



MICHAEL J. MAZARR, NATHAN BEAUCHAMP-MUSTAFAGA,  
TIMOTHY R. HEATH, DEREK EATON

# What Deters and Why

---

The State of Deterrence in Korea and the  
Taiwan Strait



For more information on this publication, visit [www.rand.org/t/RR3144](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3144)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-1-9774-0400-8

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.

© 2021 RAND Corporation

**RAND**® is a registered trademark.

*Cover: U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Keith Anderson*

### Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit [www.rand.org/pubs/permissions](http://www.rand.org/pubs/permissions).

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

### Support RAND

Make a tax-deductible charitable contribution at  
[www.rand.org/giving/contribute](http://www.rand.org/giving/contribute)

[www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

## Preface

---

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project entitled *What Deters and Why: North Korea and Russia*, sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, U.S. Army. The purposes of the project were (1) to provide the Army with improved and new frameworks for evaluating the deterrence of aggressor activities for both interstate aggression and aggression short of that threshold and (2) to apply those two frameworks to assess the United States' conventional and nonconventional deterrence relationships with Russia and North Korea. In the latter case, for comparative purposes, the authors also examine U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression.

The research and writing for this report were completed in mid-2019. Events and developments since that time are not captured in this narrative. However, although some facts may have changed or new circumstances developed, we believe that the general interpretations, findings, and recommendations remain valid.

This research was conducted within RAND Arroyo Center's Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program. RAND Arroyo Center, part of the RAND Corporation, is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the United States Army.

RAND operates under a "Federal-Wide Assurance" (FWA00003425) and complies with the *Code of Federal Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects Under United States Law* (45 CFR 46), also known as "the Common Rule," as well as with the implementation guidance set forth in U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 3216.02. As applicable, this compliance includes reviews and approvals by RAND's Institutional Review Board (the Human Subjects Protection Committee) and by the U.S. Army. The views of sources utilized in this study are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of DoD or the U.S. government.



# Contents

---

<b>Preface</b> .....	iii
<b>Tables</b> .....	vii
<b>Summary</b> .....	ix
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	xiii
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	xv
CHAPTER ONE	
<b>Foundations for the Analysis and Outline of the Report</b> .....	1
CHAPTER TWO	
<b>The State of Deterrence in Korea</b> .....	5
North Korea's Motivation .....	6
Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message .....	14
Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message .....	24
Conclusion .....	38
CHAPTER THREE	
<b>The State of Deterrence in Taiwan</b> .....	41
China's Motivation .....	42
Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message .....	48
Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message .....	53
Conclusion .....	56
CHAPTER FOUR	
<b>Conclusions and Implications for the U.S. Army</b> .....	57
Deterrence in Korea .....	57
Deterrence in Taiwan .....	58
APPENDIX	
<b>U.S. Deterrence of China in Three Taiwan Elections</b> .....	61
<b>References</b> .....	83



# Tables

---

S.1.	State of Deterrence in Korea.....	x
S.2.	State of Deterrence in Taiwan.....	xi
1.1.	Key Variables in Interstate Deterrence.....	2
2.1.	Variables Related to North Korea's Motivation.....	15
2.2.	Variables Related to the Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Korea.....	24
2.3.	Variables Related to the Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Korea.....	37
3.1.	Variables Related to China's Motivation.....	48
3.2.	Variables Related to the Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Taiwan....	52
3.3.	Variables Related to the Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Taiwan.....	56
A.1.	Summary of Deterrence Variables for Three Taiwan Presidential Elections.....	81





## Summary

---

*The research reported here was completed in July 2019, followed by security review by the sponsor and the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, with final sign-off in March 2021.*

In an era of intensifying strategic competition, the challenge of deterrence is becoming increasingly relevant—and, thus, so is the issue of what factors cause deterrence to succeed or fail. This question prompted a two-year research agenda for the U.S. Army. In earlier work connected to the same project, RAND Corporation researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of 39 cases of U.S.-led extended deterrence since 1945 and derived 12 variables that tend to determine whether extended deterrence policies succeed or fail (see Table S.1). In this report, we apply those variables to two ongoing examples of extended deterrence: U.S. efforts to deter North Korean aggression against South Korea and U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis leads us to conclude that the state of interstate deterrence in Korea is healthy. The United States and its ally South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea) have a robust military presence on the peninsula that, at a minimum, would make any effort by North Korea (officially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) to reunify the nations by force extremely costly and, more likely, would bloodily rebuff such an attempt and result in ending the Kim family’s rule. The deterrent effect of this military presence is enhanced by the fact that the bulk of it is provided by indigenous South Korean military personnel who are committed to defend their homeland. The United States has also communicated its willingness to defend South Korea against such an attack on numerous occasions, at the highest levels, and in unambiguous terms.

As shown in Table S.1, we judged that all of the variables for deterrence in Korea are robust or effective. The color-coding in the table and in Table S.2 represents our judgments based on the evidence gathered in the research. Green represents strong deterrence, gray represents mixed deterrence, and red represents weak deterrence.

Although North Korea has an interest in reunifying the Korean Peninsula, this does not appear to be a high priority or one that it believes must be accomplished in the short term. Moreover, the partners’ conventional military capability is backed up by the United States’ overwhelming nuclear superiority. Deterrence is, of course, not a static condition. Two changes could weaken the current U.S. posture: (1) a change in

---

<sup>1</sup> The research and writing for this report were completed in mid-2019. Events and developments since that time are not captured in this narrative. However, although some facts may have changed or new circumstances developed, we believe that the general interpretations, findings, and recommendations remain valid.

