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**DETECTING CHINA IN THE FUTURE**

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**THE DIFFICULTY OF DETERRING CHINESE USE OF FORCE**

The historical record indicates that China's adversaries often misunderstand its motives and willingness to use force, which affects their ability to deter the Chinese use of force. In Korea, for example, U.S. misunderstanding of China's motives undermined its ability to deter Chinese intervention. U.S. assurances, e.g., that it would not harm the Yalu River hydroelectric plants, showed that it had failed to understand the extent to which the Chinese view of its international situation was tinged by a fearfulness that had a strong ideological component. Thus, Mao's acceptance of the notion of an inevitable (ideologically based) U.S. antagonism to a communist China changed his calculus of the gains and risks of intervening in Korea in a way not understood in Washington. As Christensen has noted,

it has become common in political science to label leaders in crises as either aggressive and insatiable or fearful and protective of the status quo. The distinction is often useful, but there is no reason to believe that leaders cannot be both aggressive and fearful. Mao was no lover of the status quo, as was proven by his material support to Kim Il-sung and the Vietnamese Communists even before the outbreak of the Korean War; but Mao was also almost paranoid in his feeling of insecurity about threats to his nation, as was demonstrated by his constant fear of foreign and domestic enemies. This type of leader is extremely difficult to deter. If one shows too little resolve, as the United States did by excluding South Korea from the defense perimeter in early 1950, the leader will promote aggression. . . . But if one shows too hostile a posture, as the United States did by intervening in the Taiwan Straits, the leader will become panicky,

difficult to reassure, and capable of rash action. (Christensen, 1996, p. 254.)

### Success Has Required Very High-Level Threats

For this reason, successful deterrence of China has often required the threat of very high levels of violence. In the 1954–1955 Taiwan Strait crisis, for example, the United States resorted to threats of nuclear attack to deter further Chinese use of force with respect to the offshore islands and to bring about a final cessation of hostile action (e.g., shelling).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, to deter the Chinese instigation of border conflicts in 1969, the Soviets resorted to implicit nuclear threats and to a threat to “destabilize” Xinjiang by supporting Uighur nationalism.

It is unclear whether the United States will be willing or able to make these types of threats in the future. In the absence of a “Cold War” climate of ideological conflict, the United States may not regard the stakes as sufficiently high to threaten nuclear attack, especially given that China now possesses a capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons. It is harder to assess the likelihood and credibility of a possible U.S. threat to play on Chinese internal divisions. Unlike the Soviets’ capabilities in 1969, the United States lacks important assets: a common border with regions in which separatist sentiment exists, historical ties to the groups involved, and a reputation for being able to manage these types of operations effectively. On the other hand, the United States can bring to bear much greater public pressure, e.g., by raising the international profile of the Tibetan issue. However, this capability may not be a useful deterrent: Since it depends upon a public campaign, U.S. officials may not be able to assure China that the pressure would be called off if China refrained from

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<sup>1</sup>Whether or not the United States deterred a Chinese *invasion* of the offshore islands depends, of course, on whether the Chinese had any intention of seizing them. A strong case can be made that the PRC had no interest in taking the offshore islands separately from Taiwan, since that could have facilitated the growth of independence sentiment on Taiwan and the adoption of a “two Chinas” policy on the part of the United States. On the other hand, if the loss of the offshore islands were to lead to a collapse of Nationalist morale on Taiwan (as the Eisenhower administration feared), it could have been very much in the PRC’s interest to invade them. Stolper (1985), pp. 9–10, emphasizes the first possibility, but the Eisenhower administration could not afford to neglect the second.

taking the action the United States was trying to deter. As such, public pressure may be too blunt an instrument to have very much deterrent effect.

**Relevance of the Historical Record.** The PRC's historical record reflects behavior during a period when the disparity in military force between China and its potential adversaries (the United States and the Soviet Union) was considerably greater than it is now, and when the PRC leadership's worldview—more influenced than it is now by ideological factors—saw the outside world as much more threatening. Hence, one could question how relevant this historical record is to current and future Chinese behavior. It could be argued that since China has become militarily stronger and since its current worldview is unaffected by ideological assumptions, it will become less convinced of the inevitable hostility of the outside world and hence more amenable to the ordinary cost-benefit calculations on which deterrence rests.

While such an evolution is certainly possible, it does not appear to have occurred yet. The notion of inevitable hostility based on ideological grounds has disappeared but seems to have been replaced, at least in part, by the notion of a deep-rooted U.S. hostility, on *Realpolitik* grounds, to any increase in Chinese political-military power.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the strength of this belief, future deterrence efforts directed against China could be subject to some of the same difficulties as in the past.

