

3

MANAGING THE CHINA-TAIWAN CONFLICT: PREVENTING THE TAIWAN STRAIT FROM BECOMING A DIRE STRAIT

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The possibility of war between China and Taiwan continues to pose a serious threat to Asia-Pacific Security. The United States has a clear interest in preventing such a conflict and has acted as a quasi-mediator since the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. The evolution of its policy in this region eventually materialized into the doctrine of ‘strategic ambiguity,’ which is a form of deterrence. Drawing on deterrence theory, this paper will demonstrate that strategic ambiguity is not the optimal way to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The United States should abandon this doctrine in favour of one that sends clearer messages to China.

Introduction

The conclusion of Taiwan's recent presidential election has once again focused the world's attention on one of East Asia's most volatile flashpoints: the China-Taiwan conflict. Observers have interpreted the re-election of Chen Shui-bien's independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party as a sign that Taiwanese aspirations for *de jure* independence are more than just a passing fancy; they are an entrenched part of the collective consciousness and are likely to gather more momentum as Taiwan shapes its national identity in a manner distinct from the mainland. This trend presents trouble for the region because China has stated plainly and frequently that it will take Taiwan back by force if it ever declares *de jure* independence.

This also spells trouble for the United States. Since the conclusion of the Chinese civil war in 1949, the U.S. has acted as the quasi-guarantor of Taiwan's security. In doing so, it has engaged China militarily on a few occasions, although these never led to war.¹ The evolution of U.S. policy in the Taiwan Strait eventually materialized to form the doctrine of 'strategic ambiguity.'² As will be explained in greater detail below, this doctrine is essentially a deterrence strategy that aims to simultaneously deter China from invading Taiwan and Taiwan from declaring independence. It remains to this day the guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy in the region. But is this doctrine the most effective way to deter Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait? As will be made apparent, the answer is no. This paper will draw on deterrence theory to show that this doctrine is not an optimal means to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

¹ During the Cold War, the United States engaged China in the Taiwan Strait in 1954-55, 1958, and in 1962. See Michael Brecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997): 381-387 passim.

² Dennis Van Vranken Hickey, "The US and Cross Strait Rivalry: Strategic Partnership and Strategic Ambiguity," paper presented at the conference *War and Peace in the Taiwan Strait*, (Duke University, February 26-27, 1999): 15.

The first section of this paper will provide a brief background to the issue. It will describe and illustrate how the interests of China, Taiwan, and the U.S. interact and why this is an important area for study. It will also explain in greater detail the U.S. doctrine of strategic ambiguity. The second section will examine deterrence theory. It will explain what it is, what factors are needed to make it operational, how it can fail, and ways to enhance its reliability. The third section will assess the doctrine of strategic ambiguity against the backdrop of deterrence theory to determine its effectiveness in the China-Taiwan issue. The fourth section will suggest six policy recommendations to boost Washington's deterrent strategy against China.

Background

China views Taiwan as a 'renegade' province that must be brought back into the national fold. Taiwan, even though it has never officially declared independence, sees itself as a separate political entity and therefore opposes reunification. Beijing asserts that it will use force against Taiwan under any one of the following conditions: 1) a move on the part of the Taipei government to assert *de jure* independence from China; 2) an invasion of Taiwan by external powers; and 3) sustained attempts by the Taipei government to indefinitely delay reunification talks.³

The official return of Taiwan to China is of critical importance to Beijing for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the pursuit of reunification has become intertwined with national prestige and government legitimacy. Chinese officials are convinced that the humiliation of permanently losing Taiwan would single-handedly bring about the collapse of the Communist regime.⁴ An independent Taiwan would also set a dangerous example "for

³ "The pillars of the US' Taiwan policy," *Taipei Times*, December 29, 2000.

