The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has taken action contrary to important interests of the United States and the former Soviet Union on many occasions. In many case, one or the other tried to deter China but found this task rather difficult to accomplish, despite the vast disparity in military power between itself and the PRC. In other cases, there was no attempt at immediate deterrence, but there was an element of general deterrence.\(^1\) This chapter briefly discusses the instances in which immediate deterrence was attempted or in which some element of general deterrence (i.e., some effect arising from the military posture of China’s adversary) might be thought to have been operative.

**U.S. DETERRENCE OF CHINA**

**“Neutralization” of the Taiwan Strait (1950)**

One of President Harry S. Truman’s first acts in response to the North Korean invasion of the south was to interpose the Seventh Fleet between the Communist PRC on the mainland and the Nationalist (Kuomintang [KMT]) regime on Taiwan. Although this was presented as a “neutralization” of the Taiwan Strait, i.e., as designed to prevent either party from attacking the other, it in effect served to prevent the Communists from completing their victory in the civil war. Since a successful attack on Taiwan was so far beyond

\(^1\)As Patrick Morgan (1983) describes these types of deterrence.
the PRC’s capabilities that it was not even attempted, this can be considered a case of successful deterrence by denial.2

**U.S. Fails to Deter Chinese Entry into Korea (1950)**

In terms of its consequences, the greatest U.S. policy failure with respect to China was its failure to deter the Chinese entrance into the Korean War in 1950. Once U.S. and United Nations (UN) troops crossed the 38th parallel,3 the United States relied primarily on assurances rather than threats to keep the Chinese out of the war: The United States tried to assure China that it would not attack Chinese territory, that it would not destroy Chinese hydroelectric power plants on the Yalu River, and so forth.4 These assurances probably fell wide of the mark because they did not address the fundamental Chinese fear, which was that the U.S. actions in Korea inevitably threatened China.5

But it is not clear that a more forceful deterrent strategy would have been successful either.6 As noted, it appears that Mao believed that

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2As one Chinese observer noted,

> Before June 27 [1950], the problem of liberating Taiwan pitted the strength of the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] against the Chiang Kai-shek remnants, with the help of the American imperialists occupying a background position. Since June 27, the problem of liberating Taiwan pits the strength of the PLA against the American imperialists, with the Kuomintang bandit remnants moving into the background.


> [t]his analysis tacitly argued for postponing the Taiwan invasion until after Pyongyang had forced the United States out of Korea. By implication, the analysis conceded the futility of attacking Taiwan as long as the threat of American interdiction remained.

3The fact that the U.S.-UN forces did cross the 38th parallel, the pre-1950 dividing line between North and South Korea, itself could be seen as a failure of Chinese deterrence efforts. See the appendix.

4Tsou (1963), p. 583, lists the various steps taken in this regard; according to Tsou, U.S. policy assumed that “the Chinese Communists would be willing to negotiate on the basis of a buffer zone and access to power supply in North Korea. . . . [This] turned out to be false.”

5See Christensen (1996), Ch. 5, and Tsou (1963), pp. 576–577. Tsou believes that, consonant with their “grim, ideologically colored view of American intentions,” the Chinese thought that U.S. actions in Korea demonstrated that it was following in Japan’s footsteps.

6Whiting (1960), pp. 97–98, quotes from a speech President Truman gave on September 1, 1950, that could be read as a threat to broaden the war to China if
U.S. actions in Korea—together with the deployment, in response to outbreak of the Korean War, of the Seventh Fleet to “neutralize” the Taiwan Strait—presaged an attack on China. Hence, threats to bomb Chinese cities or industry probably would not have been an adequate deterrent, since, from Mao’s perspective, such dangers would have to be faced in any case. Mao could well have believed that it was in China’s interest to precipitate the war in 1950, when the United States was still fighting in Korea, rather than to wait and allow the United States to prepare its attack on China at its own pace.

This illustrates the important theoretical point, sometimes overlooked, that threats alone do not deter a country from taking an action. Logically, there must be a concomitant reassurance (which may typically be implicit rather than explicit) that, if the action to be deterred is not taken, the threats will not be carried out. In this case, that reassurance may have been impossible (at least after the use of U.S. naval power to protect Taiwan): Mao would have believed that the threats (e.g., bombing of China’s cities and industry) would likely have been carried out in any case; hence, their deterrent value was essentially nil.