This might be especially true in the case of a Taiwan scenario, in which any U.S. attempt to deter a significant Chinese use of force against Taiwan (such as a blockade or invasion) could be seen as *ipso facto* evidence of U.S. hostility and a desire to detach Taiwan from China permanently. After all, if the Chinese leadership has decided that the situation requires a major use of force, it likely had concluded that Taiwan was on the brink of moving significantly in the direction of a declaration of independence or of taking some other

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<sup>2</sup>Wang Jisi, a senior Chinese Americanist, believes that “a vast majority of the Chinese political élite” shares, and will continue to share for many years, a set of fundamental assumptions concerning the U.S. role in world affairs, including that “the United States wants to maximize its national power and dominate the world,” and that Americans “believe in ‘the law of the jungle,’ seeing no other nations as equal partners and attempting to prevent them from rising up.” (Wang, 1997, p. 3.)

practically irreversible step (such as acquiring a nuclear capability) designed to make reunification impossible or highly improbable. In such a situation, the U.S. insistence that reunification be accomplished peacefully might seem like a smokescreen for an abandonment of the “one China” policy.

**Deterrence by Denial.** One exception to this general difficulty of deterrence has been what one might call “deterrence by denial,” such as the United States practiced in June 1950 when the Seventh Fleet “neutralized” the Taiwan Strait and thus prevented a Communist attempt to occupy Taiwan and bring the civil war to a definitive end. Once the United States was engaged, it was simply beyond the Chinese capability to achieve their goal, and they did not attempt it. In this sense, this may be called an example of deterrence, albeit a trivial one.

### **The Problem of Deterring Lower Levels of Violence**

If the above analysis is accurate, the main problem to be addressed is that of deterring the Chinese from using force when threats of massive retaliation may not be credible. Given that the Chinese now have a capability, however rudimentary, to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, U.S. nuclear threats against China will be credible only if vital U.S. interests are seen to be involved. At present, it is unclear whether the more likely causes of Sino-U.S. conflict qualify in this regard. One could imagine, for example, a future Chinese threat to Japan that the United States would regard in the same light as the Cold War–era Soviet threat to Western Europe. In general, however, this would seem to imply a deterioration of Sino-U.S. relations to the levels of hostility characteristic of the Cold War, in which the doctrines of nuclear deterrence were developed.

Short of that, the problem will remain that of deterring Chinese threats to use force when the threat to U.S. interests is somewhat less cosmic. In the past, this has proved difficult because the Chinese use of force in such cases has had some particular characteristics that frustrate a simple application of typical deterrence theory.

**Chinese Often See Value in Crisis, Tension.** The Chinese have often shown a willingness to resort to force precisely because they see the resulting tension as in their interest. It is often claimed that, since *weiji*, the Chinese word for *crisis*, is composed of two characters that

can be translated as *danger* and *opportunity*, respectively, it does not have an entirely negative connotation. This is apparently apocryphal<sup>3</sup>; nevertheless, it does appear that, for the Chinese leadership, a crisis is not necessarily a negative phenomenon: It may provide an opportunity for making gains that would otherwise not be achievable.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the creation of a crisis may be a way to probe an adversary's intentions, to cause difficulties between it and its allies, or to weaken its resolve and the domestic political support for its policies.

The purpose of the tension may be domestic mobilization (which is one interpretation of the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis); alternatively, it may be intended to exert a psychological impact on a foreign power and hence bring about a change in its policies. If the foreign country that is the "target" of the crisis appears undecided or irresolute about an issue, a "demonstration" (involving the actual, but carefully limited, use of force) of the kinds of trouble to which a policy unfavorable to China might lead could be a useful way to affect that country's decisionmaking process.

This type of behavior may be difficult to deter. Threats to use (limited amounts of) force in reply may indeed play into the Chinese strategy. If the object is to create tension, the adversary's counter-threats help rather than hurt, as long as the harm they threaten to cause remains within acceptable bounds. The key notion here seems to be the question of controlling the level of tension and the risk of escalation rather than avoiding them altogether. Hence, a strategy of carefully controlled escalatory threats and actions may be an inappropriate means of achieving a deterrent effect.

Thus, in the Taiwan Strait crisis, the Chinese clearly wanted to create a certain level of tension and the sense, in the United States and elsewhere in the West, that the outbreak of war was possible. It was this tension that put pressure on the U.S. government to resolve the problem: Domestic opinion was perturbed by the possibility of going to war over a handful of small, remote, and seemingly inconsequential islands, while America's European allies feared that the

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<sup>3</sup>Or so the author understands from a native speaker.

