsh deterrence realities imposed by the context in this case. If these realities are ignored or dismissed, the United States will not be able to mount a realistic deterrence policy.

The question that follows from a recognition of these harsh deterrence realities is: What to do? In this, I believe there is a glimmer of good news. In concert with allies, there are potential denial and punitive deterrence tools that could help restore for the United States what Herman Kahn called a "not incredible deterrence" position in the Taiwan Strait. Those potential deterrence tools are: diplomatic, economic and military, and can be pursued simultaneously. Doing so would give real meaning to the title "integrated deterrence."

I will close by identifying the overall approach to deterrence we recommend in this study. We refer to it as a victory denial deterrence policy. This approach to extended deterrence is not new, per se. It harkens back to the basic U.S. extended deterrence policy against Moscow in Europe for much of the Cold War.

A victory denial deterrence in this case is based on five political realities:

- 1) China has resorted to nationalism as a primary rationale for its rule.
- 2) China has elevated successful unification with Taiwan as an element of nationalism and an existential goal.
- 3) If China attempts to unify Taiwan forcefully, failure for China would be a wholly intolerable repudiation of the legitimacy of CCP rule.
- 4) This political reality may provide great motivation for China to escalate to win any such conflict, but it also carries tremendous potential leverage for U.S. deterrence via victory denial.
- 5) U.S. deterrence policy can exploit the CCP's vulnerability that being denied victory in a conflict over Taiwan would be an immediate existential threat to the CCP's legitimacy to rule.

These are the five fundamental points underlying this study's recommended victory denial approach to deterrence.

In summary, recall that the U.S. deterrence task now is to identify a potential deterrence sanction against China that is more intolerable than the existing status quo on Taiwan. For the CCP, the prospect of losing legitimacy to rule in a failed or stalled war in the Taiwan Strait may be more intolerable than continuing to endure the status quo on Taiwan year after year. The prospect of a victory denied may be sufficient to lead China to decide, now is not the time to move.

This potential U.S. approach to deterrence demands, among other requirements, that Washington finds a way to counter China's coercive threats of limited nuclear first use. The

debilitating effects of regional coercive nuclear threats can already be seen in the West's cautious reaction to Russia's extensive use of them in its invasion of Ukraine.

With that, I am happy to conclude and invite my colleagues to elaborate on this recommended approach to deterrence in the Taiwan Strait.

David J. Trachtenberg

David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.

As our report notes, the implementation of a “victory denial” deterrent strategy requires an integrated approach using all elements of state power—including military, diplomatic, and economic measures...and it's the economic piece of this that I would like to address for a few minutes.

As our study makes clear, the use of economic tools can be valuable for strengthening America's deterrence position in the Taiwan Strait. The United States has a plethora of economic, financial, trade, and investment tools, including the use of sanctions, that can be used to apply pressure in those areas where China's economy is vulnerable and to penalize China for aggressive behavior.

Now the study recognizes that the economic situation with respect to China today is markedly different than the situation we faced with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For example, China has the world's second largest economy¹ and produces a multitude of consumer goods that it exports around the world, including to the United States. By contrast, the Soviet economy was a basket case and produced virtually nothing of commercial value. So, it may be more challenging to impose the same level of economic hardship on China today than was possible against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In addition, China is taking measures preemptively to insulate its economy from any potential Western sanctions that may be imposed on it.

However, economic prosperity is one of the imperatives for the Chinese Communist Party to maintain legitimacy. Therefore, if properly applied and coordinated in advance with the international community, economic tools can be valuable elements of an integrated victory denial approach to deterrence. Because China's export economy is highly dependent upon the U.S. market, our study argues that this dependency should be leveraged as part of a coordinated strategy to help bolster the U.S. deterrence position.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked renewed debate over the impact and effectiveness of sanctions, both as a deterrent and as punishment should deterrence fail. And while the United States has the ability to implement sweeping sanctions on China

¹ “China's economy is now the world's second largest,” *BBC News*, February 14, 2011, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-12445925>.

unilaterally, our report emphasizes that the effect of sanctions will be magnified if U.S. allies and partners join in this approach.

For sanctions to have a deterring effect on China's decision making, they will likely need to be in effect for a prolonged period of time, most likely years. We recognize this could lead to U.S. and allied "sanctions fatigue" and a desire to avoid extensive economic disruptions by abandoning them. But we argue that China's leaders must be convinced of U.S. seriousness and must not perceive threatened sanctions to be a transitory phenomenon that will be reassessed, eased, or lifted by subsequent U.S. administrations.

