The PRC has at best a mixed record with respect to deterrence attempts in its nearly 50-year history. Although it is hard at times to determine what should count as a deterrence attempt (and, on occasion, it is difficult to know what should count as success), the Chinese have not in general been very successful in deterring actions they regarded as inimical to their interests.

However, it should be noted from the outset that, in most cases, China was trying to deter either a stronger country (the United States or the Soviet Union) or a country closely allied to such a power. The only clear exception to this was the unsuccessful Chinese attempt to deter incursions into disputed border areas by the militarily weaker Indians in the fall of 1962. Even in this instance, however, China was at the time suffering from the consequences of the economically disastrous “Great Leap Forward.”

The more important question is, however, whether the PRC leadership understood itself as engaging in deterrence in the sense in which U.S. analysts and practitioners understand the term. As will appear from many of these examples, Chinese military postures and actions have often been structured to favor achieving surprise (and the psychological shock it can produce) rather than enhancing the effectiveness of deterrence. The Chinese concept of deterrence, if one may be spoken of, seems to depend more on the cumulative effect of past actions than on specific threats about the future: By using military force to “teach a lesson” to an adversary, one makes it...

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1See Burles and Shulsky (2000) for a discussion of this point.
more likely that he will think twice before acting against one’s interests in the future.

Thus, these examples cover cases that, in terms of U.S. strategic thinking, would seem to call for attempts at deterrence; whether one ought to characterize the Chinese behavior in such a way is less clear.

FAILURES

U.S. and UN Troops Cross the 38th Parallel and Advance to the Yalu (Fall 1950)

Thanks to research using recently available internal Chinese documents, we can have a better understanding of the Chinese reaction to the UN victories in Korea in September through November 1950. This helps round out the picture of the multiple failures of deterrence that occurred during that period.

As far as can be determined from the historical record, it appears that, with respect to the crossing of the 38th parallel, the United States was eminently deterrable. Despite earlier statements that implied that the UN goal was the reunification of Korea by force of arms, such as that of the U.S. representative to the UN Security Council on August 17, President Truman approved, in mid-September 1950, a National Security Council recommendation that

General MacArthur was to conduct the necessary military operations either to force the North Koreans behind the 38th parallel or to destroy their forces. If there was no indication or threat of entry of

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2By referring to these cases as “failures” of Chinese deterrence, I mean only that they are cases in which China’s adversary actually did what China wished it would not have. I do not mean to imply that the “blame” for this should be attributed to Chinese policymakers who made “mistakes” that wiser officials would have avoided; in some cases, any “mistakes” that were made might just as easily be laid at the doorstep of the adversary’s policymakers. For example, the Chinese intervention in the Korean War is often categorized as an intelligence (rather than a deterrence) failure; such an analysis implies that the real “mistake” was the failure of the United States to be deterred rather than the failure of the Chinese to deter.

3Christensen (1992) demonstrates the importance of this new evidence for assessing Mao’s Korean War strategy. The discussion in the text draws heavily from this article and from Christensen’s 1996 book.

4Whiting (1960), p. 78, speaks of the speech’s “seeming insistence upon total North Korean defeat as the minimal condition for terminating hostilities.”
Soviet or Chinese Communist elements in force, the National Security Council recommended that General MacArthur was to extend his operations north of the parallel and to make plans for the occupation of North Korea. However, no ground operations were to take place north of the 38th parallel in the event of Soviet or Chinese Communist entry. (Truman, 1956, p. 359.)

At the end of the month, according to Truman’s memoirs,

I had already given approval to new instructions which the Joint Chiefs of Staff had transmitted to MacArthur on September 27, in which he was told that his military objective was “the destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces.” In attaining this objective he was authorized to conduct military operations north of the 38th parallel in Korea, provided that at the time of such operation there had been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, and no threat by Russian or Chinese Communists to counter our military operations in North Korea. (Truman, 1956, p. 360.)

Thus, as late as the end of September 1950, a credible threat of Chinese intervention could well have prevented U.S. troops from crossing the 38th parallel (although South Korean troops might have moved north on their own). Things changed very quickly, however. On October 1, MacArthur publicly called on North Korea to surrender, and South Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel; U.S. troops followed on October 7.

On the night of October 2–3, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai called in the Indian ambassador to Beijing, K. M. Panikkar. Panikkar was to tell the United States that if its troops crossed the 38th parallel, China would enter the war. The choice of messenger was unfortunate. According to Truman’s memoirs, Panikkar “had in the past played the game of the Chinese Communists fairly regularly, so that his statement could not be taken as that of an impartial observer.” (Truman, 1956, p. 362.) In other words, Panikkar’s warning was discounted because of his political sympathies; the Chinese message was considered to be a bluff rather than a serious warning.

Of course, more was at work than merely the unfortunate choice of a messenger. MacArthur’s brilliant victory with respect to the landing at Inchon on September 15, and the subsequent collapse of the North Korean forces, raised hopes that the Korean problem could be solved once and for all, thereby avoiding the need for a continuing
deployment of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula. China was regarded as militarily too weak to intervene effectively in any case. There was a subtle change in MacArthur’s orders:

Hereafter in the event of open or covert employment anywhere in Korea of major Chinese Communist units, without prior announcement, you should continue the action as long as, in your judgment, action by forces now under your control offers a reasonable chance of success. (Truman, 1956, p. 362.5)

Mere Chinese intervention (to say nothing of the threat of it) would no longer be sufficient to prevent U.S. troops from operating north of the 38th parallel. Instead, it was left to MacArthur’s judgment whether the Chinese forces posed a threat to the accomplishment of his mission. Unstated, but implied in these orders, would appear to be the assumption that, if a potentially successful Chinese intervention were to be set in motion, it would be recognized in time to allow MacArthur to withdraw gracefully.