⁴ Michael D. Swain, "Trouble in Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 41.

other potentially secession-minded areas of the country, such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia.”⁵ Moreover, Taiwan’s present status represents a strategic obstacle for the broader goals of Chinese national security.⁶ Because Taiwan sits directly across from a part “of China that is difficult to defend and increasingly prosperous,” China’s competitors can use it as a springboard from which to contain and undermine Chinese power.⁷ “Just as the United States is determined to prevent a rival’s military access to Cuba,” write Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross, “Chinese leaders are determined to prevent Taiwan from once again becoming a strategic asset of a rival great power.”⁸

The possibility of war between China and Taiwan merits scholarly research in at least three important ways. First, such a conflict would hamper the flow of regional and international trade. Taiwan is flanked by the Taiwan Straits to the east and the Straits of Luzon to the west. These corridors connect Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia and the Middle East and are vital for the orderly conduct of international maritime commerce.⁹ In an immediate sense, armed hostilities in this area would restrict access to major Chinese and Taiwanese container ports. More significantly however, oil exports to South Korea and Japan may have to be redirected, damaging their economies in the process.¹⁰

Second, an armed conflict between China and Taiwan may spark a regional arms race by persuading surrounding countries to view China as an expansionist state. Japan in particular may feel compelled to furnish its modest Self Defense Force with the trappings of a

⁵ Swain, 41.

⁶ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “If Taiwan Chooses Unification, Should the United States Care?” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 22.

⁷ Andrew J. Nathan & Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress*, (New York: Norton & Company, 1997): 207.

⁸ Nathan & Ross, 207.

⁹ Martin L. Lasater, “United States Interests in the New Taiwan,” *Orbis*, 37, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 247.

¹⁰ Kazimine Akimoto, “The Current State of Maritime Security: Structural Weaknesses and Threats in the Sea Lanes,” paper presented at the conference on Maritime Security in Southeast Asia and Southwest Asia, (*Institute for International Policy Studies*, Tokyo, December 3, 2001): 7.

modern military in order to protect its territory and overseas assets from possible Chinese aggression. This would drastically diminish the security of its neighbours, leaving them with little choice but to respond with arms build-ups of their own.

Finally, a China-Taiwan war would almost definitely drag the United States into the fray. The American public as well as Congress view Taiwan as a trusted friend and ally, and a Chinese invasion against it would likely precipitate widespread protests and Congressional resolutions calling for direct intervention. Furthermore, the credibility of the United States would be called into question if it failed to assist a fellow democracy repel an attack by a militarily superior communist state.¹¹ A Sino-American military conflict could carry deadly consequences both for the region and the world since it could escalate to nuclear dimensions.

In order to deter a Chinese attack against Taiwan, the United States has adopted a policy of 'strategic ambiguity.' This policy finds its full legal expression in the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) of 1979, which states that:

It is the policy of the United States ... to consider any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means ... a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States; to provide Taiwan with arms of a defensive character; and 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 of Taiwan.¹²

The text is ambiguous in that it does *not* commit the United States to the defense of Taiwan but merely provides the *option*. The main strength of this policy, as its proponents point out, is that it allows Taiwan and China to "avoid their respective 'worst case' outcomes."¹³ Strategic ambiguity is largely a strategy of deterrence insofar as it assumes that the possibility

¹¹Hickey, 15.

¹² Hickey, 10..

¹³ Roy Pinsker, "Drawing a line in the Taiwan Strait: 'strategic ambiguity' and its discontents," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 57, no. 2 (July 2003): 357.

of U.S. intervention deters Chinese aggression against Taiwan while the absence of a firm defense commitment to Taiwan deters it from moving toward formal independence. By furnishing the U.S. with choices, American policymakers hope that strategic ambiguity will chasten ambitions on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Making Deterrence Work

Deterrence is a passive type of conflict prevention that seeks to steer one's adversary away from taking a certain course of action by convincing him that the costs of such action will outweigh the benefits.¹⁴ To implement it the status quo power must first identify what its interests are in a particular region and to what extent it is willing to defend them. The second task is to devise and communicate to the enemy a commitment to protect those interests. In order to support its commitments, the status quo power threatens punishment should the revisionist state encroach upon its interests. In the words of Alexander George, the revisionist state must view such threats as “both *credible* and *sufficiently potent* ... that is, pose a level of costs and risks that he regards as of sufficient magnitude to overcome his motivation to challenge the defending power's position (italics in original).”¹⁵

Credibility is the key ingredient in a deterrence strategy. It consists of two interrelated elements, the first of which is the deterring power's ability to persuade its adversary that it possesses the ‘will and resolution’ to protect its interests. Second, the deterring power must have the capability to execute its threats in a way that the target state views as proportionate and useable for the protection of said interests.¹⁶ A mother for instance, will likely have difficulty dissuading her teenage son from watching television past

¹⁴ Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983): 172.