We recognize this may be difficult given the ease of sanctions waivers and China's perception of the United States as unwilling to absorb significant economic hardship over the long term on behalf of Taiwan. However, if China's leaders believe they face an indefinitely long sanctions campaign, one in which the United States can adjust the supply chain away from China, they may grudgingly weigh the long-term impacts to China's economic growth and prosperity.

Now, our report also highlights the fact that the United States relies on China for pharmaceuticals, animal feed, and other products. China also has a near monopoly in some rare earth minerals, which are key components of electric vehicle motors, consumer electronics like smartphones, and military equipment, including missile defense systems. Therefore, we recommend an economic strategy that seeks to overcome these supply chain vulnerabilities so that the prospect of Chinese economic retaliation is less detrimental to the U.S. economy than the costs we can impose on China.

I would note that just last week, the United States, in coordination with nine other countries and the European Commission, established a Minerals Security Partnership to counter China's dominance in the supply of critical minerals such as nickel, lithium and cobalt.² And the Senate version of this year's National Defense Authorization Act supports increasing the national stockpile of strategic minerals in order to reduce dependency on China.³

In addition, because China imports more semiconductor chips than any other country, its reliance on external sources of supply—including Taiwan—may be an exploitable vulnerability for deterrence purposes. Denying China access to semiconductor chips as part of a cost-imposition strategy to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan would be devastating to China's high-tech industries and would impose severe, long-term economic costs on China.

Our report also makes a number of other recommendations for employing economic tools to bolster deterrence. These include:

² "U.S. and partners enter pact to secure critical minerals like lithium," *Reuters*, June 14, 2022, available at https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/us-partners-enter-pact-secure-critical-minerals-lithium-2022-06-14/?mc_cid=10951e2eb9&mc_eid=46ef2d16d1.

³ Bryant Harris, "Congress wants to double rare earth mineral fund to free defense supply chain from China," *Defense News*, June 17, 2022, available at <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2022/06/17/congress-wants-to-double-rare-earth-mineral-fund-to-free-defense-supply-chain-from-china/>.

- Considering measures to reduce investments in China's economy, punish China's intellectual property theft, and map the economic interests of those who are part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and tailor sanctions and economic tools to those individuals and their personal economic interests.
- Offsetting China's "Belt and Road Initiative" by encouraging greater U.S. trade and economic ties with countries that currently have strong economic ties with China.
- Adopting a sanctions strategy that provides disincentives for Western companies to invest in China's market while offering prudent alternatives that cause greater economic discomfort to China than to Western companies.
- And working with private sector entities in the United States and American companies abroad to mitigate in advance the impact of China's potential retaliatory actions directed against U.S. economic interests. Minimizing U.S. economic vulnerabilities can help strengthen the credibility of overall U.S. deterrent threats.

These are just some of the recommendations for integrating an economic component into an overall victory denial deterrent strategy.

The bottom line is that the United States has multiple options for employing a variety of economic tools to deter China from military aggression against Taiwan. Such an approach carries risks, and there is no guarantee of success, but we believe incorporating these tools into a comprehensive plan of action is the best approach for maximizing the prospect of deterrence success.

Matthew R. Costlow

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Everyone who is attending this webinar today has heard how a number of different factors could positively or negatively affect the functioning of deterrence in the Taiwan Strait—everything from material factors like the balance of military forces to the influences of strategic culture and history on CCP decision-making. Even though we all, as analysts of strategic policy, like to make our living by explaining events or decisions—why they happen, why they do not happen—when it comes to deterrence, we simply must accept the base truth that we cannot predict with precision how much one factor contributed to deterrence over another factor, and historic contemporaneous accounts that explain deterrence decisions are rare.

As Dr. Payne likes to say, much of the discussion about the functioning of deterrence is speculation, but there is better informed speculation and poorly informed speculation. On that basis, allow me to present what I hope is better informed speculation concerning the prospect of nuclear proliferation as a potential (and I do stress "potential") factor that could contribute to deterring a Chinese invasion attempt of Taiwan.