In the event, this was not the case. Following initial contact with UN forces at the end of October and the beginning of November, the Chinese forces disengaged on November 8. This reduced the sense of crisis, thereby making Washington less inclined to restrain MacArthur’s advance northward or to question his risky decision to divide his forces as they reached the Yalu. MacArthur began his “final” offensive on November 24, which ended in disaster when Chinese forces intervened massively over the next several days.

The mid-November disengagement, and the generally stealthy way in which the Chinese introduced their forces into Korea, has seemed puzzling to American observers who believed that the Chinese wished, or should have wished, to deter U.S. troops from attempting to occupy all of North Korea. As viewed by Thomas Schelling,

It is not easy to explain why the Chinese entered North Korea so secretly and so suddenly. Had they wanted to stop the United Nations at the level, say, of Pyongyang, to protect their own border and territory, a conspicuous early entry in force might have found the UN Command content with its accomplishments and in no mood to fight a second war, against Chinese armies, for the remainder of

5This instruction would have been given in early October.
Korea. They chose instead to launch a surprise attack, with stunning tactical advantages but no prospect of deterrence. (Schelling, 1966, p. 55; emphasis added.)

Of course, this puzzle disappears if one assumes that the Chinese were no longer interested in deterrence but wished instead to maximize the probability that their intervention would succeed in driving the UN forces off the Korean peninsula. As Christensen’s recent work has shown, the key determinant of the Chinese decision to intervene was the crossing by the UN forces of the 38th parallel. Once that happened, Mao was determined to attack in the hope of pushing the United States off the peninsula and avoiding a situation in which the basing of U.S. troops in both Korea and Taiwan would raise the specter of a “two front” attack on China. Thus, based on the contemporaneous Chinese record, it appears that the internal U.S. debate about whether to stop at the “narrow neck” of Korea or go all the way to the Yalu was beside the point. Similarly, U.S. attempts to reassure China that it would neither conduct military activities on the other side of the Yalu nor interfere with Chinese hydroelectric plants on it were similarly irrelevant. (See Whiting, 1960, pp. 151–152.)

If Christensen is right,⁶ there was no Chinese attempt to deter the United States from advancing all the way to the Yalu and hence no second deterrence “failure.” Having decided to intervene, the Chinese interest lay in making their initial attack as successful as possible. The key requirements for this were, first, American overextension and overconfidence and, second, surprise.

⁶Whiting (1960), p. 117, takes a similar view, although he also attributes to the Chinese leadership a desire “to maintain flexibility in case there were a softening of U.S. policy.” Whiting describes the other Chinese motives as follows:

Once the Chinese had ordered their units into action, it was necessary to preserve tactical surprise, as far as this was possible after the warnings of the political phase. It was also desirable, no doubt, to conceal military movements so as to reduce the likelihood of a United States counterblow in the deployment stage. . . .

According to Christensen’s analysis, the Chinese did not see any prospect of such an occurrence. In any case, Whiting (1960), p. 114, agrees that

[i]the timing and nature of the Chinese Communist reaction [to Soviet attempts at the UN to prevent U.S. troops from crossing the 38th parallel] bear out the hypothesis that the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel was the final contingency determining Peking’s entry into the war.
General MacArthur provided the first ingredient in full measure. According to President Truman’s account of his Wake Island meeting with MacArthur on October 15,

He [MacArthur] thought, he said, that there was very little chance that they [the Chinese] would come in. At the most they might be able to get fifty or sixty thousand men into Korea, but, since they had no air force, “if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang, there would be the greatest slaughter.” (Truman, 1956, p. 366.)

This is some evidence that the Chinese were aware of his overconfidence and took steps (such as releasing the Americans captured in the first skirmishes) to encourage this misestimate:

On November 18, 1950, one week before MacArthur’s offensive, Mao sent a telegram to [Marshal] Peng [Dehuai] celebrating the American misperception of China’s troop strength. Mao knew that MacArthur falsely believed Chinese forces in Korea to consist of only 60,000 or 70,000 troops, when actually there were at least 260,000. Mao told Peng that this was to China’s advantage and would assist Chinese forces in destroying “tens of thousands” of enemy troops. In the same telegram, Mao instructed Peng to release prisoners of war.7

Marshall Peng later claimed that the release of UN prisoners was designed to encourage MacArthur’s further advance northward. (Christensen, 1996, p. 171.) According to Peng,

First, though we achieved success in the first offensive operation, the enemy’s main force remained intact. With the main body of the CPV [Chinese People’s Volunteers] unexposed, it was expected that the enemy would continue to stage an offensive. Second, the enemy had boasted the ability of its air force to cut off our communication and food supply. This gave us an opportunity to deceive the enemy about our intention. By releasing some POWs, we could give the enemy the impression that we are in short supply and are retreating. Thirdly, the enemy is equipped with air and tank cover,

so it would be difficult for us to wipe out the retreating enemy on foot.\(^8\)

The result was that the Chinese achieved tactical surprise and an overwhelming victory against the very badly positioned U.S. forces.\(^9\)

The Chinese attack illustrates the doctrine of the classic Chinese strategist, Sun Zi (Ch.1, Vs. 17–18, 23, 26–27):

> All warfare is based on deception.

> Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity.

> ... Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance. ... Attack where he is unprepared; sally out when he does not expect you.

> These are the strategist’s keys to victory. It is not possible to discuss them beforehand.