<sup>4</sup>The view that crises are invariably bad—i.e., that they offer "danger" but not "opportunity"—is the understandable perspective of a status quo power, such as the United States, which regards tension as something that must be resolved as soon as possible lest it lead to war, especially nuclear war.

United States would become bogged down on the other side of the globe and hence be a less-effective protector against the Soviet Union. At the same time, as instigators of the crisis, the Chinese felt (in this instance, correctly) that they could control its intensity and avoid its escalation to levels that could be dangerous to them.

### **SCENARIO: DETERRENCE OF CHINESE USE OF FORCE AGAINST TAIWAN**

Of the possible future deterrence scenarios, one of the more likely cases, and potentially the most important one, would be a U.S. attempt to deter China from using force against Taiwan. China has consistently refused to undertake not to use force to achieve reunification with Taiwan; indeed, as Jiang Zemin asserted in a major speech on the topic,

Such commitment [not to use force] would only make it impossible to achieve peaceful reunification and could not but lead to the eventual settlement of the question by the use of force. (Jiang, 1995.)

The Chinese leadership seems to believe that Taiwan's reluctance to unify with the mainland is such that at least the threat of force will ultimately be necessary to convince it to agree to "peaceful" reunification, even under the "one country, two systems" formula.

### **Chinese Objectives**

Potential Chinese objectives in using force against Taiwan would of course depend on the situation at the time; one could imagine a variety of political circumstances in which the question of Chinese use of force would arise. In some circumstances, initiative would lie with the Chinese as to whether they chose to advance their interests by means of the threat or actual use of force; in others, the Chinese might feel compelled to respond to a Taiwanese action.

With respect to political objectives, the Chinese could seek to

- deter or reverse a Taiwanese "declaration of independence"
- deter Taiwan from developing nuclear weapons or compel it to abandon an ongoing program

- deter or compel the abandonment of U.S.-Taiwanese military cooperation (e.g., an access agreement)
- deter Taiwan from pursuing an “independence-minded” course or influence its electorate not to support candidates favoring such a course
- compel Taiwan to accept reunification.

The cases are listed in terms of the urgency with which China is likely to feel compelled to act. In the case of an actual or imminent formal Taiwanese “declaration of independence,” especially if it appeared that other countries might be willing to recognize Taiwan as a new state, China might feel that it had to act immediately or see its claim to sovereignty over the island irretrievably damaged. The prospect of a Taiwanese nuclear capability might prompt a similar reaction, since it could appear to the Chinese to be an effective counter to the credibility of their “background” threat to use force. The timing of a Chinese move could, however, depend on factors other than the precise status of the Taiwanese nuclear program.

The timing of a threat or use of force to deter the Taiwanese government from following an “independence-minded” course of action—the apparent motivation of the missile tests and military exercises in 1995 and 1996—affords China much more flexibility, since such a course of action would take a long time to reach fulfillment. At each step along the way (e.g., the Taiwanese president’s unofficial visit to the United States), China would have to decide whether a major reaction was called for or not. Under some circumstances, however, China may feel compelled to act before an election, to head off the victory of a candidate it regarded as committed to independence or to support a candidate it regarded as more favorable to reunification.

Finally, even if the Chinese leadership were to set an internal “deadline” for reunification, as long as that fact were not made public, it would be free to apply pressure to compel reunification on its own timetable. On the other hand, if the deadline were made public, China might feel pressed to take action at an inopportune time, for considerations of prestige, although a face-saving reason for postponing action would not be hard to invent.

Whatever the political motivation, there could be a wide variety of more immediate objectives of the military action. In order of

increasing seriousness, the purpose of Chinese military operations could be

- saber rattling for political effect
- harassment designed to cause minor cost or inconvenience, for political effect (e.g., interfering with shipping or air routes, causing detours or delays)
- serious interference with shipping or air routes designed to cause serious economic loss and/or financial panic
- blockade and/or missile bombardment designed to cause surrender
- occupation of the island.

### **U.S. Commitment: “Strategic Ambiguity”**

As already noted, the U.S. commitment to deter any Chinese use of force against Taiwan may not be entirely clear to the Chinese. Indeed, the current U.S. policy is one of “strategic ambiguity,” i.e., a deliberate refusal to state explicitly that the United States would defend Taiwan against Chinese attack. This policy derives from the complexity of the fundamental U.S. stance toward Taiwan: support for its *de facto* independence (in the sense of rejection of Chinese use of force to change Taiwan’s political status) combined, however, with the rejection, as part of the “Three Noes” policy,<sup>5</sup> of *de jure* independence and “acknowledg[ment of] the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.”<sup>6</sup> This implies U.S. opposition to any Taiwanese declaration of *de jure* independence and hence the reluctance to provide any security guarantees that might make Taiwan believe that declaring independence was less risky than it would be in the absence of such a guarantee.