First, to reiterate quickly, the term “proliferation” in this context means both the prospect of “horizontal” proliferation in which states that do not currently possess nuclear weapons then pursue them, and “vertical” proliferation, in which states that already possess nuclear weapons either expand their stockpile sizes, add improved capabilities, or somehow modify their force to be more capable. In this study’s chapter on the potential deterrent effect of proliferation, we first had to establish that Chinese leaders did in fact perceive a threat of horizontal or vertical proliferation. And, indeed, as expected, CCP officials have a long history of publicly denouncing the possibility of its neighbors acquiring nuclear weapons.

There are two prominent examples. First, the “red line” the Chinese Communist Party set for Taiwan: should Taiwan ever attempt to acquire nuclear weapons, that would be grounds for military intervention. Second, the CCP regularly denounces the large apparent latent nuclear power of Japan and its stockpile of fissile material. Both of these examples demonstrate that horizontal proliferation enters into the CCP’s threat perception.

The major finding of the chapter is that a successful People’s Republic of China (PRC) invasion of Taiwan would, at the very least, cause a major re-evaluation of security requirements, and the dependability of the U.S.-led alliance, in Tokyo, Seoul, and Canberra. Countries that depend a great deal on the assured capability of naval reinforcement from the United States would suddenly find themselves in an environment where U.S. access is not assured, or, in other words, highly contested.

One “lesson” that states like Japan, South Korea, and Australia could “learn” from a successful PRC invasion of Taiwan is that states without nuclear weapons are at the mercy of a revisionist nuclear power with a growing nuclear arsenal.

The prospect of this scale of horizontal proliferation should, we hope, give CCP leaders pause—and it is interesting from a deterrence perspective because even if China is successful in its invasion of Taiwan, it may ultimately produce a more threatening security environment for itself by causing its neighbors to obtain nuclear weapons. Would China be willing to trade a short-term victory for potential long-term proliferation problems? Perhaps. We cannot dismiss out of hand that CCP leaders anticipate horizontal proliferation after their invasion of Taiwan and that is perhaps one reason why we see their nuclear arsenal projected to quadruple in this decade.

For reasons of time, I will not delve into the possibility of vertical proliferation in the wake of a PRC invasion of Taiwan, except to say that it is a very real possibility, but it does not appear to have the same magnitude of potential deterrence effect as horizontal proliferation.

I will close by noting that we, as the authors of this report, are under no illusions that the prospect of nuclear proliferation will have decisive deterrent effect on CCP leaders. Rather, we believe the deterrence factors you have heard discussed today will work best when combined with each other under the banner of a “victory denial” deterrence strategy. In short, the prospect of diplomatic, information, military, and economic tools, used in conjunction and with the support of allies, provides the best chance for deterrence to succeed. I believe the possibility of nuclear proliferation deserves to be included in the discussion of how best to deter a PRC invasion of Taiwan.

Robert Joseph

Amb. Robert Joseph is Senior Scholar at National Institute for Public Policy. He served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security.

First, let me compliment Keith and all the co-authors for providing what I consider to be the most insightful analysis of perhaps the most important national security challenge we face as a nation—deterring the PRC from attacking Taiwan.

We failed in Ukraine to deter Putin, but we can help Ukraine achieve victory over Russia. I believe Taiwan is different. Under current conditions, if we fail to deter Xi, I see almost no prospect for victory. Unless, of course, the PLA proves as hollow as the Russian military proved to be in the early weeks of the war. But hoping for that is not a sound basis for strategy.

And the costs of deterrence failure with China are even greater than in Ukraine—as significant as those costs would be. In Asia, the stakes are much different and even higher. China’s goal is to replace the U.S. as the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific. If Beijing absorbs Taiwan it is well on the way to success. The negative consequences would be devastating for US interests.

As the study points out, the PRC is a determined adversary who has—by design and though the commitment of massive resources—fundamentally changed the deterrence circumstances over the past two decades. In doing so, it has used all instruments of statecraft—economic, political/diplomatic, and military. Its conventional and nuclear buildup is best understood as positioning China to take Taiwan by force.

Other factors—such as the absence of an integrated alliance structure and a formal Article 5 commitment—as noted in the study—make deterrence success even more problematic. Drawing on my own experience with NATO I see very little reason to be confident in our ability to deter China. In 1982, when I first served in government in the nuclear planning position at NATO headquarters, we had hundreds of thousands of US forces stationed in Europe and 7,200 theater nuclear weapons in Europe. Overall, in the Pacific today, the correlation of forces—to use a Soviet term—is much less favorable to us.