¹⁵ Craig and Alexander, 172.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

midnight by threatening to send him to boot camp. In the eyes of her son, this threat lacks credibility because it is extremely out of proportion with the violation. The son would reason thus: “My mother is unlikely to follow through with this threat because it would damage her reputation as a responsible and caring parent, which in turn, would alienate her from her family and friends.” If however, the mother threatens a milder punishment, such as freezing his allowance or suspending his driving privileges, she will be able to more effectively influence her son’s behaviour because these threats are more proportionate to the infraction. To put it bluntly, these threats are simply more believable. This example illuminates the point that credibility depends *not* on the defender’s ability to inflict massive and absolute punishment, but rather on his ability to inflict punishment that corresponds to the gravity of the infraction.

Thus far, the discussion has focused on deterrence in general and has not made a distinction between conventional and nuclear deterrence. On balance, the advent of the atomic age did not alter the principles of deterrence so much as it sharpened the determination of world leaders to make sure that deterrence did not fail. Nuclear weapons dramatically increased the stakes of war and in this connection represent so extreme a departure from the destructive capabilities of their conventional counterparts that nuclear “deterrence rests today on the threat of pain and extinction [and] not just on the threat of military defeat.”¹⁷ Alarmingly, deterrence failure involving nuclear weapons would result in destruction that was swift, mutual, and complete.¹⁸ But to deter a nuclear attack, states still have to demonstrate that they have the will and capability to inflict punishment proportionate to the violation. In the final analysis, fission weapons raised the importance of deterrence strategy in the minds of foreign policy makers while leaving its theoretical underpinnings

¹⁷ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966): 23.

¹⁸ Schelling 23.

intact.¹⁹

The American Cold War doctrine of ‘massive retaliation’ highlights the difficulties of executing an effective deterrence policy in the nuclear age. In the early years of the Cold War, the United States threatened massive retaliation to deter the Soviet Union from not only initiating “an all-out war,” but also “a variety of possible lesser encroachments against free countries.”²⁰ The credibility of this doctrine however, declined rapidly once the Soviet Union gained a nuclear capability of its own. Threatening Soviet cities with nuclear destruction may have been an appropriate means to deter a nuclear assault against American cities, but what about assets of lower value? Would the same threat have succeeded in deterring Soviet conventional attacks against American allies or overseas troop deployments? Would the United States, for example, have risked a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union merely to deter it from supporting communist movements in democratic countries? “Because our strategic doctrine recognized few intermediate points between total war and total peace,” laments Henry Kissinger, “we ... found it difficult, during periods of Soviet belligerency, to bring the risks of resistance into relationship with the issues which have actually been at stake.”²¹ The United States fixed this problem by stratifying its conventional military capabilities in ways that allowed it to issue threats more proportionate to the violations in question and was therefore “more credible in deterring them.”²²

Deterrence Failure

Deterrence failures typically fall into one of the following two categories: 1) the fait

¹⁹ Craig and George, 173.

²⁰ Craig and Alexander, 173.

²¹ Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957): 11.