As Schelling notes, this approach to warfare may produce surprise, but not deterrence.

**U.S. Concludes an Alliance with Taiwan (1954–1955)\(^{10}\)**

On September 3, 1954, the Chinese PLA began an artillery bombardment of Republic of China (ROC)–held Jinmen island. The U.S. response included the alerting of the Pacific Fleet and the eventual signing, on December 5, of a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan. On January 19, 1955, PRC forces occupied the Yijiangshan Islands, which lie along the Chinese coast several hundred miles north of Taiwan, on the outskirts of the Dachen island group. Soon after, the ROC withdrew from the rest of the Dachens. The Chinese shelling of Jinmen island continued into the spring of 1955.

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\(^9\) As noted, this interpretation relies heavily on Christensen (1996). An alternative interpretation would be that the initial intervention was truly tentative in nature; only when it achieved success did the Chinese decide to intervene in a major way and seek to inflict a significant defeat on the U.S./UN forces.

\(^{10}\) This account draws heavily on Zhang (1992), pp. 189–224.
The origins of the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–1955 may be sought in China’s attempt, following the end of the Korean War, to remove what it saw as the threat to itself arising from U.S. military ties to the KMT government in Taiwan. On July 23, 1954, as Premier Zhou Enlai was returning from the Geneva conference on Indochina, Chairman Mao Zedong sent him the following message:

In order to break up the collaboration between the United States and Chiang Kai-shek, and keep them from joining together militarily and politically, we must announce to our country and to the world the slogan of liberating Taiwan. It was improper of us not to raise this slogan in a timely manner after the cease-fire in Korea. If we were to continue dragging our heels now, we would be making a serious political mistake. (Zhang, 1992, p. 193.)

In essence, China attributed to the United States a “three front” strategy: The United States sought to exert military pressure on China from Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan. By mid-1954, the first two “fronts” had been dealt with. What remained was to try to do something about the potential third “front.” (Zhang, 1992, p. 189.) In addition, China may have feared that a formal U.S.-Taiwan alliance was an obvious next step following the formation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the signing of a mutual defense treaty with South Korea.

Mao’s concerns were in line with the advice of Sun Zi (Ch. 3, Vs. 4–7):

Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy.

Next best is to disrupt his alliances.

The next best is to attack his army.

The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities only when there is no alternative.

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11 Zhang cites an unpublished paper by He Di, a member of the Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. See also He (1990), pp. 222–245.

12 This is the interpretation put forward by He Di (1990), pp. 224–225:

With the signing both of a mutual defence treaty with South Korea and the protocol creating the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization the U.S. government entered into negotiations with the Kuomintang to form a mutual defense treaty—the last link in the ring of encirclement of China.
Mao thus sought to disrupt what he took to be the strategy and alliances of the United States. In fact, both President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles had been reluctant to conclude a mutual security treaty with Taiwan. Eisenhower thought that such a treaty would be “too big a commitment of U.S. prestige and forces.” 13 In any case, there was no enthusiasm for any guarantee that would extend to the offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu, which were seen as essentially indefensible. Furthermore, the administration believed that public and allied support for military action in defense of the offshore islands would be hard to obtain.

Nevertheless, U.S. policy shifted toward a treaty with Taiwan, which was concluded on December 5. A key question was whether the U.S. commitment would extend to the offshore islands; this was left ambiguous in the treaty. The subsequent Formosa Resolution, passed by Congress on January 28, 1955, took a step in the direction of extending the commitment: It authorized the president to deploy armed forces to protect the offshore islands if he judged that an attack on them was part of an attack on Taiwan. 14

Following the seizure of the Dachen islands, the Eisenhower administration’s fears concerning Chinese intentions with respect to Jinmen and Mazu led to an attempt to threaten the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. 15 Whether for this reason or because the Chinese leadership saw no more advantage in prolonging the crisis, China expressed, in April 1955, an interest in reducing tension in the area.

Although a Chinese scholar has claimed that the crisis “advance[d] Chinese foreign policy interests in several ways,” 16 Christensen’s

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14 Hinton (1966), p. 262, suggests that this proviso was insignificant, since Chinese rhetoric always spoke in terms of “liberating” Taiwan.
15 This point is dealt with in Chapter Three in connection with the discussion of U.S. deterrence efforts with respect to the offshore islands.
16 He (1990), pp. 230–231, who cites the following gains achieved by China from the crisis:

  First, by opening up a new channel [the Sino-U.S. ambassadorial talks in Warsaw] for dealing directly with the United States, the crisis led to the creation of an important new diplomatic venue for PRC participation in world affairs. Second, the crisis provided Chinese leaders with valuable experience in the design and execution of limited
evaluation of the incident neatly sums up the deterrence failure with respect to the principal objective, as described in the Mao-Zhou message cited above:

The motivations of Mao’s 1954 attack on the offshore islands are fairly clear and have been explored in detail both in the United States and in China: Mao hoped that by attacking in the straits he could dissuade the United States from including Taiwan in new multilateral defense arrangements in Southeast Asia (specifically, SEATO, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). The attack was essentially a test of American resolve toward the defense of Taiwan. Mao was warning that any nation signing a defense pact with Taiwan ran the risk of war with Beijing. Mao’s attempt backfired. If anything, the attack caused Eisenhower and Dulles to make a clearer and earlier commitment to Taiwan’s security than they otherwise would have preferred. (Christensen, 1996, p. 195.)