For these and other reasons, the authors suggest that Chinese leaders may now believe that US options are limited to retreat or risk escalation to a strategic exchange. At a minimum, China is likely to question the credibility of US red lines. One can only speculate the effect on Chinese leaders of President Biden’s disastrous exit from Afghanistan and President Obama’s failure to respond with force to Syria’s use of chemical weapons.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the study is the roadmap it provides for actions to reposition the US in a more advantageous deterrent posture—across the diplomatic, economic, and military fields. Here, as others have highlighted, the report’s victory denial deterrent strategy presents a way forward to increase the prospects for deterrence success. The key is taking those steps that will deny Beijing the expectation of a quick victory and the belief that threats of nuclear use will compel the US to abandon Taiwan.

Regarding threats of nuclear use—Trey Obering and I argue in an op ed that should be out soon that Putin’s sabre rattling worked in Ukraine—a lesson China will no doubt incorporate into its strategy.

Russian officials threatened nuclear employment to coerce Kiev and intimidate countries providing support to Ukraine. In response, the Biden administration withheld vital weapons and targeting assistance that they believed would risk escalation to “World War III.”

This was exactly the intent of Putin’s bullying. By ruling out reasonable support to help Ukraine launch a counter-offensive, and perhaps achieve early victory, the Biden team gave Russia time to consolidate in the east and south where it is now prevailing.

Rather than communicating resolve to demonstrate our nuclear deterrent in the face of Russian threats, the Biden administration cancelled long-planned ballistic missile tests and zeroed out funding for the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile.

While the administration insists that its moves reflect the behavior of a “responsible” nuclear power, they have not impressed Putin. In response, he went forward to test his own. For someone who sees the world in terms of raw power, restraint is seen as weakness.

To increase the credibility of our deterrent requires capabilities both to punish the attacker through offensive retaliation, and to deny his objectives through active defenses.

Given the huge disparity in theater nuclear weapons relative to China, we must expand our options through such means as the low-yield warhead on our strategic submarines and the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile.

In addition, defenses must be an integral component of deterrence and allied assurance. Both theater and homeland missile defenses undermine China’s confidence that it can achieve its policy goals using force.

Let me end with one last point. To deter and defend against missile threats from China, Russia and rogue states, we must deploy space-based capabilities. Ground-based and sea-based systems, while useful, cannot be scaled to meet these growing threats.

A space-based kill capability is the necessary evolution to the layered defense architecture. Moving to space is the only means to provide the boost/ascent phase missile defense capability essential to defeat current and future threats. There is no other feasible option.

Christopher Ford

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Thank you to Dave [Trachtenberg] and Keith [Payne] for the chance to discuss the National Institute for Public Policy’s new study on “Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait,” *Journal of Policy and Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2022). This study is a real contribution at an important time, and I hope it is widely read.

The NIPP study makes quite a few good points, among them the importance of “tailoring” deterrence to the adversary, and the challenges the United States now faces as a result of its collective drift away from taking great power competitive strategy seriously for an entire generation—during which China has been preparing itself for us. The document also commendably draws attention, to such things as the role that limited missile defenses can play in reducing adversary incentives to engage in nuclear weapons use as a tool of escalation dominance, the importance of more effectively countering CCP propaganda and influence operations, the need to adopt better-coordinated approaches to denying China access to sensitive technologies, the need to expand the United States’ range of forward-deployable nuclear systems (e.g., SLCM-N) in response to China’s build-up, and the imperative of augmenting Taiwan’s capabilities and making it more thoroughly “indigestible” to potential Chinese invaders.

For my own contribution to this discussion—and with the caveat that these are my personal views and I speak here only for myself—I’d like to flag a couple of further points suggested by the NIPP study, and which I think are of significance from the perspective of U.S. alliance and partner relationships.

The study focuses with special emphasis on the idea of denying China its “theory of victory” in the military arena. But such an approach also works well in peacetime competition.

In peacetime competition, we don’t need everyone in the Indo-Pacific to jump to our tune. That’s China’s objective, not ours. The CCP’s ambition is to craft a Sinocentric region—and indeed a Sinocentric world: one in which everyone tips their hat and kowtows appropriately to the CCP in some kind of modernized version of the Middle Kingdom’s ancient tributary system. In such a system, all infrastructural, political, economic, and diplomatic ties are essentially “hub-and-spoke” relationships tying everyone asymmetrically back to a China that sits at the center of everything.