**Table S.1**  
**State of Deterrence in Korea**

Category	Variable	Level of Deterrence
<b>Motivation:</b> How motivated is the potential aggressor?	1. General level of dissatisfaction with the status quo and determination to create a new strategic situation	Strong
	2. Degree of fear that the strategic situation is about to turn against the aggressor in decisive ways	Strong
	3. Level of national interest involved in the territory of concern	Strong
	4. Urgent sense of desperation and a need to act	Strong
<b>Clarity of message:</b> Is the defender clear and explicit regarding what it seeks to prevent and what actions it will take in response?	1. Precision and consistency in the type of aggression the defender seeks to prevent	Strong
	2. Clarity and consistency in the actions that will be taken in the event of aggression	Strong
	3. Forceful communication of messages to outside audiences, especially potential aggressors	Strong
	4. Timely response to warning with clarification of interests and threats	Strong
<b>Credibility of message:</b> Does the aggressor view the defender's threats as credible and intimidating?	1. Actual and perceived strength of the local military capability to deny the presumed objectives of the aggression	Strong
	2. Degree of automaticity of the defender's response, including escalation to larger conflict	Strong
	3. Degree of actual and perceived credibility of the political commitment to fulfill deterrent threats	Strong
	4. Degree of the defender's national interest engaged in the state to be protected	Strong

North Korea's perception of its need to act to reunify the peninsula and (2) a significant divergence of interests between South Korea and the United States.

In the Taiwan case, however, the situation is very different. As Table S.2 indicates, many of the variables governing capability, commitment, and national will appear to have degraded over the past two decades, leaving only China's motivations as the major barrier to a seriously imperiled deterrence posture. As long as China continues to prioritize other pressing concerns, such as economic transformation, over unification and continues to believe that peaceful methods could succeed, the uncertain risks and costs of war could prove a daunting enough reason for Beijing to avoid military aggression to compel unification.

However, U.S. strategies that promote continued peace without challenging these trends are arguably not deterrence strategies as much as they are reassurance strategies for China's plans of peaceful, eventual unification. Although this approach could buy continued peace and stability in the near term, it is not without cost. A sustained ero-

**Table S.2**  
**State of Deterrence in Taiwan**

Category	Variable	Level of Deterrence		
		1996	2004	2016
<b>Motivation:</b> How motivated is the potential aggressor?	1. General level of dissatisfaction with the status quo and determination to create a new strategic situation	Mixed	Strong	Strong
	2. Degree of fear that the strategic situation is about to turn against the aggressor in decisive ways	Weak	Mixed	Strong
	3. Level of national interest involved in the territory of concern	Weak	Weak	Weak
	4. Urgent sense of desperation and a need to act	Weak	Mixed	Strong
<b>Clarity of message:</b> Is the defender clear and explicit regarding what it seeks to prevent and what actions it will take in response?	1. Precision and consistency in the type of aggression the defender seeks to prevent	Mixed	Weak	Weak
	2. Clarity and consistency in the actions that will be taken in the event of aggression	Mixed	Mixed	Weak
	3. Forceful communication of messages to outside audiences, especially potential aggressors	Strong	Weak	Weak
	4. Timely response to warning with clarification of interests and threats	Strong	Mixed	Weak
<b>Credibility of message:</b> Does the aggressor view the defender's threats as credible and intimidating?	1. Actual and perceived strength of the local military capability to deny the presumed objectives of the aggression	Strong	Strong	Weak
	2. Degree of automaticity of the defender's response, including escalation to larger conflict	Mixed	Weak	Weak
	3. Degree of actual and perceived credibility of the political commitment to fulfill deterrent threats	Strong	Strong	Mixed
	4. Degree of the defender's national interest engaged in the state to be protected	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed

sion in the U.S. deterrence posture could leave the United States open to exposure in a crisis for which it is ill prepared. Moreover, U.S. allies and partners in the region could begin to doubt the credibility of U.S. security commitments. If China's motivations change, then the weaknesses in the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence message could become apparent. Because China's motivations could change very quickly, this is a potentially dangerous situation for the United States. The U.S. Army is not involved in shaping the Taiwan context on a day-to-day basis, but, if deterrence were to fail and the United States were to go to war, the Army would become engaged in a major way.



## Acknowledgments

---

We would like to thank several people from the project sponsor, especially MG William Hix, MG Christopher McPadden, and Tony Vanderbeek, for their support throughout the course of the project. We would also like to express our appreciation to Tim Bonds, former director of RAND Arroyo Center, and Sally Sleeper, director of RAND Arroyo Center and former director of its Strategy, Doctrine, and Resources Program, for their support of our work. In addition, we would like to thank Eric Heginbotham of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Andrew Scobell of RAND, who provided extensive and useful comments on the report during the peer review process.



## Abbreviations

---

CBRN	chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFC	ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
GDP	gross domestic product
KMT	Kuomintang
KPA	Korean People's Army
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense
PLA	People's Liberation Army
ROK	Republic of Korea
ROKA	Republic of Korea Army





## Foundations for the Analysis and Outline of the Report

---

The challenge of deterring territorial aggression has once again become a major focus of U.S. defense policy. In three key scenarios in particular—China’s threats against Taiwan, Russia’s threats against the Baltic states, and North Korea (officially the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea [DPRK])’s aggression against South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea [ROK])—the United States is attempting to deter adventurism by rivals. This report is part of a multicomponent, two-year project examining the current status of deterrence relationships and offering recommendations for shoring up deterrence in the three key scenarios.<sup>1</sup>

In an earlier component of the project, RAND Corporation researchers examined a specific category of deterrence: extended deterrence of *interstate aggression*, or large-scale conventional aggression.<sup>2</sup> Three key examples of potential interstate aggression include Russian attacks on the Baltic States, a North Korean assault on South Korea, and a Chinese assault on Taiwan. A previous report discussed the first example,<sup>3</sup> and this report discusses the other two examples. The second phase of the project considered requirements for deterring other forms of aggression, such as gray zone campaigns. Although another form of aggression by one state against another, *gray zone aggression* is understood as an integrated campaign designed to achieve *political* objectives while remaining below the threshold of outright warfare. In the report on gray zone activities, the study team developed a distinct set of criteria for deterring serious forms of gray zone belligerence and applied the criteria to three case studies: potential Chinese gray zone aggression against the Senkaku Islands, which are controlled by

---

<sup>1</sup> The research and writing for this report were completed in mid-2019. Events and developments since that time are not captured in this narrative. However, although some facts may have changed or new circumstances developed, we believe that the general interpretations, findings, and recommendations remain valid.