²² Craig and Alexander, 173.

accompli; and 2) the limited probe and its variant, “salami tactics.”²³ A *fait accompli* is an attempt by the target state to alter the status quo through a sudden, swift, and decisive military attack before the deterring power has a chance to respond. Two beliefs in the mind of the target state make this outcome possible. First, she believes that “no commitment by the defender exists”²⁴ and second, that the risks her actions entail are “calculable and controllable.”²⁵ In the end, these beliefs persuade the target state that the best way to alter the status quo is to mount a quick and fierce attack in the hope that the deterring power will have no time to clarify her commitment or intervene. North Korea’s invasion of South Korea in 1950 is often cited as an example of the *fait accompli* strategy. Pyongyang launched a massive invasion with the aim of defeating South Korea “before the United States could organize an effective flow of military equipment to the South Koreans.”²⁶

The ‘limited probe’ is a strategy by which the revisionist power creates a ‘controlled crisis’ to test the strength of the defender’s commitments. Two beliefs influence the initiator’s decision to execute this strategy. First, he believes that the defender’s commitment is dubious and, again, that the risks his actions entail are “calculable and controllable.”²⁷ The initiator comes to the conclusion that the “controlled application of limited force ... will require [the] defender to clarify the ambiguity of his commitment.”²⁸ China employed this strategy in 1958 against the United States. It attacked Quemoy (an island in the Taiwan Strait) with artillery shelling to determine whether America’s commitment to defend Taiwan’s offshore islands was still in force. Once the U.S. made it clear that its commitment still

²³ Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974): 537..

²⁴ George and Smoke, 537.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*, 541.

applied, China backed down and the crisis ended.²⁹

A variant of the limited probe strategy is “salami tactics.”³⁰ While the limited probe seeks to test or clarify the defender’s commitment, salami tactics aim to weaken and erode it. In this strategy, the revisionist state challenges the defender’s commitment in a non-provocative and “noncommittal”³¹ way. It may send a jet into the defender’s airspace for example, or violate a minor provision of a treaty. If it encounters resistance, it can easily back down and dismiss the incidents as accidental or unauthorized. If, however, its actions go unchallenged, it will feel confident to undertake riskier violations, each one bolder than the last, until a point is reached where the defender is left wondering why her threat was never invoked.³² “There is some threshold,” writes Thomas Schelling, “below which the commitment is just not operative, and even that threshold is usually unclear.”³³ No matter how meticulously one draws up a contract, for example, or how assiduously one communicates his interests, there are always some areas that are ambiguous and impossible to clarify.³⁴ The defender’s inability to draw a distinct, concrete line between minor and major offenses allows the challenger to chip away at the defender’s commitment in ways that are too insignificant in and of themselves to invoke the threat, but which cumulatively weaken and invalidate the commitment.³⁵

Ways to Strengthen Deterrence

One of the best ways to enhance deterrence is to “relinquish the initiative.”³⁶ This is

²⁹ George and Smoke, 541.

³⁰ Schelling, 66.

³¹ *ibid.*, 67.

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*, 68.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 43.

the act of maneuvering into a spot where retreat is impossible. Normally, strategists tend to favour policies that provide the state with as many options as possible in its international relations. In deterrence relationships however, an abundance of options can be a liability. If your adversary is advancing toward you for example, you could, at the last minute, lose your nerve, and use one of your options to beat a hasty retreat. Even if you firmly believe that you will stay and fight, your adversary may not think so. But if you leave yourself with no options, with no way of escape so that you must stay and hold your ground, then your enemy must make a new calculation. In this scenario writes Schelling, your enemy “cannot count on what you would *prefer* to do if he were advancing irresistibly; he must decide instead what he ought to do if you were incapable of anything but resisting him.”³⁷ (italics in original) Indeed, the dictum, ‘actions speak louder than words’ applies here with particular force. By leaving yourself with no choice but to stay and defend your position, relinquishing the initiative is not only an effective way of demonstrating your intentions, but of adopting them as well.³⁸ It puts the ball in the enemy’s court, leaving him with the difficult decision of whether or not to provoke a fight. The presence of American troops in South Korea can be interpreted in this manner. When compared to the size of the North Korean army (almost one million troops³⁹), the U.S. garrison in South Korea amounts to little more than a token force. And even though it is highly unlikely that these troops could stop the North Korean army from breaching the South Korean frontier, they would serve as a ‘trip wire’⁴⁰ ensuring further U.S. action.

Deterrence can be strengthened even further by attaching the state’s prestige and

³⁷ *ibid*, 43.

³⁸ *ibid*, 44.