Shelling of Jinmen (Quemoy) and Mazu (Matsu) (1954 and 1958)

Although the onset of the shelling of Jinmen and Mazu in 1954 and again in 1958 did not take the United States entirely by surprise, in neither case can the United States be said to have tried to deter the initial shelling of the offshore islands. However, once the 1954 crisis began, the United States faced the question of whether the Chinese posed a serious threat to invade the islands, either as an isolated engagement or as a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan.

The U.S. commitment to the defense of the offshore islands was ambiguous. Public statements of support for the defense of Taiwan

Chinese troops intervened in Korea, although, as he notes, its ostensible purpose “was to reassure Peking on U.S. intentions,” i.e., to disclaim any intention of attacking China. However, as noted in the text, there was little likelihood that such reassurances would be effective.

The circumstances of the 1954–1955 crisis are discussed in greater detail in the appendix.
never specified whether Jinmen and Mazu were included, to say nothing of the more remote Dachen island group. (Zhang, 1992, p. 210.) The mutual security treaty signed with Taiwan on December 5, 1954, covered Taiwan and the Pescadores “and such other territories as may be determined by the mutual agreement.”

Following the Chinese seizure of Yijiangshan island in mid-January 1955, Congress, by means of the Formosa Resolution, authorized President Dwight D. Eisenhower to use force to defend the offshore islands when the president judged their defense to be required or expedient in assuring the defense of Taiwan. While the formula retained some ambiguity, the Chinese saw this as an American commitment to the defense of the offshore islands. (Zhang, 1992, p. 220.) In the following months, U.S. spokesmen made references to U.S. nuclear weapons in the context of the Taiwan Strait crisis.8

Having occupied the Dachen islands in February (after the Taiwanese troops stationed there evacuated them), the Chinese were faced with the question of whether to attempt to seize Jinmen and Mazu as well. Observing a clearer U.S. commitment to the islands, backed up by the brandishing of nuclear weapons, the Chinese chose to wind down the crisis. In April, Zhou Enlai announced that

the Chinese people do not want a war with the United States. The Chinese government is willing to sit down with the U.S. government to discuss the question of relaxing tensions in the Far East, and especially the question of decreasing tensions in the Taiwan area.9

In the 1958 crisis, the U.S. commitment to the defense of the offshore islands—which was not forthcoming until several weeks after the onset of the crisis10—did not suffice to deter a continuing Chinese

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8For example, President Eisenhower, when asked at a press conference on March 16, 1955, whether the United States would “use tactical atomic weapons in a general war in Asia” responded that, “[a]gainst a strictly military target . . . the answer would be ‘yes.’” Eisenhower “hoped this answer would have some effect in persuading the Chinese Communists of the strength of our determination.” (Eisenhower, 1963, p. 477.)


10The shelling began on August 23, 1958; the first public statement committing the United States to the defense of the islands was made on September 4 by then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.
bombardment of Jinmen. The bombardment threatened to cut off efforts to resupply the garrison there; unbroken, this artillery blockade would have ultimately required Taiwan to abandon the island. China may have calculated that the blockade could not be lifted unless the United States used air power to attack artillery sites and other targets on the mainland and that the United States would be unwilling to expand the conflict in that manner. In the event, U.S. naval assistance to the Taiwanese was sufficient to enable them to resupply their troops, thus obviating any need to attack sites on the mainland.

1996 Missile Exercise Against Taiwan

The United States did not attempt to deter China from conducting missile and other military exercises against Taiwan in 1996. However, sending two carrier battle groups helped diminish the psychological effect of the Chinese exercises. Whether this action should be seen as a deterrent depends on whether there was any fear that further Chinese military action—e.g., more serious harassment or an outright invasion—was a likely possibility. Assuming that it was not, the U.S. action does not appear to be a case of deterrence.