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Arthur Chan, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Alireza Nader, Stephanie Pezard, Julia A. Thompson, and Elina Treyger, *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2451-A, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Mazarr et al., 2018, Chapter Four.

Japan; potential Russian gray zone aggression against the Baltic states; and potential North Korean gray zone aggression against South Korea.<sup>4</sup>

The first phase of the project was based on an in-depth review of the available literature on deterrence in general and on the requirements for extended deterrence in particular. From this literature, RAND researchers derived variables that tend to determine whether extended deterrence policies succeed or fail. Through a quantitative analysis of 39 cases of U.S.-led extended deterrence since 1945 and four in-depth case studies of failed or successful extended deterrence involving the United States since 1945, the team then honed its list of variables. This resulted in the list of 12 variables shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1**  
**Key Variables in Interstate Deterrence**

Category	Variable
<b>Motivation:</b> How motivated is the potential aggressor?	1. General level of dissatisfaction with the status quo and determination to create a new strategic situation
	2. Degree of fear that the strategic situation is about to turn against the aggressor in decisive ways
	3. Level of national interest involved in the territory of concern
	4. Urgent sense of desperation and a need to act
<b>Clarity of message:</b> Is the defender clear and explicit regarding what it seeks to prevent and what actions it will take in response?	1. Precision and consistency in the type of aggression the defender seeks to prevent
	2. Clarity and consistency in the actions that will be taken in the event of aggression
	3. Forceful communication of messages to outside audiences, especially potential aggressors
	4. Timely response to warning with clarification of interests and threats
<b>Credibility of message:</b> Does the aggressor view the defender's threats as credible and intimidating?	1. Actual and perceived strength of the local military capability to deny the presumed objectives of the aggression
	2. Degree of automaticity of the defender's response, including escalation to larger conflict
	3. Degree of actual and perceived credibility of the political commitment to fulfill deterrent threats
	4. Degree of the defender's national interest engaged in the state to be protected

SOURCE: Based on Mazarr et al., 2018, p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Joe Cheravitch, Jeffrey W. Hornung, and Stephanie Pezard, *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3142-A, 2020.

We do not, in this report, replay the line of analysis that led to the development of the framework for deterrence effectiveness. That discussion is offered in the project's first report, which describes the historical, theoretical, and quantitative basis for the deterrence criteria and explains the validation process used to test a proposed set of variables against several historical cases.<sup>5</sup> Readers interested in a more extended justification for the 12 variables can refer to that report.

An especially important theme of that work—which is reflected in the criteria in our framework and the analysis of Korean and Taiwanese deterrence dynamics in this report—is that deterrence is a subjective, not an objective, phenomenon. It exists in the eye of the beholder—the country toward which the deterrent threats and messages (and wider dissuasive signals, including reassurances) are directed. Whether deterrence is successful is ultimately a function of one factor: the beliefs and perceptions of leaders and decisionmakers in the state to be deterred, based partly on their motivations. In the cases of Korea and Taiwan, in particular, those motivations can be asymmetric and the beliefs highly skewed. As we will discuss, these factors can complicate deterrence.

In the earlier study, researchers applied the 12 variables to the case of Russia's potential interstate (or conventional) aggression against the Baltic states. The team found that the United States' and its partners' deterrence posture was mostly healthy, assessing ten of the 12 variables as strong.<sup>6</sup> This report employs the same framework to assess U.S. efforts to deter North Korean conventional aggression against South Korea and Chinese conventional aggression against Taiwan.

This study's purpose was to assess the health of deterrence postures in two key contingencies. The study was not designed to examine broader U.S. strategy toward the countries targeted by the deterrence policy—North Korea and China. We recognize that U.S. policy must balance many factors that affect the character of its deterrent promises and threats. Some of these factors are accounted for in elements of the deterrence framework, and others are not—such as other U.S. interests that may trade off against an ability to take direct deterrent actions. Weaker deterrent statements in Taiwan, for example, may be a function of (1) U.S. unwillingness to encourage bold proclamations by the government of Taiwan or (2) a focus on economic issues in the U.S.-China relationship. All of these elements can affect the overall U.S. statecraft toward North Korea and China. But, in this study, we aimed at assessing the deterrent situation on its own terms.

One pertinent aspect of both deterrence cases examined in this report is that they are not simple examples of one state coveting the territory or goods of another. The Korea and Taiwan situations represent unresolved civil wars in which one or both sides in each dispute claim to be the rightful government of the combined land area of the two countries. One result is that the territorial status of South Korea and Taiwan

---

<sup>5</sup> See Mazarr et al., 2018, pp. 1–54.

<sup>6</sup> Mazarr et al., 2018, Table 4.1.

is, to the governments in North Korea and China, not merely a question of ambition. That status goes to the essential identity of these autocratic regimes, and territorial issues rank among their most vital interests. This factor has a critical influence on the perceived interests of the potential aggressors, and we discuss this later in the report.

For the most part, in this analysis, we treat the subjects of deterrence policies—the North Korean and Chinese governments—as unitary rational actors. Certainly, no government is a fully unitary actor, and the views of specific interest groups can affect deterrence outcomes. In both of these cases, however, the United States is seeking to deter a government that is headed by a single unquestioned leader and operating according to some version of a Leninist authoritarian model. We believe that we sacrifice little in analytical rigor by making this assumption.

The remainder of the report unfolds as follows. In Chapter Two, we apply the framework to the case of North Korean aggression against South Korea and analyze the health of deterrence in that case. In Chapter Three, we apply the framework to the case of potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Chapter Four offers conclusions and recommendations for the U.S. Army. The appendix offers additional detail on the Taiwan case—specifically, the ways in which three rounds of elections in Taiwan affected the prospects for deterrence.