India Conducts Its “Forward Policy” in Aksai Chin and Eastern Tibet (1959–1962)\(^\text{17}\)

Conflicting Indian and Chinese border claims, and Indian insistence on establishing border posts in disputed areas (India’s “forward policy”), led to fighting between the two countries in 1962. The border dispute centered on two areas: In the west, India claimed, but did not control, the Aksai Chin, a plateau adjacent to the Indian-held part of Kashmir and lying between Tibet and Xinjiang. This area has strategic significance for China because an important road from Xinjiang to Tibet passes through it. In the east, China claimed, but did not control, a strip of territory south of the McMahon Line dividing the northeastern Indian state of Assam from Tibet (between Bhutan and Burma).\(^\text{18}\) Generally speaking, the McMahon Line runs

\(^{17}\)This section draws heavily on Maxwell (1970) and Liu (1994), Ch. 2.
\(^{18}\)The McMahon Line was negotiated in 1914 between British officials in India and Tibetan authorities; China claimed that it never recognized as valid any bilateral
along the crest of the Assam Himalayas, while the Chinese claim line runs along the lower edge of the foothills.\(^{19}\) As part of the forward policy, the Indians had established outposts in disputed areas in the west and along the McMahon Line; in some cases, the outposts were north of the line as it had been originally drawn.\(^ {20}\)

On October 20, 1962, the Chinese launched major attacks, which succeeded immediately, in both the eastern and western sectors; in the former, they pushed the Indians out of the territory north of the McMahon Line (as the Chinese understood it); in the latter, they destroyed most of the Indian outposts in the disputed territory.

After a short pause, the Chinese renewed their attacks in mid-November (in one case, an Indian offensive action planned for November 14 failed, leading to a successful counterattack); by November 20, no organized Indian units remained in the entire disputed territory south of the McMahon Line. The rout of the Indian troops left the Chinese poised to strike southward into the Indian state of Assam. The Chinese military victory was complete. At this point, the Chinese announced a unilateral cease-fire and withdrew to positions 20 km behind the line of actual control of November 7, 1959. They “reserved the right to strike back” if the Indian armed forces did not remain 20 km back of the line of actual control as well. The Indian army ordered its soldiers to observe the cease-fire, but, at the political level, India remained noncommittal (Maxwell, 1970, pp. 417–421); the Indians abandoned their forward policy, and the conflict abated.

Given the one-sided result of the fighting, the Chinese failure, prior to October 1962, to deter India from pursuing its forward policy (or, after the first clashes in October 1962, to compel India to abandon it) is puzzling. In the western sector (the Aksai Chin plateau), the Indians realized that their own forces were outnumbered by the Chinese; in addition, their logistics capabilities were so poor that

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19 There was also a much-less-important third area where overlapping claims existed (the “middle sector”), between Aksai Chin and Nepal.

20 The Indians made these adjustments to the line unilaterally, to have it follow topographic features, such as ridge lines.
most posts had to be supplied by airdrop, which meant that they had to stick to the valley floors, while the Chinese could take up dominating positions on higher ground. All in all, the forward policy was extremely risky for the troops involved, as Indian Prime Minister Nehru admitted to the parliament:

> We built a kind of rampart on this part of Ladakh [the Aksai Chin] and put up numerous military posts, small ones and big ones. . . . It is true that these posts are in constant danger of attack with larger numbers. Well, it does not matter. We have taken the risk and we have moved forward, and we have effectively stopped their further forward march. . . . If [the Chinese] want to they can overwhelm some of our military posts. That does not mean we are defeated. We shall face them with much greater problems and face them much more stoutly.\(^{21}\)

Despite this recognition of the inherent risk involved, the basic belief that the Chinese would not attack the weaker Indian positions held firm. Similarly, in the east, the Indians suffered significant disadvantages in terms of logistics and mobility, although it is less clear how aware they were of them.\(^{22}\) At various points, the Indian political leadership asserted that conditions in the east were militarily favorable to them, although the military leadership understood the precarious situation of some of its advanced positions.

The key point, however, is that the Indians were convinced that the Chinese would not attack. Throughout the period, even after their initial defeats in October, the Indians did not believe that the Chinese would launch a massive attack on them.

During the months before the conflict, China issued a series of warnings, both diplomatic notes and public statements, attacking the Indian forward policy. Nevertheless, the tone was often relatively restrained. For example, the Chinese, in a diplomatic note dated June 2, 1962, after accusing the Indians of seeking “to provoke bloody conflicts, occupy China’s territory and change the status quo of the


\(^{22}\)For example, at a key point along the McMahon Line, the Indian positions were five days' march from the nearest road, while the Chinese, based on the Tibetan plateau, had an all-weather road that extended to within three hours' march of their position.
boundary regardless of consequences," nevertheless concluded as follows:

The Chinese government consistently stands for a peaceful settlement of the Sino-Indian boundary question through negotiations. Even now when the Sino-Indian border situation has become so tense owing to Indian aggression and provocation, the door for negotiations is still open so far as the Chinese side concerned [sic]. However, China will never submit before any threat of force.23

Other notes warned that “India will be held responsible for all the consequences” arising from its intrusions; but this was coupled with an assertion that the Chinese government strove "to avoid clashes with intruding Indian troops."24 The Indians may have regarded this verbal posture as not particularly threatening; it seemed to imply only that the Chinese would fight back if attacked. Thus, the Indians may have believed that, as long as their forces did not initiate conflict with the Chinese, the forward policy could continue as a form of shadow boxing, with each side maneuvering its patrols to gain positional advantage, but without actually coming to blows.