³⁹ Amos A. Jordan et al, *American National Security*, Fifth edition, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1999): 368.

⁴⁰ Schelling, 47.

international reputation to the commitment in question. By doing so, the status quo state shows that it is even more committed to this because its reputation is now at stake. Its obligation to act will be greater because it knows that failure to act will damage its credibility in other areas.

Yet another way of strengthening deterrence is to assure the revisionist state that its core interests will not be harmed if it submits to the demands of the status quo state. “Successful deterrence,” writes Thomas Christensen, “is a form of coercive bargaining that requires a mix of credible threats and credible reassurances.”⁴¹ It is simply not enough to convince the target state that it will be punished if it behaves a certain way. How can the target state for example, be sure that its compliance will not be taken as a sign of weakness and used against it at some later date? How does it know that compliance in this instance is not part of a broader strategy to exact political concessions in other areas? Indeed, relying too heavily on the stick may actually generate a ‘nothing to lose’ mentality in the mind of the revisionist state and create an incentive to engage in the very behaviour one sought to deter. It is crucial for the revisionist state then, to believe that it will not be stripped of its vital interests by agreeing with the status quo state’s demands.

Deterrence then, is a psychological tactic that aims to convince one’s adversary that the costs of taking a certain action greatly outweigh any benefit she expects to gain from that action. Credibility, which is the key to deterrence, consists of two elements: will and capability. In order to maintain credibility, the response must be proportionate to the weight of the violation. The two most common ways that deterrence can fail are through a fait accompli or a limited probe. In order to make deterrence more reliable, the deterring power

⁴¹ Thomas J. Christensen, “The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict,” *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 8.

should try to relinquish the initiative, commit its national prestige, and provide assurances to the target state that its core values will not be harmed by submitting to its demands.

Assessing Strategic Ambiguity Against Deterrence Theory

In terms of military capacity, the United States can respond proportionately to every level of force that China can use against Taiwan, both nuclear and conventional. It therefore meets the capability requirement of credibility. At first glance, this view is not easy to accept. As matter of fact, the size and ongoing development of China's nuclear forces are a source of intimidation to many analysts, politicians, and lay people alike. Some observers have raised concerns that China would retaliate with nuclear attacks against American assets and cities in response to military intervention on behalf of Taiwan.⁴² After all, Beijing has about "twenty CSS-4 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of" hitting the American west coast. It also maintains a modest arsenal of intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) within striking distance of U.S. regional outposts as well as its key allies in the region: South Korea and Japan.

Upon closer inspection however, Chinese nuclear weapons do not pose a serious threat to the United States, its assets, or its allies. China's nuclear warheads and missiles are kept at separate sites, and the time needed to attach the warheads to the missiles would provide the United States with ample time to spot such preparations.⁴³ Moreover, since these missiles use liquid fuel, they require even more time to ready, thus furnishing the United States with yet another opportunity to execute a preemptive strike.⁴⁴ The operational restrictions inherent in the launch preparations for Chinese ICBMs and IRBMs invariably

⁴² Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait," *International Security* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 59.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 58.

prevent them from realizing their full coercive potential.

In terms of conventional strength, the United States can remain confident in its ability to match every Chinese threat with a corresponding level of force. U.S. high-technology capabilities continue to improve and have reached the point where its conventional weapons can achieve the same military objectives as nuclear weapons. Chinese military analysts acknowledge that the U.S. has a competitive edge in long-range, high-accuracy weapons that enable to prosecute a war while maintaining a safe distance from enemy fire. Of further significance is the fact that U.S. conventional capabilities also permit it to accurately hit enemy military targets without endangering civilians. Lastly, the U.S. forward presence in the Western Pacific allows it to project force rapidly and decisively into any theatre in the region. Taken together, these advantages cumulatively reduce American “misgivings about punishing potential challengers,”⁴⁵ and thereby enhance the capability requirement of credibility.