As noted, this report is one component of a project that was designed to offer tools for evaluating deterrence relationships; identify potential weaknesses; and point toward activities, policies, or capabilities, including Army capabilities, that would be especially valuable in strengthening deterrence against both interstate and gray zone aggression. The results could be applicable to evaluating and improving major U.S. deterrence relationships around the world.

## The State of Deterrence in Korea

---

The roots of the current tensions on the Korean Peninsula lie in the division of the Korean nation in 1945 in the aftermath of World War II and the ending of some 35 years of Japanese colonial occupation. At that time, dueling governments were created by the occupying Allied powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, whose leaders divided the peninsula along the 38th parallel. The peak of the ensuing conflict between the two rival claimants, who hoped to unify all of Korea under their respective rule, occurred in 1950, when the Communist regime that controlled Korea north of the 38th parallel invaded the southern half of the peninsula. By the time the Korean War ended in a cease-fire in 1953, the United States and its coalition allies had come to the aid of South Korea, while China had intervened on behalf of North Korea. The military demarcation line, along which the fighting ground to a halt, has since solidified into a de facto international border, and the two Koreas have developed into separate and distinct governments and societies.

Both North Korea and South Korea still proclaim the desire to see a unified Korea; in other ways, however, they have drifted further apart since the end of the Korean War. The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, thus depriving North Korea of its primary international patron. Economically, North Korea has stagnated and remains one of the world's poorest countries. In contrast, South Korea has transformed itself from an economically backward military dictatorship into a thriving democracy and global economic power. While much has changed economically, much has remained the same militarily: The military demarcation line is still one of the world's most heavily fortified frontiers, South Korea and North Korea maintain large militaries, and both sides fear an effort by the other to forcibly unify Korea.

In addition, since 1953, the United States has maintained a large military presence in South Korea to deter North Korea from seeking to forcibly reunify the peninsula or, should deterrence fail, to defeat a northern invasion and reunify Korea under the auspices of the South Korean government instead. The ensuing sections of this chapter explore the robustness of the U.S. and South Korean deterrent posture by

assessing North Korea's motivation, the clarity of the deterrence message, and the credibility of the deterrence message.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, we focus primarily on deterring a conventional attack on South Korea by North Korea, motivated by a desire to reunify the Korean Peninsula under the North's political system. We argue that the deterrence posture regarding North Korean territorial aggression is fundamentally strong. However, because the conflict between the two sides is multidimensional and because U.S. goals are broader than just the territorial defense of South Korea—including regime change in North Korea and the elimination of its emerging nuclear arsenal—there is more than one path to war. As we discuss later, efforts to coerce North Korea into denuclearizing run the risk of increasing crisis instability by incentivizing both sides to strike first in a conflict. This is particularly so because North Korea sees its nuclear capability as a guarantee of regime survival against the more powerful United States.<sup>2</sup> As a result, a strong deterrent against territorial aggression does not guarantee that the two sides will not go to war, either inadvertently or by design, over other issues.

## North Korea's Motivation

To assess North Korea's current motivation to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force, we examine four variables:

1. North Korea's general level of dissatisfaction with the status quo and its desire to change it
2. the degree to which North Korea fears that the strategic situation might decisively change to prevent it from reunifying the peninsula
3. North Korea's national interest in reuniting Korea
4. whether an urgent sense of desperation requires North Korea to invade South Korea in the near term.

In general, although North Korea continues to believe that it is important to reunify Korea, this does not appear to be a high priority for the rulers of North Korea.

### Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo

National reunification is an important rhetorical goal for North Korea. As a matter of official policy, North Korea is dissatisfied with the continued division of Korea.

---

<sup>1</sup> This chapter relies on English-language sources. Much of the analysis relates to military operations, and U.S. sources offer the best analyses of these issues. Moreover, unlike in the case in which China is the potential aggressor, there are not Korean-language strategy or military documents from North Korea that are available as open sources and that provide critical interpretive lenses on North Korea's true perceptions and concepts.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., January 2018, p. 2.

In his 2018 New Year's Day address, Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un made his dissatisfaction clear:

Last year, too, our people made strenuous efforts to defend the peace of the country and hasten national reunification in keeping with the aspirations and demands of the nation. However, owing to the vicious sanctions and pressure by the United States and its vassal forces and their desperate manoeuvres to ignite a war, all aimed at checking the reinforcement of the self-defensive nuclear deterrent by our Republic, the situation on the Korean peninsula became aggravated as never before, and greater difficulties and obstacles were put on the road of the country's reunification.<sup>3</sup>

He further noted, however, that the solution lies within the peninsula:

The prevailing situation demands that now the north and the south improve the relations between themselves and take decisive measures for achieving a breakthrough for independent reunification without being obsessed by bygone days. No one can present an honourable appearance in front of the nation if he or she ignores the urgent demands of the times.<sup>4</sup>

While important rhetorically, however, reunification appears to be neither a top nor an urgent priority for North Korea. The U.S. intelligence community assesses, based on North Korean public statements, that North Korea's main priorities are advancing its nuclear program, developing the country's economy, and improving the livelihood of the population within the tenets of a command economy.<sup>5</sup> The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) similarly argues that the primary goals of North Korea are to maintain the Kim family in power, gain recognition as a nuclear state, maintain a viable deterrent, and simultaneously develop nuclear weapons and North Korea's economy.<sup>6</sup> OSD further argues that North Korea's interest in reunification is primarily to provide an internal narrative to justify continued sacrifices by the population, and the leadership realizes that reunification under North Korean control is unattainable in the foreseeable future.<sup>7</sup> In April 2017, GEN Vincent K. Brooks—commander of United Nations Command, the Republic of Korea and U.S. Combined Forces Com-

<sup>3</sup> Kim Jong Un, "Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year Address," National Committee of North Korea, January 2, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Kim, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> James R. Clapper, "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," testimony presented before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, D.C., February 25, 2016, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Report to Congress, 2015*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, January 5, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> OSD, 2016, p. 5.