Given this complexity, it is difficult to assess how credible the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan would appear in a given situation. If

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<sup>5</sup>As stated by President Clinton, June 30, 1998, in Shanghai and reported in Pomfret (1998).

<sup>6</sup>“United States–China Joint Communiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan,” August 17, 1982 (reprinted in Harding, 1992, p. 383).

China were reacting to Taiwanese moves that it regarded as “provocative” (because, for example, they appeared to the Chinese as tantamount to a declaration of independence), it might feel that the United States would be politically constrained from reacting militarily.

More generally, China would have to assess the U.S. interest in Taiwan’s continued *de facto* independence. This would not be an easy assessment to make. First of all, the formal U.S. position implies that the United States has no *strategic* interest in Taiwan’s being independent of the mainland; otherwise, it ought to oppose peaceful reunification as well as reunification by force. Hence, China would have to assess how committed the United States was to the mere *principle* of nonuse of force, as opposed to concern for the object for which force might be used.<sup>7</sup> Second, it might be unclear to China whether the United States would see Chinese use of force against Taiwan as a harbinger of a more aggressive policy generally or whether the United States could be brought around to accept China’s view that, Taiwan being an internal affair, China’s use of force against it did not signify a policy of future (international) expansionism. Finally, China would have to assess how the United States valued Taiwan relative to its larger concerns vis-à-vis China itself, including its economic interests. To the extent that China was able to control the timing of its use of force against Taiwan, it could attempt to manipulate some of these factors affecting U.S. perceptions, for example, by improving its relations with other East Asian nations, by taking steps to resolve outstanding disputes with them, and/or by raising the value to the United States of Sino-U.S. economic ties (lowering tariffs or other trade barriers, enhancing the security of U.S. economic interests in China, signing major contracts with U.S. corporations, etc.).

### **U.S. Capability**

As discussed above, the United States might seek to deter Chinese military action by appearing able and willing to deny the Chinese the achievement of their military objective or by threatening retaliation.

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<sup>7</sup>While the Chinese claim to be very principled with respect to their international behavior, they hardly attribute the same virtue to the United States.

**Denial.** A clear U.S. capability to deny the Chinese the objective for which they might be willing to use force against Taiwan would probably be the most reliable method of deterrence. China would probably believe that the United States would be more willing to use such a capability than one that required the United States to expand the scope of hostilities to include retaliation against Chinese targets not directly related to the use of force against Taiwan.

Assessing whether such a capability exists or will exist in the future is very complicated. Generally speaking, with respect to the lesser military objectives listed above (e.g., saber rattling or harassment), it would appear impossible for the United States to deny the Chinese the ability to achieve their goal.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the U.S. response itself, if it were perceived as an overreaction by a significant part of the Taiwanese population or by other countries in the region, could contribute to the accomplishment of the Chinese objective by raising tensions higher than they would otherwise have been.

At the higher level (occupation or blockade), China at present may be incapable of achieving its objective even in the absence of U.S. involvement. A clear indication of U.S. willingness to use force would suffice to demonstrate to China that it could not achieve its objective. This favorable situation, however, is likely to erode over the next several decades. Enhanced Chinese capabilities involving short-range missiles (potentially with chemical warheads); surveillance capabilities (especially ocean surveillance); and new, quiet diesel submarines could increase the Chinese ability to achieve these objectives, absent U.S. willingness and ability to commit major forces.<sup>9</sup>

At present, the United States could probably prevent Chinese achievement of the middle objective (inflicting serious economic loss by interfering with shipping and air routes), although there could be

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<sup>8</sup>According to press reports, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Freeman was told during a trip to China in late 1994 that "the People's Liberation Army had prepared plans for a missile attack against Taiwan consisting of one conventional missile strike a day for 30 days." (Tyler, 1996.) U.S. development of an effective, rapidly deployable, area ballistic missile defense system could provide the capability to deny China the ability to inflict this type of harassment on Taiwan.

<sup>9</sup>See Khalilzad (1999), Ch. 3, for a discussion of the impact of Chinese military modernization.

an initial period of panic on Taiwan before it became evident that the losses the Chinese interference caused would remain in the tolerable range. In the future, this may become more difficult for the reason given above.