Mere capability though, is just one aspect of credibility. In order to be fully credible, the defender must also be able to convince the challenger that she has the fortitude to carry out her threat. In this respect, U.S. strategy is weak. Indeed, strategic ambiguity diminishes its ability to persuade China of its resolution to protect Taiwan. Plainly speaking, the nature of this strategy can potentially create conditions that may lead China into attempting a fait accompli. In this type of strategy, the initiator believes no commitment exists on the part of the defender. Because this policy does not make a clear pledge to defend Taiwan, China may eventually come to the conclusion that the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is non-existent or superficial at best. Moreover, even a relatively firm commitment by the U.S. may not amount to much in light of the asymmetry of interests between China and the U.S. in the Taiwan

⁴⁵ Ross, 65.

Strait.⁴⁶ To be sure, the stakes for China are considerably greater than those of the U.S. The Beijing government sees Taiwan as part of China, and has compelling security and nationalist reasons to achieve unification. As stated earlier, reunification with Taiwan is deeply tied to regime legitimacy and survival, and “no Chinese politician, strategist, or anyone else will dare to abandon [this] objective.”⁴⁷ Conversely, American interests in the region are largely “reputational.”⁴⁸ Washington aims to deter China mainly to uphold the credibility of its other security commitments in the Western Pacific.⁴⁹

Despite the fact that China may not believe in the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan, deterrence is unlikely to fail in this way because Chinese strategists will probably doubt their ability to ‘control and calculate’ the risks associated with a swift invasion of the island. In practice, a *fait accompli* would involve an enormous bombardment of missiles and air strikes against Taiwan with the purpose of generating widespread economic and political disorder “and associated psychological pressures.”⁵⁰ If this could be accomplished before the U.S. could respond, there is a chance that Taiwan would capitulate. It is highly improbable however, that China could accomplish this in time to preclude U.S. intervention because of the quality of its armed forces. The almost five hundred missiles that China has reserved for use in the Taiwan Strait have an accuracy rate of no more than three hundred meters, and many analysts estimate that they have about a one in ten chance of hitting their targets.⁵¹ It is also doubtful that China’s attack jets would fair any better in influencing a victorious outcome. Since Chinese jets are not equipped with precision armaments, they have to fly at low altitudes to hit their targets, thus exposing them to Taiwan’s formidable arsenal of

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ross 76.

⁵¹ Michael O’Hanlon, “Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 58.

surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery. Moreover, “given their poor state of repair and lack of night-flying capabilities,”⁵² China would have to restrict its operations to daytime hours, allowing Taiwan to boost its defenses at night.

The more likely way in which deterrence will fail in the Taiwan Strait is through the combination of a limited probe and salami tactics. Once again, the very essence of strategic ambiguity can easily give China reason to doubt Washington’s commitment. Additionally, the methods by which one executes a limited probe are normally both manageable and calculable. In fact, Beijing has used this tactic in the past, most recently in March of 1996. In an effort to intimidate Taiwanese citizens before their first-ever democratic election, China conducted massive military exercises on its side of the strait during which it fired missiles dangerously close to Taiwan. The United States responded by sending two aircraft carrier battle groups into the region to demonstrate that this behaviour would not be tolerated.⁵³ The crisis ended soon thereafter without incident.

By carrying out such provocative military exercises, did China try to resolve its dispute with Taiwan with force? It is hard to say. But had the U.S. not responded, it would have sent a signal to Beijing that the importance of Taiwan’s security was declining in the eyes of American strategists. It would also have set a precedent upon which China could undertake more daring probes at some point in the future, leaving the U.S. with the task of responding to a greater show of force. As U.S. foreign policy adjusts to changes in the global political environment, Beijing can be expected to ‘test the waters’ from time to time to determine what priority Taiwan’s security takes in American defense planning.

The most likely way that deterrence will fail in the Taiwan Strait is through a belief on

⁵² O’Hanlon, 59.

⁵³ Robert S. Ross, “The 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation,” *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 87.