mand (CFC), and U.S. Forces Korea—argued that North Korea’s top priority was to develop a credible nuclear deterrent to prevent external intervention, which would threaten the survival of the existing regime.<sup>8</sup>

Kim Jong Un’s statements reinforce the idea that internal developments, particularly improvement of the economy, are now North Korea’s top priority. Kim’s New Year’s Day addresses in both 2017 and 2018 highlighted the needs to create a nuclear deterrent to counter U.S. threats and to develop the economy to improve the livelihoods of the people.<sup>9</sup> This is the essence of his *byungjin* line that he first laid out in 2013, calling for simultaneous nuclear and economic development. In 2018, he hinted that North Korea might have achieved a satisfactory deterrent, noting that “our Republic has at last come to possess a powerful and reliable war deterrent, which no force and nothing can reverse. Our country’s nuclear forces are capable of thwarting and countering any nuclear threats from the United States, and they constitute a powerful deterrent that prevents it from starting an adventurous war.”<sup>10</sup> He further stated that the

central task facing socialist economic construction this year is to enhance the independence and Juche character of the national economy and improve the people’s standard of living as required by the revolutionary counterstrategy put forward by the Second Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee of the Party. We should concentrate all efforts on consolidating the independence and Juche character of the national economy.<sup>11</sup>

North Korea’s stated goals regarding reunification also emphasize that it should be gradual and “peaceful.”<sup>12</sup> The goals are based on former leader Kim Il Sung’s concept of the formation of a federation in which, at least initially, both sides retain their

<sup>8</sup> Vincent K. Brooks, *Statement of General Vincent K. Brooks, Commander, United Nations Command; Republic of Korea and United States Combined Forces Command; and United States Forces Korea in Support of U.S. Pacific Command’s Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, U.S. Forces Korea, April 27, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address,” Korean Central News Agency, January 2, 2017; and Kim, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Kim, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, 2018. Juche is the official state ideology of North Korea.

<sup>12</sup> The phrase *peaceful unification* may have a different meaning across time for North Korea and may differ from how the United States and South Korea interpret it. The North Koreans are reported to have celebrated Hanoi’s victory over Saigon in 1975 as the peaceful unification of Vietnam. By the mid-1970s, North Korea’s leaders had come to believe that it could not reunite the peninsula by force, primarily because of the robust U.S. presence in South Korea. Rather, at this time, they hoped to achieve unification following the overthrow of South Korea’s military regime by a popular uprising following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, for these leaders still believed that they had the support of the bulk of South Korea’s population. While they did not believe they could achieve unification through an outright invasion, they did believe that they could be successful if they intervened on the behalf of a popular uprising. See Erik Cornell, *North Korea Under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, p. 80; Bernd Schaefer, *Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971–1975*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, December 2010; and Ri Chae, *East German Documents on Kim Il Sung’s Trip to Beijing in April 1975*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 2012.



existing social systems until they are ready to merge.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, North Korea's Foreign Ministry reaffirmed this idea:

The proposal for founding the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo (DFRK) that clarified full pictures of [a] reunified state and ways for its realization reflects the universal truth and the world's hard reality that no one can deny.

Denying the other party's ideology and system and pursuing unification based on one side's ideology and system is tantamount to a declaration that they do not want reunification but war. The only peaceful way for unifying different ideologies and systems is to realize the reunification by means of federation formula. In fact, one third of the world population live in various types of federal states. It is today's reality that different systems co-exist in a country.<sup>14</sup>

North Korea still formally espouses this gradual approach and, as a result, has expressed its desire to reestablish contacts with South Korea as a first step toward beginning the process of reunification. This message was again echoed in Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Day message, in which he emphasized that "we should work together to ease the acute military tension between the north and the south and create a peaceful environment on the Korean peninsula."<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that North Korea has given up on the goal of ultimately bringing the entire Korean Peninsula under its political system. Rather, it suggests that *the immediate source of dissatisfaction with the status quo is the lack of a relationship with the South that might eventually lead to unification*. The reinvigoration of such a gradual process would not be helped by a near-term invasion of the South.

OSD broadly accepts this generalization and notes that, in recent decades, North Korea "has largely abandoned unilaterally enforced reunification as a practical goal. North Korean goals and strategies reflect the reality of political isolation, significant economic deprivation, a deteriorating conventional military, and the increasing political and military power of nearby states."<sup>16</sup> OSD believes that the leaders of North Korea understand that the forcible reunification of the Korean Peninsula is an unattainable objective.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Park Young Ho, *South and North Korea's Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations*, January 21, 2014; and Kim Il Bong, *Reunification Question*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, Understanding Korea Series No. 10, July 2017.

<sup>14</sup> "Memorial Report of DPRK Foreign Ministry Institute for Disarmament and Peace," Korean Central News Agency, April 8, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Annual Report to Congress, 2012*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 15, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> OSD, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Annual Report to Congress, 2013*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 4, 2014, p. 6.

### Fear That the Strategic Situation Is About to Turn

There is very little sense from North Korea's public pronouncements that its leaders believe that the strategic situation is about to decisively turn against the North. Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's address was one of triumph rather than fear. Articles around the same time in *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, reflected this line of argument. A January 8, 2018, article stated,

The army and people of the DPRK got more confident that the road of holding the new line of simultaneously pushing forward the economic construction and the building of nuclear force advanced by the Party and bolstering up the nuclear deterrence in every way is the most correct one to be followed by them to the end.

Their will to defend peace on the Korean Peninsula and the region grew stronger.

The DPRK emerged a world-level nuclear power and rocket power possessed of A-bomb, H-bomb and [intercontinental ballistic missile].