**Retaliation.** The U.S. capability to retaliate with nuclear weapons would seem assured for the foreseeable future. However, this raises all of the “extended deterrence” issues with which the United States struggled during the Cold War. In particular, could a U.S. threat to run the risk of Chinese nuclear retaliation in defense of Taiwan be made credible, given the vast difference between the weight of Taiwan, on the one hand, and Western Europe, on the other, with respect to the global balance of power?

In addition, the United States will likely retain the ability to inflict serious damage on Chinese military and economic targets using conventional air and cruise missile attacks, although the United States would probably not be able to “collapse” the Chinese air defense system the way that it rendered Iraqi air defenses ineffective in Desert Storm. Thus, the ongoing costs of a U.S. retaliation campaign are likely to be relatively high. The size of such a campaign would be affected by the amount of available basing in the region (especially whether basing on Taiwan was feasible).

In addition, political constraints would limit the range of Chinese targets to be attacked: There could be a strong desire to avoid collateral damage, and targets might be limited to military facilities directly involved in the Chinese action against Taiwan. Thus, military targets that the Chinese leadership might care about most, such as nuclear facilities in northwest China, might not be targetable.

Finally, methods of retaliation other than air and missile strikes would be possible. For example, a Chinese attempt to blockade Taiwan could be answered by a U.S. blockade of Chinese ports. This could have wider international repercussions than air strikes on military targets (or a trade embargo by the United States and any other states that chose to join the United States), since it would interfere with other countries’ trade with China, but it might otherwise be preferable as a less escalatory (more “tit-for-tat”) option.

Retaliation could also take nonmilitary forms, for example, trade sanctions, imposition of strict export controls, or downgrading of diplomatic relations. How successful this would be would depend

primarily on whether the other advanced industrial nations were willing to impose similar restrictions on their relations with China. Strict trade sanctions against China on the part of all NATO nations plus Japan and Korea could, in theory, impose a very high cost on the Chinese, since they value economic and technological development highly. However, it seems unlikely that such a threat would have much deterrent value, given the demonstrated inability of these countries to maintain a common front and given the allure of the Chinese market.

### **Possible Chinese Course of Action**

Judged entirely by the historical record, China's use of force against Taiwan would very likely occur at the lower end of the scale in terms of military objectives. In the 1950s, for example, China harassed Taiwanese garrisons on Jinmen and Mazu islands with artillery barrages; in 1995 and 1996, its missile tests and military exercises fell into the same category. Only once (in 1955) did China occupy Taiwanese-held territory; this involved the small, remote (from Taiwan) islands of the Yijiangshan group. Even the late-1994 threat to attack Taiwan directly (passed unofficially to a visiting American former official; see Tyler, 1996) involved the use of only 30 missiles, to be launched at the rate of one a day.

However, future actions may be different, for several reasons. First, the political circumstances may change in a manner unfavorable to China. Assuming the democratization of Taiwan's political life continues, the self-confidence of the society may increase. This may decrease the value of harassment tactics: After several decades of democratic rule, with indigenous Taiwanese (as opposed to mainlanders) holding the major political offices, Taiwanese society may be harder to intimidate. In addition, low-level harassment tactics could backfire in that they might provoke Taiwan to declare independence formally, a danger that would not have existed in the past, when Taiwan's political leadership was adamantly against independence.<sup>10</sup> Hence, to have the same effect, China may have to ratchet up the military pressure it applies.

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<sup>10</sup>In this connection, it is of interest that, when the Chinese called off the artillery bombardment of the offshore islands in October 1958, one motivation might have

Second, the initiative in the past incidents lay with China, which was able to control the level of tension as it saw fit. In the future, China may find itself faced with a Taiwanese action that appears so provocative that it feels it has no choice but to bring overwhelming pressure to bear to stop it. In particular, the pre-1949 pattern suggests that a weak or unstable regime in Beijing might find itself pushed by popular pressure into taking stronger action than it would have wished. Indeed, even the current regime has acted—for instance, in response to the actions of private Japanese citizens to affirm sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands in 1996–1997—as if it feared allowing the free expression of its people’s nationalist passions.<sup>11</sup> If the regime felt weaker domestically than it does now, it might, at some future point, feel more compelled to act to satisfy nationalist passions.