That the CCP’s vision. But we don’t need to dominate the Indo-Pacific like that. We just need to deny China the Sinocentric hegemony it wants, by helping the states of the region—and farther afield—remain independent and autonomous, minimizing their dependency upon and associated risk of coercion by Beijing, and forestalling their tributary subjugation.

China only “wins” if it ties states in the region asymmetrically to itself and exploits that dependency for leverage in making everyone defer reflexively to CCP desires. We “win” merely by helping other states retain their freedom of action, and by building ways in which they can interact with the world and thrive with minimal exposure to Chinese coercion.

The study makes a strong point about how we could help deny China its Sinocentric theory of victory in this aspect of the peacetime competition by promoting the establishment of an ever-stronger “latticework” of cross-cutting relationships between states in the region that have strength and vitality in ways that don’t involve China. I agree with that point, as I made clear in one of NIPP’s Occasional Papers earlier this year.

But here’s what I’d like to stress today: as the “latticework” concept illustrates, success in peacetime competition with China is by definition not something that the United States

can do alone. If we do not cultivate relationships and approach competitive challenges in close collaboration with a wide network of foreign allies and partners, that means “losing.”

To put it another way, if we ignore or cold-shoulder our friends, we do China’s work for it in diminishing the United States’ influence and role in the region and in the world, and in helping pave the way for a new Sinocentric order.

Similar arguments about the importance of working with others, moreover, can be made for peacetime competition in technology and economic power, where “technology diplomacy” will be ever more critical to our success. There, too, despite all the strategic ground Western states have lost over the years through incautious high-technology exports that maximized short-term profits in China at the cost of long-term strategy, we can still be effective in blunting the problematic aspects of China’s advances if and to the degree that we act in concert with other sophisticated technology possessors in the developed world. But even as powerful as we are, we have only a modest chance to do so if we try to act alone.

Needless to say, alliances and partnerships are also crucial in the military context, as the NIPP study makes clear. But their importance goes beyond simply the concrete capabilities that our friends could “bring to the fight” if it came to it. CCP leaders are big believers in “Comprehensive National Power” (CNP) calculations, and they appreciate the degree to which international relationships are an important facet of a country’s power.

The perception that things in the Indo-Pacific are moving China’s way, therefore, is seen not just as a result of China’s rise but also—in a sort of positive feedback loop—as a factor that CCP officials expect to accelerate that rise. Some momentum, in other words, helps beget more momentum.

So far, this “nothing succeeds like success” dynamic is perceived as helping China. Indeed, perceptions of favorable momentum are probably fueling Xi Jinping’s adventurism. But it also follows from such thinking that “nothing fails like failure.” To the degree that our improved engagement with allies and partners can blunt or reverse impressions of Chinese momentum, therefore, this could itself be seen as a shift in trends contributing to the “correlation of forces,” with potential implications in reducing China’s odds of success not only in peacetime competition but in potential conflict as well.

This is thus another way in which good diplomatic relationships contribute to deterrence. Stronger U.S. relationships contribute to American CNP, as it were—and in Chinese strategic thinking, countries with superior CNP tend to win wars, while those with inferior CNP to lose them. (Notably, through the prism of the CCP’s modern legitimacy narrative, China’s failure to elicit awestruck tributary deference in regional states might also be taken to signal some defect in the Party’s virtue—a potentially very dangerous flaw in the pseudo-Confucian narrative of benevolent omniscience the CCP has tried to construct for itself.)

Accordingly, active engagement and diplomacy—working closely with U.S. allies, partners, and friends—are crucial no matter how you slice it.

Don’t get me wrong. One might wish the United States were still in a position in which to some extent we had the luxury of not needing allies and partners all that much: the kind of unquestionably dominant, military, economic, technological, and diplomatic “hyperpower”

position that we enjoyed after the end of the Cold War. But this is no longer that world. In this world, competing effectively with China requires us to have friends, and to work with them.

I know full well how frustrating and challenging alliance and partner relationships can sometimes be, and how even traditionally close foreign counterparts do not always see eye to eye with American officials. Nevertheless, if we want to succeed in our peacetime competition with China and blunt the threats it presents to the free and open international system we prize so dearly, if we want to deter Chinese aggression, and if we want to have the best possible chance to prevail in the event of conflict, we cannot do these things by ourselves. If we want to succeed, real diplomacy is the cost of doing business—and a critical ingredient to denying China its Sinocentric theory of victory.