Perhaps more importantly, Chinese behavior was restrained as well. The Indian forward policy inevitably led to situations in which units of the two armies confronted each other in close proximity. In two instances, in May and July 1962, Chinese troops adopted threatening postures with respect to newly implanted Indian posts; in the latter case, they surrounded an Indian post and blocked an attempt to resupply it by land, forcing it to rely on airdrops. Nevertheless, in both cases, the Chinese did not follow through on their implicit threats and refrained from actually attacking the posts. This served to confirm, for the Indians, the wisdom of the forward policy: If the Indians were resolute, the Chinese would not use force to interfere with their strategy of creating a network of new posts. (Maxwell, 1970, p. 239.)

China’s pause between its initial victories in October and its all-out offensive in mid-November may also have served to give the Indians an unfounded confidence in their assessment of Chinese inten-

tions. During the “pause,” Chinese troops infiltrated India’s Northeast Frontier Agency by means of a side trail, outflanking the new Indian defensive position established after the initial reverse. But if, for the Chinese, the pause presented the opportunity to regroup and infiltrate troops behind the main Indian positions, the Indians appeared to interpret it as a sign that the Chinese would not, or could not, pursue their attack any further. At the same time, the Indians held an exaggerated view of their own strength, believing that they were now able to resist any Chinese attack.26

Underlying this Indian confidence was a perception of Chinese weakness, caused in part by the failure of the Great Leap Forward, which eventuated in the great famine of the early 1960s. This man-made disaster, compounded by difficult weather conditions, is estimated to have cost the lives of 30 million Chinese. No doubt, the Indian leadership believed that a weakened China was in no position to risk war, especially with a country that was, in global geopolitical terms, generally friendly.27

On the other hand, the Chinese leadership probably drew a different conclusion from their domestic troubles, i.e., that India was deliberately trying to take advantage of them, and thus that its forward policy was even more dangerous than might appear on the surface. In Allen Whiting’s view,

Ironically New Delhi and Peking shared a common assessment of China’s weakness; however, where Indian logic argued this would prevent the PLA from fighting, Chinese logic saw it as compelling strong action. New Delhi and Peking also agreed on Indian weakness, but here New Delhi assumed this obviously made its behavior harmless, although Peking saw it as necessitating some larger, hidden design, aided and abetted from outside. (Whiting, 1975, p. 169.)

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25This is similar to what occurred in Korea in November 1950.

26For example, on November 12, Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri claimed that "India was now strong enough to repulse the Chinese attackers and was building its military might to drive the invaders from Indian soil." (Maxwell, 1970, p. 387.)

27For example, India had always been a major supporter of PRC membership in the United Nations; in the mid-1950s, Sino-Indian friendship became a major foreign policy principle for both governments.
Although India thought it was only vindicating its territorial claims, China may have interpreted its behavior as being part of a more complex and sinister plot. Precisely because India was behaving in such a reckless fashion, China may have suspected that it was merely the spearhead of a much more dangerous anti-Chinese combination, perhaps involving Taiwan, the United States, and the Soviet Union (which, except at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, had tended to “tilt” toward India). As Whiting summarizes,

Paradoxically, while India maintained a benign misconception, China held a malevolent one, firm in the belief that persistent advances behind PLA outposts represented at least New Delhi’s aggressive design and most probably collusion with Moscow or Washington or both. (Whiting, 1975, p. 168.)

From this perspective, it is possible to deduce a reason China did not attempt to deter India in a more explicit and threatening fashion. Conceiving of Indian policy as being more aggressive, purposeful, and settled than it in fact was, China would have concluded that threats could not be an adequate deterrent; surely India would have already discounted them. Only forceful action, producing a psychological shock for which India was not prepared, could cause the Indian leadership to change course.

**Vietnam Invades Cambodia (1978–1979)**

Traditional tensions between China and Vietnam, which were suppressed during the Vietnam War, began to reemerge in 1974 as the North Vietnamese victory approached. That January, the Chinese seized the South Vietnamese–held islands of the Paracel (Xisha) group, which were claimed by China and both Vietnamese governments. The timing was propitious: The United States was disengaging from the region (and in any case was more concerned about pursuing its rapprochemenwith China); Saigon had bigger problems to deal with; and Hanoi was not yet in a position to challenge China, from whom it was still receiving some support for its war effort.

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28 This section draws heavily on Ross (1988).
In addition, there were incidents on the contested land border between China and North Vietnam. China proposed negotiations on this issue in spring 1975, as the war was coming to a close, but North Vietnam rejected the offer, reportedly replying that it “had a lot of work to do in view of the developments in the liberation of South Vietnam.” (Ross, 1988, p. 37.)

After Hanoi’s victory in 1975, the key issue in Chinese-Vietnamese relations became the nature and extent of the tie between Vietnam and the Soviet Union; from China’s perspective, Vietnam’s desire to be a “regional hegemon” in Indochina led to a relationship with the Soviet Union that was too close for China’s comfort. By 1978, additional issues between Vietnam and China included, aside from the border, Vietnamese mistreatment of Chinese nationals in Vietnam (the Chinese were disproportionately hurt by the suppression of the private economy in South Vietnam) and the impending Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and overthrow of the (Chinese-supported) Khmer Rouge.