China's part that it will be divested of one of its core interests, namely, reunification with Taiwan. Should such a belief materialize, China may invade Taiwan despite the fact that it cannot achieve military success. The costs of losing Taiwan permanently would simply outweigh the costs of fighting a war with the U.S. "The damage to China's political and social stability in being seen to lose territory," asserts Michael Swaine, "would be even greater than the diplomatic and economic damage resulting from a conflict with the United States."⁵⁴ It is true that the U.S. has recently been urging Taipei to refrain from activities and rhetoric that Beijing would regard as steps toward independence. In fact, President Bush himself actually scolded the president of Taiwan over his plans to hold a referendum on whether Taipei should formally petition Beijing to remove its missiles from its (Taiwan's) side of the strait.⁵⁵ These words however, ring hollow when juxtaposed against U.S. actions, which are clearly signaling to Beijing that Washington has every intention of not only deterring a Chinese attack but also encouraging Taiwan independence. On February 1, 2000 for instance, the U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, reinforcing Washington's right to sell weapons to Taiwan and calling for an expansion of U.S.-Taiwan defense cooperation.⁵⁶ In early 2001, President Bush approved the largest weapons sales package to Taiwan in over ten years, which included eight submarines that China considers offensive weapons.⁵⁷ If this was not provocative enough, the Bush administration decided that same year to sell weapons to Taiwan "on a regular basis," a move that represented a striking departure from its previous policy of selling arms "just once a year."⁵⁸ Furthermore,

⁵⁴ Swaine, 42.

⁵⁵ Paul Peachey, "Chen calls for US recognition," *Australian Financial Review*, March 26, 2004, electronic document can be accessed at <http://afr.com/articles/2004/03/25/1079939782664.html>.

⁵⁶ Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, electronic document can be accessed at http://taiwantt.org.tw/fortaiwan/fortaiwan7/new_page_9.htm.

⁵⁷ "Bush's words on Taiwan set new course for US," *Central News Agency*, May 7, 2001, electronic document can be accessed at <http://www.taiwanheadlines.gov.tw/20010507/20010507p4.html>.

⁵⁸ Bill Gertz, "Taiwan shoring up defenses with U.S. assistance; Analysts say balance of power in Strait still shifting toward China," *Washington Times*, February 29, 2004.

on April 25, 2001, when asked if the United States would respond militarily to Chinese aggression in the Taiwan Strait, President Bush replied that the U.S. would do “whatever it took to help Taiwan defend herself.”⁵⁹ Even though the U.S. asserts that it does not support Taiwanese independence,⁶⁰ its actions and occasional words may lead Beijing to think otherwise. Robust Taiwanese defenses make it difficult for China to bring Taipei to the bargaining table and, in the absence of firm assurances, the Chinese leadership can easily be led to interpret U.S. weapons sales and diplomatic backing as signs of tacit support for Taiwanese independence. The U.S. is clearly failing to balance its threats with an equal amount of assurances.

Policy Implications

One of the most obvious policy implications is that the United States must provide China with more assurances that it will not lose Taiwan by cooperating with U.S. demands. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to impress upon the Beijing leadership that an independent Taiwan is inconsistent with the wider goals of America’s national security strategy. Instead of emphasizing the obvious fact that such an event would precipitate a war, Washington should advance a more positive line of reasoning. Ideally, Washington should stress that it has long-term moral and security interests in the political reform of China and that Taiwan’s standing as a democracy can serve as a powerful catalyst to bring about this end. This will indicate to Chinese leaders that the U.S. is not opposed to reunification so long as it occurs peacefully and under the right set of political conditions.⁶¹ The U.S. should also

⁵⁹ Ted Galen Carpenter, “Going Too Far: Bush’s Pledge to Defend Taiwan,” *CATO Institute*, May 30, 2001, electronic document can be accessed at <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb66.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Hickey, 29.

⁶¹ Christensen, 19.

emphasize that while it has a solid interest in supporting Taiwan's status as a democracy, it will not come to its defense if it unilaterally declares independence. This recommendation would not only resonate strongly with the American public, but be more convincing in the eyes of Chinese policymakers.⁶²

The second policy recommendation is a corollary of the first, namely, that Washington should persuade Taipei to abandon its aspirations for *de jure* independence. Taiwan already has all the trappings of an independent country: a definite geographic location, its own currency, its own constitution, and a robust economy. The United States should use its influence to convince Taipei that *de jure* independence will not generate any social or political benefits for the people of Taiwan.