Third, a future Chinese leadership may find it harder to call off an unsuccessful attempt to intimidate Taiwan than did past leaderships. In 1958, for example, Mao was able to reverse course dramatically after his attempt to starve out the Nationalist garrisons on Jinmen and Mazu failed; he could rationalize calling off the (unsuccessful) blockade of the islands by suggesting that their abandonment by the KMT would be a step toward the realization of a “two China” policy on the part of the United States.<sup>12</sup> Evidently, he did not feel that the abrupt about-face would cause him to lose prestige domestically; a future Chinese government might not feel so secure and, hence, once embarked on a policy of military pressure against Taiwan, might feel that it had no choice but to escalate the pressures until it succeeded in achieving its originally stated goal.

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been the fear that the crisis risked abetting a “two China” policy putatively being pursued by the United States. As Anna Louise Strong, presumably speaking for high Chinese officials, wrote: “To take [Jinmen] at present . . . would isolate Taiwan and thus assist [U.S. Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles in his policy of building ‘two Chinas.’” (Strong, 1958.)

<sup>11</sup>For example, the *Hong Kong Standard* reported that “Jiang Zemin has ordered university officials to prevent students from staging protests over the Diaoyu islands row.” (“Jiang Issues Campus Gag Order on Diaoyu Islands,” 1996.) Similar reports appeared in the same newspaper on September 13, 16, and 18.

<sup>12</sup>Whether or not Mao initially intended to take the islands is irrelevant to this point: Even if he had never intended to take them, he had to reckon with the possible public perception of defeat when he did not.

Finally, the military balance may be more favorable to China than it has been in the past; in particular, U.S. military predominance over China will be less complete, given Chinese strategic nuclear weapons and incipient ocean surveillance and strike capabilities. Hence, China may feel that it can use greater levels of military force in putting pressure on Taiwan. Ultimately, if China were ever to believe that it could occupy Taiwan with speed and certainty, thereby presenting the United States with a *fait accompli*, the temptation to solve the reunification issue once and for all might be very great.

### U.S. Deterrence Strategy

**“Strategic Ambiguity.”** The current U.S. policy of “strategic ambiguity” is designed to deter Chinese use of force against Taiwan without committing the United States to react in any given case and without running the risk of encouraging the Taiwanese to take actions that the Chinese would see as provocative. It is meant to deter the Taiwanese as well as the Chinese, by leaving both in some doubt as to how the United States would react to any given situation.

While a posture of ambiguity thus reduces certain costs of pursuing a deterrence policy and enables one to achieve a degree of deterrence “on the cheap,” it also has potential drawbacks. Essentially, it pays for its advantages by creating a greater risk of miscalculation; the side to be deterred may take certain actions in the mistaken belief that the would-be deterrer will not react, thus perhaps resulting in an “accidental” war that would not have come about had the active side understood clearly the consequences of its actions.

Whatever the theoretical advantages and disadvantages of ambiguity, it would seem to be an inappropriate policy in the long run for deterring Chinese use of force against Taiwan. First, Chinese action against Taiwan may be triggered by events that the Chinese leadership sees as threatening to its core national goals, to say nothing of survival of the regime itself, i.e., events that seem to the Chinese leadership to point clearly toward a Taiwanese assertion of independence. In such a case, the impulse toward taking action will be strong. While ambiguity may be useful in preventing a side from taking actions that it sees as advantageous but not required (why risk serious trouble for something that is not necessary but would be merely nice to have?), it is less likely to prevent actions that a side

sees as necessary to protect core values or ensure survival (in which case the choice becomes one of possible trouble if one acts, as opposed to the certainty of serious problems if one does not).

Second, an ambiguous U.S. posture is likely to be interpreted in the light of overall U.S. policy. Thus, a U.S. policy of improving bilateral relations could easily lead China to believe that its freedom of action with respect to Taiwan had been tacitly expanded. In particular, if China were to believe that the United States, in the interest of good relations, had implicitly adopted a favorable stance toward “peaceful” reunification (e.g., by pressing Taiwan to accept “one country, two systems”), it might read a policy of strategic ambiguity as giving it freedom to use at least low levels of force to move reunification forward, to say nothing of opposing Taiwanese steps toward *de jure* independence.<sup>13</sup>

More generally, the more the United States appears to favor good relations with China, the more likely it is that China will interpret a policy of strategic ambiguity in a manner favorable to its freedom of action. Precisely because the United States may seem to have good reasons to want to avoid a conflict with China over Taiwan, the commitment to oppose the use of force against Taiwan must be made explicit. Indeed, the United States would be forced, in this circumstance, to follow the opposite policy, one of seeking ways of making its commitment less flexible and more difficult to “interpret away,” to make it clear to China that, even if the United States wanted to abandon Taiwan, the costs in terms of U.S. prestige and credibility would be too high to bear.<sup>14</sup>

As an alternative, the United States could adopt a more clear-cut policy with respect to Taiwan; such a policy would commit the United States to the defense of Taiwan against any Chinese use of

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<sup>13</sup>This dynamic may have contributed to the Chinese decision to conduct the military exercises of 1996; the Chinese may have been truly surprised by the level of the U.S. military reaction. Garver (1997), pp. 112–113, presents evidence that the Chinese leadership was in fact surprised by the U.S. reaction in 1996.