The Vietnamese concluded a “Friendship and Cooperation Treaty” with the Soviet Union on November 3, 1978, and invaded Cambodia on December 25, 1978. Given the subsequent Chinese reaction—China launched a limited invasion of Vietnam on February 17, 1979—the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia could be seen as a failure of Chinese deterrence. The Chinese invasion similarly “failed” to compel Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia, which did not occur until years later, after Vietnam’s Soviet ties had become irrelevant.29

The Chinese issued a series of strong warning statements to Vietnam in 1978. The warnings, however, tended to be somewhat ambiguous about exactly what action the Chinese were trying to deter, assuming

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29As noted above, it is often unclear, in a case of this sort, whether the Chinese leadership believed itself to be engaged in deterrence, i.e., whether it took the steps it did with the expectation that the target of those steps (in this case, Vietnam) might, as a result, refrain from doing something China wished it not to do (in this case, invade Cambodia). It is equally possible that the warnings related in the text were designed primarily to prepare domestic and foreign opinion for an intended Chinese invasion of Vietnam and that the Chinese leadership had no real expectation that it could deter Vietnam. Pollack (1984), p. 37, takes the latter view, stressing that “[t]he Chinese apparently regarded a forceful response to the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea as an immediate necessity.”
that was their purpose. For example, on November 10, 1978, the *People’s Daily* carried an editorial, which read in part:

> Under the support and direction of the Soviet Union, [the leaders in Hanoi] have made incessant provocations along the Sino-Vietnamese border and nibbled away at Chinese territory following their wanton anti-China and anti-Chinese activities over the Chinese nationals question.

> The Vietnamese authorities have gone farther and farther down the anti-China road by escalating from persecution of and ostracism against Chinese residents to the creation of incidents against the Sino-Vietnamese border.

> Both the Soviet Union and Vietnam regard China as the biggest hindrance to the implementation of their designs of hegemonism and regional hegemonism. It is by no means accidental that the Vietnamese authorities engineered the incident on the Sino-Vietnamese border on the eve of their intensified aggression on Kampuchea and conclusion of a military alliance with the Soviet Union.

> We sternly warn the Vietnamese authorities: Draw back your criminal hand stretched to Chinese territory and stop the provocation and intrusion along the Chinese-Vietnamese border.

> The Vietnamese authorities had better not turn a deaf ear to China’s warning. 

Thus, the statement explicitly warned Vietnam only against further border incidents; to the extent that it conveyed a deterrent threat, it would appear the Vietnamese actions to be deterred were the “provocation(s) and intrusion(s) along the Chinese-Vietnamese border.” However, the statement linked this unacceptable border activity (by means of the well-known locution “it is by no means accidental that”) to Vietnam’s treaty with the Soviet Union and its intervention in Cambodia, which were presumably China’s real concerns.

Months later, and only a week before the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, China’s rhetorical emphasis remained on the border dis-

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pute. For example, on February 10, 1979, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivered a note to Vietnam, which listed a series of border incidents and then concluded:

The Chinese Government hereby expresses its utmost indignation at the above new crimes committed by the Vietnamese authorities. . . . The Vietnamese authorities must stop their military provocations against China; otherwise they must be held responsible for all the consequences arising therefrom.31

Not only did China’s statements not specify the actions with which it was primarily concerned, but China does not appear to have made any attempt to escalate the vehemence of its warnings so as to indicate the imminence of its invasion. (Segal, 1985, p. 213.) Indeed, it appears that, despite its warnings, China was able to achieve some measure of tactical surprise.32

However, the major reason Vietnam was able to shrug off these warnings was probably that it was confident that its own strength, backed by the support of the Soviet Union, if required, would be sufficient to handle any Chinese military challenge. As discussed in Chapter Three, China was quite aware of the limitations the Vietnamese-Soviet alliance imposed on its military freedom of action. To succeed, China had to achieve a major victory quickly, before Soviet military capabilities could be brought to bear; only by means of such a psychological shock could China hope to secure a political change in Hanoi. This China was unable to do.

**SUCCESSES**

As opposed to these four more or less clear examples of cases in which Chinese adversaries took steps China had wished to prevent, Chinese deterrence successes are harder to affirm with certainty. This section discusses three possible candidates:

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31Perhaps because this was an official government note, it did not mention the other sources of Chinese concerns; in particular, it was silent on the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, which had already succeeded in toppling the Khmer Rouge regime. Xinhua—English, Beijing. 1639 GMT February 10, 1979 in FBIS-CHI, February 12, 1979, pp. A6–A7.

32The evidence for this is that most of the Vietnamese leadership was away from Hanoi on February 17, when the actual invasion began. (Segal, 1985, p. 215.)
Chinese “Deterrence” Attempts: Failures and Successes

- U.S. ground troops stay out of North Vietnam.
- Taiwan scales back campaign to bolster diplomatic status (1996).

In each case, one could question whether the label “success” is justified: One could argue that the first case involved U.S. self-deterrence and that the second involved a situation in which the Soviet Union did not intend to attack China in any case; and the third had an ambiguous result in which China did not get much of what it wanted.

**U.S. Ground Troops Stay Out of North Vietnam**

The record is fairly clear that U.S. decisionmakers were very aware of the Korean War experience as they planned U.S. strategy at the beginning of the Vietnam War. As one observer has noted, if one set of lessons from Korea dealt with the importance of making clear commitments and countering aggression, another lesson had to do with the costs of provoking China in the process:

That Lyndon Johnson and his civilian advisors were mindful of China is not controversial. In fact, one of the things about which there is a strong consensus among Johnson’s former military and civilian advisors is that this last lesson of Korea, the specter of Chinese intervention, constrained American strategy in Vietnam decisively. If the other five lessons of Korea suggested that the United States ought to intervene and win in Vietnam, this sixth lesson reminded the policymakers of the necessity of avoiding another war with China. . . . Looked at this way, the stakes of avoiding war with China were as high, if not higher than, the stakes in Vietnam. (Khong, 1992, pp. 136–137.)