The U.S. got hell-bent in nuclear war drills but dared not to provoke the DPRK possessed of powerful war deterrent.<sup>18</sup>

Increased sanctions do not appear to have imparted to North Korea a sense of urgency to act. Through at least mid-2017, the North Korean economy appeared to be doing moderately well. In 2016, North Korea had achieved nutritional self-sufficiency in food production, and the number of defectors was roughly half what it had been when Kim Jong Un came to power. These are indications that Kim Jong Un's *byungjin* might, at least for the time being, be working.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that North Korea is complacent about the effects of the sanctions. In his 2018 New Year's speech, Kim Jong Un recognized that increased sanctions were making living conditions difficult, when he offered his

noble respects to the heroic Korean people who, despite the difficult living conditions caused by life-threatening sanctions and blockade, have firmly trusted, absolutely supported and dynamically implemented our Party's line of simultaneously promoting the two fronts.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ri Hyon Do, "DPRK's Strategic Decision Is Just," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 8, 2018a.

<sup>19</sup> Henri Féron, "Pyongyang's Construction Boom: Is North Korea Beating Sanctions?" *38 North*, July 18, 2017; and Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, "Between Sanctions, Drought and Tensions: How Bad Is North Korea's Food Situation?" *38 North*, November 14, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Kim, 2018.

North Korea continuously denounces the sanctions placed on its economy, but its official statements do not yet indicate a sense of desperation or impending disaster.

North Korean leaders *do* appear to believe that denuclearization would decisively turn the strategic situation against the nation and make regime survival difficult. The leaders believe that giving up their nuclear weapons will lead to U.S.-led regime change or foreign invasion. They point to the examples of Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine as reasons why they should not give up these weapons.<sup>21</sup> This concern is mirrored in OSD's 2012 assessment of North Korean security interests, which noted that the

regime's greatest security concern [in 2012 was] opposition from within, and outside forces—primarily South Korea—taking advantage of internal instability to topple the regime and achieve unification of the Korean Peninsula. In North Korea's view, the destruction of regimes such as Ceausescu, Hussain, and Qadhafi was not an inevitable consequence of repressive governments, but rather a failure to secure the necessary capabilities to defend their respective autocratic regime's survival.<sup>22</sup>

These fears might be one reason why Kim Jong Un has repeatedly stated in high-level policy forums that he will not trade away North Korea's nuclear deterrent. On March 31, 2013, he told a Plenary Meeting of the Worker's Party of Korea Central Committee of his long-term commitment to nuclear deterrence:

The nuclear weapons of Songun Korea are not goods for getting U.S. dollars and they are neither a political bargaining chip nor a thing for economic dealings to be presented to the place of dialogue or be put on the table of negotiations aimed at forcing the DPRK to disarm itself.

The DPRK's nuclear armed forces represent the nation's life which can never be abandoned as long as the imperialists and nuclear threats exist on earth. They are a treasure of a reunified country which can never be traded with billions of dollars.

Only when the nuclear shield for self-defense is held fast, will it be possible to shatter the U.S. imperialists' ambition for annexing the Korean Peninsula by force and making the Korean people modern slaves, firmly defend our ideology, social system and all other socialist treasures won at the cost of blood and safeguard the nation's right to existence and its time-honored history and brilliant culture.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Kristof, "Inside North Korea, and Feeling the Drums of War," *New York Times*, October 5, 2017; and Jeff Baron, "What If Sanctions Brought North Korea to the Brink? 'Well, in 1941 . . .,'" *38 North*, September 7, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> OSD, 2013, pp. 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> "2013 Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee and 7th Session of Supreme People's Assembly," North Korean Economy Watch, March 31, 2013.

### North Korea's National Interest

Korea was an independent nation for nearly 1,000 years before it was colonized by Japan in the early 20th century—and a unified one until it was divided in two at the end of World War II. There is thus a strong desire in both North Korea and South Korea to see the two halves of the Korean Peninsula eventually reunified.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of reunifying the Korean nation is enshrined in North Korea's constitution. Its preamble praises Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as the suns of the nation and the lodestars of reunification who regarded “the reunification of the country as the supreme national task” and who devoted their lives to realizing this goal. In addition, they are credited with setting out the fundamental principles and ways of achieving national unification and of “opening the way for completing the cause of reunification through the united efforts of the whole nation.”<sup>25</sup> Article 9 of North Korea's constitution further states that North Korea “shall strive to . . . reunify the country on the principle of independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite this formal statement of interest in Korean reunification, there is very little information available on how important reunification is to the general population of North Korea. A recent poll conducted among North Korean citizens temporarily working or visiting China provides some potential insights. In the 2015 poll, fully 95 percent of North Korean citizens believed that unification was necessary primarily for economic reasons, and most felt that they would benefit from the reunification. Of these, 8 percent thought North Korea would control the process, 7 percent thought reunification would result from the collapse of North Korea, 22 percent thought South Korea would absorb North Korea, and the majority thought reunification would occur through negotiations. Interestingly, only 14 percent thought the unified Korea should adopt North Korean socialism.<sup>27</sup>

North Korea's degree of national interest in forcible reunification is therefore unclear. Unification under the North is a traditional goal of the regime in Pyongyang, but the costs it would have to pay to achieve that goal appear to be prohibitive. For the moment, preserving the existing political entity in North Korea is the overwhelming interest of the regime; there is little evidence that it would place that interest at risk in order to achieve reunification by force.

<sup>24</sup> Support for unification may be waning among the younger generations in South Korea (Clint Work, “What Do Younger South Koreans Think of North Korea?” *The Diplomat*, February 2, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Languages Publishing House, *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, Pyongyang, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> This poll should be treated cautiously because it cannot be considered a scientific poll; in addition, the polled population was not necessarily representative of the broader North Korean population, but they were not defectors, and they all planned to return to North Korea. In addition, it was conducted, in part, by a conservative South Korean newspaper. See John Feffer, “Korean Reunification: The View from the North,” *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2015.

