As China modernizes its military capabilities, it will seek to play a more active political-military role in the affairs of East Asia. At the same time, U.S. policy calls for the maintenance of strong military forces in the region that “promote security and stability, deter conflict, give substance to [its] security commitments and ensure [its] continued access to the region.” (U.S. Department of Defense [DoD], 1998, p. 9.) The confluence of these two tendencies raises the possibility of potential military conflict between the two countries; at the political level, it poses the question of how “rules of the game” can be established to reduce the risk of military conflict.

This report examines one aspect of this question, the role of deterrence in U.S. policy toward China. As discussed in Chapter Two, deterrence can only be one facet of overall U.S. policy, since the basic issue is that of managing the emergence of a potential new great power into the global arena. This clearly involves much more than deterrence of specific Chinese actions; nevertheless, deterrence is of special importance for the U.S. armed forces, including the U.S. Air Force. Chapter Three examines the historical record of attempts the United States and the former Soviet Union have made to deter certain Chinese actions; the record is decidedly mixed. Given how much weaker China was than either of these two adversaries, what stands out is how difficult the deterrence problem was for them.

Chapter Four examines the role deterrence can play in Sino-U.S. relations and attempts to explain what specific characteristics of that relationship are likely to affect the deterrence question. It addresses the question of the types of Chinese actions that the United States is
likely to wish to deter.\(^1\) This sets the stage for Chapter Five, which looks at the relevant characteristics of Sino-U.S. relations in the light of deterrence theory. In general, many of the difficulties and perplexities of deterrence that have been discussed at the theoretical level are reflected in the particulars of the Sino-U.S. relationship. The report concludes (in Chapter Six) with some reflections on the problem of deterring China in the future, including a more detailed discussion of issues involving the possible requirement to deter Chinese use of force against Taiwan.

The appendix looks at the historical record of Chinese behavior directed against adversaries who were potentially engaged in actions detrimental to China; in many cases, the Chinese may not have deliberately intended to deter their adversaries (rather than, say, to “punish” them) but took action in situations to which Western observers would typically apply deterrence theory.

\(^1\)This report was completed before the period of heightened tension surrounding the Taiwanese presidential election of March 18, 2000.