If this is so, Chinese intervention in the Korean War served a deterrent purpose in Vietnam; it helped restrain the United States from sending ground troops into North Vietnam and, especially in the early part of the war, helped maintain a sanctuary from aerial attack in the areas of North Vietnam closest to China. In general, it may even be said that the United States had “overlearned” the lesson of the Korean War and that, initially at least, the United States deterred itself from steps it could have taken without provoking Chinese
intervention. According to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, discussing the early decisionmaking process in 1963 and 1964,

The bombing was also related to the question as to whether the war would expand and whether Red China could come in. If anyone had asked me in 1963 whether we could have half a million men in South Viet Nam and bomb everything in the North right up to the Chinese border without bringing in Red China, I would have been hard put to say that you could.33

Indeed, none of the options considered in 1964–1965 involved sending U.S. troops into North Vietnam. Yet, despite an intelligence assessment of early 1965 that only a ground invasion of North Vietnam or the toppling of the Hanoi regime would trigger Chinese intervention (Johnson, 1971, p. 125), Johnson decided against the more aggressive options under consideration—“bring[ing] the enemy to his knees by using our Strategic Air Command” and “call[ing] up the reserves and increas[ing] the draft” and “go[ing] on a war footing,” both to support a major land war and to signal resolve—for fear of provoking a larger war:

I believed that we should do what was necessary to resist aggression but that we should not be provoked into a major war. We would get the required appropriation in the new budget, and we would not boast about what we were doing. We would not make threatening noises to the Chinese or the Russians by calling up reserves in large numbers. (Johnson, 1971, p. 149.)

Thus, one may say that Chinese intervention in Korea exercised, more than a decade later, a deterrent effect on the United States with respect to its actions in Vietnam. While this may not be an example of deterrence according to the criteria set out by international relations theorists (since there was little contemporaneous Chinese action directed toward deterring the United States), it is worth noting nonetheless.

Soviets Do Not Attack China (1969)\(^{34}\)

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the promulgation of the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” which justified it in terms of the limited sovereignty of socialist states (with respect to the larger socialist community), raised the temperature of the Sino-Soviet dispute, which had up to that point centered on ideological differences. The Chinese had indeed already raised the question of the 19th-century “unequal treaties” between Tsarist Russia and Imperial China, by means of which Russia gained large tracts of land in what became the Russian Far East; however, the 1968 invasion also introduced a security aspect to the dispute.

In September 1968, the Chinese complained about intrusions of Russian aircraft into their airspace during the previous month (including, in particular, the period of Russian military operations in Czechoslovakia). The Chinese broadened this complaint into a campaign to indict the Soviet Union for “social imperialism,” the criminal nature of which was portrayed as being equal in gravity to the “imperialism” of the United States. Primary targets for this campaign were the communist parties of the world, especially the ruling parties of China’s neighbors, North Korea and North Vietnam. Especially with respect to the latter, which was heavily dependent on Soviet military supplies, this campaign was not successful.

On March 2, 1969, after a period of mounting tensions, a major firefight occurred on Zhenbao (Damanskiy) Island in the Ussuri River, a piece of real estate contested between China and the Soviet Union. Although it lay on the Chinese side of the main shipping channel or thalweg, the Soviets claimed it on the grounds that, by treaty, the border ran along the Chinese shore.\(^{35}\)

The clash appears to have resulted from a Chinese initiative, i.e., its decision to patrol disputed territory aggressively that had only seen Chinese civilian activity before. Chinese tactics—the use of a lead patrol to draw out Soviet border guards and a subsequent ambush by

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\(^{34}\)This section draws heavily on Wich (1980) and Segal (1985), Ch. 10.

\(^{35}\)This border dispute resembled that with the Indians concerning the McMahon Line: Although in principle the Chinese rejected the existing boundaries altogether, since they considered the treaties that established the borders to be invalid, they accepted the borders in practice. The actual fighting resulted from differences concerning the detailed demarcation of the boundary lines contained in the treaties.
other Chinese forces—seemed designed to ensure that casualties would be higher than in previous incidents. Most tellingly, the Chinese launched a major propaganda campaign on the basis of the incident, while Soviet press coverage was more low key and reactive. (Segal, 1985, p. 194, fn. 6.)

The Soviets responded by bringing superior firepower to bear in the course of a second incident on the same island on March 15:

The new pattern of differentiated reaction by the two sides—with the Soviets being the ones this time [March 15] to make a big fuss over the event—gave further confirmation to the interpretation that the first clash resulted from a Chinese challenge to the existing rules of the game along the border, but that the second one resulted mainly from a Soviet determination to demonstrate the dangers of escalation inherent in the Chinese use of arms in border challenges. (Wich, 1980, p. 113.)

Despite this Soviet show of force, the Chinese resisted Soviet efforts to convene talks on the border problem, going so far as to refuse a phone call from Soviet Premier Kosygin on March 21.37 It was not until September 11 that the Chinese consented to receive Kosygin, who had been in Hanoi to attend Ho Chi Minh’s funeral. That Ho’s “testament” called for Sino-Soviet reconciliation may have made it easier for the Chinese to take this step. Even so, their “invitation” reached Kosygin only after he was already in Soviet Central Asia on his return trip to Moscow, forcing him to double back to Beijing. Whether this humiliation was deliberate, or resulted from slow Chinese decisionmaking, is not clear.