Third, in order to strengthen deterrence, Washington should try to move into a position where it 'relinquishes the initiative' to some degree. Doing so would send a clear signal to Beijing that the United States will not tolerate an attempt to change the status quo by force. The decision to initiate a change in the status quo would then be left entirely up to China. Washington could accomplish this by stationing a token garrison of troops on one of Taiwan's offshore islands or by deploying a small fleet of ships to patrol the Taiwan Strait on permanent basis. Even though the size of these deployments would be too insignificant to repel a Chinese attack, the risks or injuries incurred would act as 'trip wire' for further U.S. intervention.⁶³ To be sure, this recommendation is wholly unsuitable within the current context of U.S.-China relations. However, if undertaken gradually and in support of a broader strategy that combines threats *and* assurances, this move would have a stabilizing effect by eliminating any doubts in the minds of Chinese strategists about the quality of the

⁶²ibid.

⁶³Schelling,

U.S. commitment.

Fourth, the United States should continue to sell arms to Taiwan as required for its *defense* only. A strong Taiwan that is capable of defending itself is a sure way of keeping the costs of invasion high and thus the chances of a *fait accompli* low. To the greatest extent possible, the United States should sell weapons suited for defense and in increments that will not upset the China-Taiwan military balance. An asymmetry in military forces that strongly favours Taiwan could lull the Taipei leadership into a false sense of optimism that it can ‘go it alone’ in a war against China, and thus be tempted into declaring independence.

Fifth, the US should maintain a forward presence in the Western Pacific by expanding or at least preserving its military outposts on Okinawa’s Kadena Airforce base as well as its naval base in Guam. It should also tighten its military relationship with Singapore and the Philippines to the greatest extent possible so that it may use their territories as alternative points of departure for the projection of military force into the Taiwan Straits. These measures will increase Washington’s ability to respond rapidly and further reduce China’s ability to execute a *fait accompli*.

Sixth, American defense planners should focus on refining their conventional war-fighting capabilities in ways that allow them to escalate or de-escalate military action in narrower degrees. Greater choice in conventional tactics would enable Washington to more accurately tailor its military responses to a wider variety of threats and thereby enhance its credibility in the mind of the adversary. Specifically, funds should be devoted to research and development in nonlethal weapons.⁶⁴ These weapons can neutralize enemy targets without the destruction and loss of life that normally attend operations of this type. Instruments that project electromagnetic waves, for example, can incapacitate an enemy’s communication

⁶⁴John B. Alexander, “Optional Lethality,” *Harvard International Review* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 64.

system just as effectively as artillery shelling but in a decidedly less provocative manner. In the words of John Alexander, “when missiles, bombers, and tanks are too much, and sitting on the sidelines is undesirable, the availability of nonlethal weapons becomes imperative.”⁶⁵ Nonlethal weapons permit a state to demonstrate intent to use force without inciting a vicious response and therefore represent a new notch on the spectrum of military action.

Conclusion

This analysis shows that executing a strategy of deterrence is a complex undertaking. It depends on more than just having the will and capability to follow through with a threat. To be sure, it is equally and perhaps even more important to persuade the target to *believe* in your will and capability, as deterrence can easily falter if your opponent thinks you lack the ‘courage of your convictions,’ so to speak. In this connection, it is crucial that words are backed by actions, such as relinquishing the initiative or attaching your nation’s prestige to the issue in question. Moreover, threats need to be balanced with assurances to convince the target that her compliance will not result in the loss of her most valued assets. It is clear that Washington’s policy of strategic ambiguity is not the most advantageous way of deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. It not only keeps China uncertain about the quality the U.S. commitment to Taiwan, but provides no mechanism by which China can be assured that it will not lose this territory. A policy based more on what can be called “strategic clarity”⁶⁶ appears to be a more favourable way of averting war in the Taiwan Strait.

⁶⁵Alexander, 65.

⁶⁶Carpenter, 2.

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