### Sense of Desperation or Urgent Need to Act

There are no public indications that North Korean leaders believe there is an urgent need to reunify the Korean Peninsula or that they feel locked into a course of action requiring an invasion of South Korea to achieve unification. Since coming to power in December 2011, Kim Jong Un has undertaken very few provocations, only one of which could be considered serious, along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). This restraint suggests that challenging the territorial status quo is not a current priority requiring urgent action.<sup>28</sup>

Official statements also do not reflect an urgent need to reunify the peninsula by force. The 2018 New Year's address did not convey a sense of desperation or an urgent need to act militarily on the issue of Korean reunification. While recognizing problems, particularly with regard to North Korea's economy and the effects of global economic sanctions, the address was generally measured and self-confident.<sup>29</sup> Kim stated, "recollecting with great pleasure and pride and deep emotion the proud achievements we performed last year through our diligent and worthwhile labour and sincere efforts and by the sweat of our brow, we are all seeing in the new year 2018 with fresh hopes and expectations." He further noted that "year 2017 was a year of heroic struggle and great victory, a year when we set up an indestructible milestone in the history of building a powerful socialist country with the spirit of self-reliance and self-development as the dynamic force" and that "our Republic has at last come to possess a powerful and reliable war deterrent, which no force and nothing can reverse."<sup>30</sup>

On the matter of reunification, Kim noted that increased military tensions and economic sanctions were an obstacle to reunification. To reduce these tensions, he urged that the two halves of Korea pursue a spirit of *détente*. He further urged that a "climate favourable for national reconciliation and reunification should be established" and that, under these conditions, "the north and the south should promote bilateral contact, travel, cooperation and exchange on a broad scale to remove mutual misunderstanding and distrust, and fulfil their responsibility and role as the motive force of national reunification."<sup>31</sup> It was in the context of furthering these processes that Kim Jong Un made his offer to discuss North Korean participation in the 2018 Winter

---

<sup>28</sup> Of the North Korean provocations, as defined and recorded by South Korea, from 2011 to 2016, only one involved injuries to South Korean personnel: the 2015 laying of land mines on the South Korean side of the DMZ. Five were patrols straying across the military demarcation line, while others involved shooting at propaganda balloons, a straying North Korean patrol returning fire, and the alleged firing of three artillery rounds at a South Korean loudspeaker during the land mine crisis.

<sup>29</sup> Ruediger Frank, "Kim Jong Un's 2018 New Year's Speech: Self-Confidence After a Tough Year," *38 North*, January 3, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Kim, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Kim, 2018.

Olympics in South Korea and later accepted South Korean President Moon Jae-in's offer to meet.<sup>32</sup>

North Korean commentary on its participation in the February 2018 Winter Olympics reinforced the idea that North Korea sees reunification as a gradual and lengthy process rather than an urgent one. Commentary in *Rodong Sinmun* emphasized creating a favorable environment that would support eventual reunification. It thus noted that "the atmosphere of national reconciliation and reunification never comes by itself. It is realized through contact, travel, cooperation and exchange." It further noted that North Korea was willing to "open the door to anyone from south Korea" interested in national reconciliation and unity and further admonished leaders of South Korea that the future path of inter-Korean relations was dependent on their efforts at "creating the atmosphere of national reconciliation and reunification."<sup>33</sup>

The closest thing that comes to reflecting a sense of desperation and an urgent need to act are North Korea's statements about needing to preempt a U.S. attack on North Korea. These statements, however, arise from the nuclear standoff between the two nations and are not related to challenging or changing the territorial status quo.

### Assessment

Table 2.1 summarizes the assessments of the four deterrence variables pertaining to North Korea's motivation in 2018. In each table in this chapter, the color-coding represents our judgments based on the evidence gathered in the research. Green represents strong deterrence, gray represents mixed deterrence, and red represents weak deterrence.

## Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message

For most of the past two decades, the primary source of tension on the Korean Peninsula has been North Korea's pursuit of an operational nuclear capability and not challenges to the territorial status quo along the inter-Korean frontier.<sup>34</sup> Since Kim

---

<sup>32</sup> Kim, 2018; Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Hails 'Openhearted Talk' with South Korean Envoys," *New York Times*, March 5, 2018; and "Kim Jong Un Meets Members of Delegation of Special Envoy of S. Korean President," Korean Central News Agency, March 6, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Pak Chol Jun, "National Unity Is Vital to Improved Inter-Korean Relations," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 16, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> While this section does include statements made by U.S. officials regarding the possible use of North Korean nuclear weapons, its primary focus is on conventional deterrence. We assume that any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea would be the result of its fear of impending defeat in a conventional war and the demise of North Korea's current regime. Nuclear use would thus be a desperate attempt to stave off final defeat and not part of a strategy to conquer South Korea. Should North Korea develop a more secure second-strike capability and a more robust intercontinental strike capability, the problem of extended nuclear deterrence may arise. That discussion, however, is beyond the scope of this report. Note that, given North Korea's current motivations vis-à-vis reuniting

**Table 2.1**  
**Variables Related to North Korea's Motivation**

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Dissatisfaction with the status quo	Strong	North Korea's dominant goal is to preserve, not upend, the status quo—that is, the security and stability of an independent North Korea.
Fear that the situation will turn against North Korea	Mixed	North Korea has a general degree of confidence at the moment but residual underlying paranoia and continual fear about needed economic progress and the potential for U.S. military action.
North Korea's national interest	Strong	There is limited interest in forcible unification.
Sense of desperation or urgent need to act	Strong	North Korea has persistent concerns but no desperation, and the implications of possible desperation likely would not be expressed in interstate aggression.
Overall assessment	Strong	Criteria for deterrence appear to be met.