SOVIET DETERRENCE OF CHINA


The Chinese decided to raise tensions on their border with the Soviet Union in 1969, leading to a major clash on March 2 on the disputed island of Zhenbao (Damanskiy) in the Ussuri River. The Chinese evidently wanted to preempt any Soviet attempt to put pressure on

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11See George and Smoke (1974), pp. 365–366, for this interpretation. For an alternative explanation of Chinese motives in the 1958 crisis, see Christensen (1996), Ch. 6, who argues that Mao’s primary purpose in raising tensions in the Taiwan Strait was to mobilize popular support for the Great Leap Forward.

12This paragraph deals only with the limited question of whether the United States deterred further Chinese military action against Taiwan. For the context and more detail concerning this episode, see the discussion in the appendix.

13This episode is discussed in greater detail in the appendix.
them; they may have felt that passivity on their part would only tempt the Soviets to see how much political leverage they could extract from their forces on the Sino-Soviet border, which had been built up during the second half of the 1960s. The immediate cause of the Chinese decision was probably the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which emphasized the potential danger the Soviet buildup posed and which probably heightened the need the Chinese perceived to show that they could not be bullied. (Gelman, 1982, pp. 28–29.)

The Soviets now faced the possibility of a continuing low-level conflict along the border, as the Chinese tried to promote their territorial claims. The Soviets sought to avoid this prospect by opening talks with the Chinese but were rebuffed, at times in a humiliating manner.

The Soviets thus had the problem of deterring the Chinese from conducting a series of provocation actions. This situation may have seemed particularly frustrating and baffling to the Soviets, since China appeared to be disregarding what would seem to be the manifest Soviet advantage in both conventional and nuclear forces. As one study summarized, “A central aim of Soviet policy from March through September 1969 was therefore to create credibility for the threat to escalate, through a combination of means.” (Gelman, 1982, p. 34.)

The Soviets eventually succeeded in bringing the Chinese to the table by escalating the conflict. On March 15, the Soviets took the initiative in causing a larger firefight on the same island. (Wich, 1980,)

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14See Wich (1980) for a somewhat more elaborate interpretation, according to which the Chinese were mainly interested in demonstrating to other ruling Communist parties, primarily those of North Korea and North Vietnam, the “social imperialist” nature of Soviet policy by creating a situation in which the Soviet Union would be induced to use force against China.

15Wich (1980) notes on p. 117 that [at the Ninth Chinese Communist Party Congress in April 1969 Chinese Defense Minister Lin [Biao] disclosed that Premier Kosygin on 21 March had asked to communicate with the Chinese leadership by telephone—one of a long series of attempts by Moscow to remove the burden of the border conflict—but that the Chinese on the next day replied with a memorandum indicating that, in the view of the present state of relations, it was “unsuitable” to communicate by telephone and the Soviets would have to conduct their business through diplomatic channels.
Later in the year, they instigated conflicts on their border with Xinjiang (Kissinger, 1979, p. 177\textsuperscript{16}), an area of political sensitivity for the Chinese because of prior instances there of Uighur nationalism. Indeed, the Soviets deliberately referred in their own publications to separatist tendencies in Xinjiang, suggesting that they might provide support to antigovernment groups as a way of putting pressure on Beijing.\textsuperscript{17} The Soviets also dredged up a former Chinese general of Uighur nationality; he wrote an article in July 1969 entitled “Maoist Outrages on Uigur [sic] Soil,” in which he recalled his participation, from 1944 to 1949, in the establishment of the separatist (and Soviet-influenced) East Turkestan Republic. (Taipov (1969).\textsuperscript{18}

In addition, Soviet media also pointedly recalled three occasions on which the Soviet Union had fought large-scale battles in the Far East: in 1929, against local “Chinese militarists” in Manchuria; in 1939, against the Japanese at Khalkin-Gol; and in 1945, when the Soviets ousted the Japanese from Manchuria.\textsuperscript{19} More ominously, the Soviets also brandished an implicit nuclear threat against China during this period. According to Henry Kissinger,

On August 18 [1969] a middle-level State Department specialist in Soviet affairs, William Stearman, was having lunch with a Soviet Embassy official when, out of the blue, the Russian asked what the U.S. reaction would be to a Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities. (Kissinger, 1979, p. 183.)

\textsuperscript{16}Kissinger bases his belief that the Soviets instigated these incidents on the Soviet logistics advantage given their location:

\textquote{When I looked at a detailed map and saw that the Sinkiang incidents took place only a few miles from the Soviet railhead and several hundred miles from any Chinese railhead, it occurred to me that Chinese military leaders would not have picked such an unpropitious spot to attack.}

However, the political context as described in the text seems to provide an equally, if not more, convincing argument.