<sup>14</sup>The standard deterrence literature discusses at length various methods of enhancing deterrence by binding oneself irretrievably to a commitment, thereby making it very difficult or even impossible to wriggle out of it. The classic illustration of this is Herman Kahn’s instructions (noted above) for winning a game of “chicken”: Ostentatiously throw the steering wheel out the car window before the game begins.

force *unless* Taiwan was judged to have provoked the attack by declaring *de jure* independence, developing nuclear weapons, or taking one or more “provocative” steps, which would have to be spelled out in some detail. While the explicit statement of such a policy might be only that the guarantee would be withdrawn in case Taiwan behaved in a prohibited manner, it would be subject to the interpretation—which might or might not be a misinterpretation—that the United States would *not* defend Taiwan in such a case.

Such a policy would aim to deter Taiwan from taking one of the provocative steps and to deter China from using force against a Taiwan that had not. It would be less subject to Chinese misinterpretation at times when the United States is striving to improve Sino-U.S. relations or when the United States might appear to be less interested in events in East Asia. It would raise the cost to the United States (in terms of prestige and credibility) of not defending Taiwan; to the extent that the Chinese understood and believed this, they would have to take the possibility of a U.S. reaction to their use of force against Taiwan more seriously.

**Military Prerequisites.** To back up such a policy, the United States should take steps to demonstrate a military capability to counter Chinese uses of force against Taiwan. To the extent possible, a capability to deny the Chinese the ability to attain their military objectives would probably be the most effective deterrent. In particular, such a “blocking” capability would not be subject to a Chinese “counterdeterrent,” whereas the Chinese might believe they could inhibit U.S. retaliatory threats by posing threats of the “is Taiwan worth Los Angeles?” variety. Since ballistic missiles represent the main Chinese power-projection capability, as well as its main threat to U.S. assets in the theater, effective theater ballistic missile defense would be the primary means of supporting such an approach.<sup>15</sup>

Even when denial is impossible (as discussed above), the United States would need to demonstrate the military capability of counter-

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<sup>15</sup>Of course, providing Taiwan with an effective ballistic missile defense, even if possible, would presumably be seen by China as a hostile action. As discussed later, China might see actions aimed at negating China’s ability to use force against Taiwan as parts of an implicit or deliberate policy of prolonging Taiwan’s separate status indefinitely.

ing the political effect of any Chinese actions. The U.S. willingness to deploy two carrier battle groups near Taiwan during the 1996 crisis played an important role in countering the psychological effect of the Chinese military exercises. Preserving the capability to operate carriers close to Taiwan will be an important military prerequisite of a strong deterrence posture. In addition, demonstrating that the U.S. Air Force will be able to operate over and near Taiwan would be an important means of bolstering deterrence. The various means of doing this (permanent bases, creating the political preconditions for access during a crisis, longer-range fighter aircraft, etc.) have been investigated in other RAND publications. (See Khalilzad, 1999, pp. 77–83, and Stillion and Orletsky, 1999, Chs. 4 and 5.)

Finally, a retaliatory capability remains important. The key point here would be strengthening its credibility in the face of a Chinese counterdeterrence strategy. This is not, strictly speaking, a military issue, although there may be military components.<sup>16</sup> U.S. declaratory policy concerning, for example, which Chinese targets would be considered tactical if force were used against Taiwan (e.g., the ports, air bases, and missile bases from which the attack against Taiwan was launched) could begin the process of creating perceptual “thresholds” between limited homeland attacks and all-out exchanges. Similarly, U.S. policy could suggest an equation between aircraft carriers and air bases.