Whether or not the Soviets ever intended to apply the Brezhnev Doctrine to China, the Chinese behavior at the border may have been designed, at least in part, to serve notice that China would be no Czechoslovakia. As noted above,38 the Soviet Union did make some vague nuclear threats against China (but these occurred after the initial border incidents and were probably designed to force China to

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36 For a detailed description of this clash and of the subsequent one on March 15, see Robinson (1970), pp. 33–40.
37 Chinese Defense Minister Lin Biao announced this at the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in April 1969, evidently to humiliate the Soviet Union.
38 See the discussion of the Soviet deterrence of China in Chapter Three.
the bargaining table). After the initial border incidents in March, the Chinese were not so much trying to deter a Soviet attack as to resist the Soviet efforts to compel them to come to the bargaining table; in this, the Chinese were ultimately unsuccessful, and talks opened between the two countries on October 20, 1969. To the extent that the Soviets were deterred from attacking China, credit should probably go to the People’s War doctrine, which promised a difficult, long-drawn-out struggle, and to the incalculability of the consequences of a Soviet nuclear strike.

**Taiwan Scales Back Campaign to Bolster Diplomatic Status (1996)**

During March 1996, China conducted a series of military exercises that included missile tests to two maritime areas adjacent to Taiwan’s major ports; live fire exercises by air; land and naval forces in an exercise area off the coast of Fujian province and immediately south of the Taiwan Strait; and an amphibious, helicopter, and parachute assault on an island in the northern end of the Taiwan Strait. (Garver, 1997, pp. 100–107.) These exercises ran from March 8 to 25, thus coinciding with Taiwan’s first democratic presidential election on March 23 and the final weeks of the political campaign.

The exercises appeared designed to affect the election and bolster the chances of the New Party, a breakaway group from the KMT, which had remained loyal to Chiang Kai-shek’s policy with respect to the ROC’s claim to be the legitimate government of all of China. By contrast, Lee Teng-hui, the incumbent president and the KMT candidate for reelection, had deviated from that policy by adopting a “pragmatic diplomacy” that recognized the existence of two separate Chinese governments (the PRC and the ROC), one of which ruled the mainland and the other, Taiwan. On the basis of this approach, he sought to expand his government’s “international space” by, among other things, seeking membership in various international organizations, including the United Nations. Thus,

In September 1993 Taipei announced its new goal of joining the [UN] General Assembly as the “Republic of China” under the

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39This section draws heavily on Garver (1997).
“divided state” formula that had allowed the two Germanys and the two Koreas to join. . . .

In preparation for its [1995 UN] bid, Taipei said that it might donate $1 billion to the UN if it were allowed to become a member. This time Taiwan gained the support of twenty-nine countries. (Garver, 1997, p. 31.)

Another target of the exercises was U.S. policy. In the 1992–1995 period, several U.S. actions regarding Taiwan—notably the F-16 sales President Bush announced during the 1992 election campaign and the decision in May 1995 to allow President Lee Teng-hui of Taiwan to make a “private visit” to the United States—had disturbed Chinese leaders and raised the specter of a secret U.S. plan to “contain” China by supporting a Taiwanese bid for independence. In any case, the U.S. actions could encourage Taiwanese independence forces.

The 1996 exercise followed a less threatening series of missile tests the previous year, which, arguably, had succeeded in influencing the Taiwanese legislative elections held in December 1995. In that election, the KMT had lost seven seats (holding on to 85, a bare majority of the Legislative Yuan), while the New Party tripled its representation to 21. In terms of popular vote, the KMT fell below a majority, winning only 46 percent. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which had been formed in opposition to the KMT, calling for both democracy and independence, gained four seats (to 54); this was much less than the party had expected to win in Taiwan’s first fully democratic legislative election.

With respect to the presidential election itself, by contrast, Beijing’s muscle-flexing was a failure: Lee Teng-hui was reelected with 54 percent of the vote. China’s military pressure probably swung DPP votes toward the KMT, as proindependence voters understood the need for greater unity in response to Chinese pressure. Conversely, in the absence of the crisis, the election would arguably have turned more on domestic issues (such as crime, corruption, and social problems), in which case the two opposition parties might well have denied the KMT a majority.40

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40 Garver (1997), pp. 152–153, notes that the two opposition parties were prepared to cooperate on domestic issues; but this ended once China’s actions made independence versus unification the primary issue of the campaign.
China also failed to produce a major panic on Taiwan that could have caused the elections to be canceled and Taiwan’s democratization to be thrown off track. While there was some capital outflow and panic hoarding of food and other items, the overall effect remained minor and insufficient to produce any political consequences. A major reason for this was U.S. deployment of two carrier battle groups as the exercises progressed. These tended to counterbalance the psychological pressure of the exercises with the psychological assurance of U.S. support in case of more serious Chinese military actions.

Despite the immediate failure with respect to the presidential elections itself, the Chinese exercises achieved some of the desired results. Taiwan has, generally speaking, been less aggressive in its pursuit of such forms of international recognition as UN membership. Certainly, the population of Taiwan has been put on notice that open support for independence could lead China to take military action; in the December 1977 local elections, for example, the DPP emphasized local issues rather than independence in its generally successful campaign.

Similarly, U.S. policy turned more toward improving relations with China, leading eventually to Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s visit to Washington in 1997 and President Clinton’s return visit to China in 1998. It is certainly unlikely that Lee Teng-hui will be granted another visa.

In the long run, China may still pay a price for its actions: Taiwanese public opinion may be more suspicious of China and less willing to accept a “one country, two systems” outcome, while the United States and the other countries in the region may be more wary of growing Chinese military power. However, in the near term, China may well feel that it successfully deterred both Taiwan and the United States from going further down a path that could only lead, sooner or later, to Taiwanese independence.

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41 This analysis of gains and losses was completed before Lee Teng-hui, in July 1999, announced that Taiwan would pursue relations with China on a “special state-to-state” basis, i.e., he asserted that the PRC and ROC were separate “states,” albeit within one Chinese nation. See Faison (1999).