\textsuperscript{17}For example, Mirov (1969), referenced in Wich (1980), p. 172, claimed that some residents of Xinjiang wished to rename the area “Uighurstan.”

\textsuperscript{18}According to Gelman (1982), the rebellion that produced the East Turkestan Republic was “orchestrated by the USSR.”

\textsuperscript{19}See Gelman (1982), pp. 36–37, for the citations to the Soviet media; in some cases, the Soviets explicitly pointed out the lesson that they wished China to draw from these historical examples.
Also during August, a *Pravda* editorial referred to China’s nuclear potential as a matter of concern not only for the Soviet Union but for the international community as well, perhaps suggesting the justifiability of a preemptive strike.20 The editorial mentioned the dangers created by “the armaments, lethal weapons, and modern means of delivery that now exist”; it is no coincidence (as the Soviets would say) that August also saw the appointment of a Strategic Rocket Forces general as the new commander of the Soviet Far Eastern Military District. (Hinton, 1971, pp. 52–53.)

Finally, in September 1969, the Chinese agreed to negotiations, inviting Soviet Premier Kosygin to stop in Beijing on his return home from Ho Chi Minh’s funeral in Hanoi. A Chinese government statement of October 7 argued that the “struggle of principle” with the Soviet Union could continue for a long time yet would not make normal state-to-state relations impossible. (Wich, 1980, p. 209.) Thus, the Chinese were finally forced to give up the use of border incidents as a means of conducting their anti-Soviet policy. In this sense, then, the Soviet escalation following the March 2 incident may be seen as a successful instance of deterrence. However, it is worth remembering that Soviet “deterrence” did not affect the main issue that lay behind the border incidents, i.e., the Chinese shift from the isolation of the Cultural Revolution to semialliance with the United States.

**USSR Fails to Deter Chinese Attack on Vietnam (1979)**21

The Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a treaty on November 3, 1978, in accordance with which the two parties promised to “consult” in case one of them was attacked or threatened with attack, for the purpose of “eliminating the threat and taking appropriate and effective measures to safeguard peace and security in their countries.”22 Although Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko emphasized this provi-

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21This section draws heavily on Gelman (1982), pp. 91–102. See the appendix for a more detailed discussion of the Chinese invasion of Vietnam.
22As Gelman (1982), p. 91, notes, the Soviet commitment under this treaty was weaker than its comparable treaty commitment to other Communist states, which was to provide immediate military aid in the event of attack.
sion in early December in the course of the treaty ratification proceedings, the Soviets did not try, during the following months, to use it to deter the Chinese from invading Vietnam. Neither did the Soviets warn China of any military action in case it invaded Vietnam.

There is some evidence that the Soviet Union thought that Chinese preparations for the invasion represented merely a form of pressure on Vietnam; the Soviets tended to play down the reports of Chinese military concentrations and to treat them as attempts at political intimidation. If so, they might have thought that focusing attention on the Chinese threat, and the concomitant creation of a crisis atmosphere, would only play into Chinese hands.

When it actually occurred, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was not an impressive operation militarily: It proceeded only slowly and at great cost. In addition, the Chinese were very explicit about the limited nature of their military goals and, having achieved them, withdrew unilaterally. Thus, the costs to Vietnam were relatively small, and the Soviet Union was never forced to make the difficult decision of whether or not to aid Vietnam militarily.

In this case, the Soviets may have misread Chinese intentions, thinking that the mere existence of large Soviet forces on its northern border would serve as a deterrent even in the absence of specific threats or warnings. In addition, the Soviets may have refrained from committing themselves too explicitly to the defense of Vietnam precisely because they did not wish to run the risk of war with China. However, if the Chinese had been more ambitious and more successful militarily, the Soviets would have found themselves in a difficult situation, forced either to attack China or to suffer a major loss of credibility.

Thus, while the Soviets failed to prevent the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, the implicit threat that their Brezhnev-era Far Eastern military buildup conveyed may have induced the Chinese to limit their military action to a level that the Soviets could ignore without loss of prestige.