**Fundamental U.S. Policy Issues.** As this short discussion makes clear, questions of deterrence must be addressed in the context of fundamental U.S. policy issues regarding Taiwan. Most fundamentally, the United States would have to decide on the relative importance of strengthening deterrence and of pursuing better relations with China. This would directly affect the possibility of abandoning strategic ambiguity in favor of a clearer statement of intent: A clearer policy would make China face the fact that the United States intended to deter Chinese use of force against Taiwan. A corollary of Jiang’s statement (at the beginning of this section) would be that successful U.S. deterrence of Chinese use of force against Taiwan

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<sup>16</sup>For example, the stationing of Pershing IIs and ground-launched cruise missiles in Western Europe in the early 1980s served the primarily political purpose of enhancing the “coupling” between Western Europe and the United States in the face of Soviet strategic nuclear power.

implies the impossibility of “peaceful” reunification. Hence, the United States would either have to allow the Chinese perception that the United States favored indefinite separation to stand or have to take positive steps to promote peaceful reunification.

At the same time, a clearer policy would presumably state some circumstances (at least, an outright declaration of independence) under which the United States would not commit itself to the defense of Taiwan. The Chinese might well interpret this to mean that the United States would *not* defend Taiwan in such a situation. While it may be in the interest of the United States to try to deter Taiwan from taking such provocative actions, it is not clear whether, once Taiwan had done so, the United States would want to abandon it to its fate. Until such a decision had been taken, it might prove impossible to craft a clearer policy than the current one.

Similar considerations would affect the narrower decisions regarding the military steps that could be taken to strengthen deterrence. Any step taken to strengthen deterrence (especially those that involved basing forces on Taiwan or transferring weapons to it) could also be read in Beijing as a step toward an eventual policy of support for indefinite *de facto* or eventual *de jure* independence for Taiwan.

### **ROLE OF DETERRENCE IN A FUTURE SINO-U.S. RELATIONSHIP**

Deterrence theory assumes a certain transparency of intent and capability. In principle, the party to be deterred should be able to calculate the deterrer’s willingness to use force and capability to do so with some degree of accuracy, to determine whether or not the deteree should proceed with its desired course of action. In fact, in many historical cases, the reality was quite different; the motives of the parties were opaque, and the strength of their military capabilities was misestimated, often wildly so.

### **NONMILITARY TYPES OF DETERRENCE**

Unless Sino-U.S. relations deteriorate to Cold War–like levels, it would seem that nuclear deterrence will have little role to play in handling the types of conflict scenarios that might arise. If this is so, the record suggests that deterrence at a lower level may be difficult to

manage. Indeed, depending on the circumstances, China may see low-level tension as being in its interest.<sup>17</sup>

This poses a difficult but not insurmountable challenge to U.S. policymakers. The key may be to seek nonmilitary means of deterrence, i.e., diplomatic ways to manipulate the tension to China's disadvantage. For example, one interpretation of the Chinese decision to wind down the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis was that Mao feared that the United States was using the crisis to persuade Chiang Kai-shek to withdraw his troops from the offshore islands, once that could be done in a way that did not look like giving in to Chinese pressure. By thus breaking this link between Taiwan and the mainland, the United States would be promoting a "two China" policy (which Mao feared was the true U.S. goal). So, the crisis could have led to a result very disadvantageous to China; although Mao would have probably been happy to take the offshore islands in a context that humiliated the KMT and the United States, receiving them as a "gift" would be an entirely different matter:

Available data from August [1958] do not demonstrate that Mao was concerned about the negative repercussions of recovering the islands at the very beginning of the crisis, but Chinese actions and statements show that such concerns were paramount in September and October. A KMT retreat from Quemoy and Matsu would move the Civil War enemy much further (100 miles) from the mainland, making it harder to attack in the future. . . . the delinkage of Taiwan from the mainland would only further the cause of Taiwanese separatism. (Christensen, 1996, p. 231.)

In future crises, China will have to be concerned that its threat or use of force will encourage neighboring states to see her as an emerging

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<sup>17</sup>A major question, which cannot be addressed here, would concern how China would see such tension affecting its economic development. If China believes that its economic development no longer requires close trade and financial relations with the United States or believes that such ties could survive heightened political-military tension, the way would be open to the use of "demonstrative" force, as in the past. On the other hand, if China believes that political-military tension would create serious economic disadvantages, this would be an important restraint. However, China's economic integration into the world also creates strong economic interests in the United States, which would be hurt by Sino-U.S. tension; hence, China might believe that the prospect of such tension would bring strong domestic pressure to bear on the U.S. government to take whatever steps might be necessary to avoid tension.

strategic threat against which they must band together. Following Chinese actions at Mischief Reef in 1995, for example, the states making up the Association of Southeast Asia Nations drew somewhat closer together in support of the Philippines, one of the members. (Valencia, 1995, pp. 42–43, 45, 48–49.) This type of regional reaction, encouraged and supported by the United States, may be the best deterrent to Chinese use of force in the region.