Jong Un ascended to power on the death of his father in December 2011, there have been very few incidents along the DMZ. Of these, only one was violent—the laying of land mines by North Korea in August 2015, which injured two South Korean soldiers. This crisis lasted roughly three weeks and ended with an expression of regret by North Korea. It was a crisis in which both sides acted with care to avoid further escalation.<sup>35</sup>

Because there have been no specific threats to the territorial integrity of South Korea, U.S. deterrent messaging has focused not on countering specific actions but rather on a general commitment to the defense of South Korea, backed up by the presence of U.S. troops. In addition, most U.S. actions in recent years have been focused on deterring North Korea from advancing its nuclear program and are now focused on compelling the country to denuclearize. To these ends, the United States (1) has been unambiguous in its intent to defend South Korea against all threats, (2) has been clear in its willingness to use all means at its disposal to achieve these ends, (3) has forcefully communicated these intentions to North Korea through public statements and military actions on numerous occasions, and (4) has done so in a timely fashion. These four variables are discussed in detail in the next three sections.

---

the Korean Peninsula, we conclude that North Korean leaders are likely to be risk averse regarding the offensive use of nuclear weapons and to be unwilling to risk potential nuclear destruction. Should North Korea's underlying interests change, we would need to revisit this conclusion.

<sup>35</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "South Korea Accuses the North After Land Mines Maim Two Soldiers in DMZ," *New York Times*, August 10, 2015.



### Types of Aggression to Be Prevented

The United States has unambiguously declared at the highest levels and on numerous occasions its commitment to support South Korea in its response to all North Korean threats, ranging from so-called provocations to the use of nuclear weapons. In May 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama declared,

I want to make clear the United States is fully prepared and capable of defending ourselves and our allies with the full range of capabilities available, including the deterrence provided by our conventional and nuclear forces. As I said in Seoul last year, the commitment of the United States to the security of the Republic of Korea will never waver.<sup>36</sup>

This presidential message was reiterated in an October 2016 joint fact sheet on the alliance between the United States and South Korea, released by the White House during South Korean President Park Geun-hye's visit to the United States. The fact sheet states that the two allies will "continue to modernize the Alliance by assuring we field the best combined capabilities, collaborate on innovative, combined, and effective operational plans, and train and equip our personnel to the highest levels of combined readiness." The document also states that the U.S. "commitment to the defense of the ROK remains unwavering." In addition, it notes that the allies affirmed their "mutual commitment to the fundamental mission of the alliance to defend the ROK through a robust combined defense posture, as well as to the mutual enhancement of mutual security based on the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty."<sup>37</sup>

The land mine crisis of August 2015 was the most direct North Korean challenge to the territorial status quo since the accession to power of Kim Jong Un in December 2011. Amid the tensions arising from this incident, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs David Shear stated in an August 21 Department of Defense press briefing that

the United States is very concerned by the DPRK's August 4 violation of the armistice agreement and we are monitoring the situation very closely. We are in close touch with our commanders and with our ROK ally, and the United States remains steadfast in its commitments to the defense of its allies and will continue to coordinate closely with the Republic of Korea. The DPRK's provocative actions heightened tensions, and we call on Pyongyang to refrain from actions and rhetoric that threaten regional peace and stability, and we are at one with our ROK ally on this.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Barack Obama and Park Geun-hye, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference," Washington, D.C., White House, May 7, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> White House, "Joint Fact Sheet: The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: Shared Values, New Frontiers," press release, October 16, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> David Shear, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant Secretary Shear in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room," transcript, U.S. Department of Defense, August 21, 2015.



In response to a later question, Shear reiterated that “our commitment to the defense of the ROK is absolutely solid.”

The following day, the United States underscored its support for Korea by releasing the summary of a telephone call between the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. In this summary, GEN Martin Dempsey “reaffirmed the unwavering commitment of the United States to the defense of the ROK and reiterated the strength of the U.S.-ROK Alliance.” During the conversation, the men also stated that the two allies would continue to watch North Korea’s actions and would work closely with each other to deter further provocations and defuse tensions.<sup>39</sup>

U.S. President Donald Trump reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea on June 30, 2017, during a visit by President Moon to the United States. The joint statement following the visit stated that “the commitment of the United States to the ROK’s defense remains ironclad. President Trump reaffirmed that the United States will defend the ROK against any attack and both presidents remain committed to jointly addressing the threat posed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”<sup>40</sup> The statement further

reaffirmed the Alliance’s fundamental mission to defend South Korea through a robust combined defense posture and the enhancement of mutual security based on the United States-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. President Trump reiterated the United States commitment to provide extended deterrence to the ROK, drawing on the full range of United States military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. . . . The ROK will continue to acquire the critical military capabilities necessary to lead the combined defense, and detect, disrupt, destroy, and defend against the DPRK’s nuclear and missile threats, including through interoperable Kill-Chain, Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD), and other Alliance systems.<sup>41</sup>

The annual security consultative meetings between the two nations generally result in a joint communiqué that reiterates the U.S. commitment to South Korea, often in very similar language to that of the previous year. The Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting, issued on October 28, 2017, stated that the allies “reaffirmed the two nations’ mutual commitment to the fundamental mission of the Alliance—which is to defend the ROK through a robust combined defense posture, and to enhance the mutual security of both nations under the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty,” and they were “resolved to continue to strengthen the Alliance to remain postured to defend against and respond to North Korean aggres-

<sup>39</sup> Greg Hicks, “Readout of Chairman Dempsey’s Phone Call with Republic of Korea Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Adm. Choi Yoon-hee,” U.S. Department of Defense, Release No. NR-337-15, August 22, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> “Joint Statement Between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” White House, June 30, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> “Joint Statement Between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” 2017.

sion and preserve stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the region.”<sup>42</sup> It was further reaffirmed “that any North Korean aggression or military provocation will not be tolerated and that the ROK and the United States commit to work together shoulder-to-shoulder to demonstrate their combined resolve to make North Korea understand that it cannot achieve the ends it seeks through its provocative behavior.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, during the meeting, U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis “reiterated the long-standing U.S. policy that any attack on the United States or its allies will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons will be met with a response that is both effective and overwhelming” and “reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence for the ROK using the full range of military capabilities, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities.”<sup>44</sup>

Secretary Mattis reinforced many of these points in a joint news conference following the meeting. He said that he was there to “underscore America’s priority commitment for a bilateral alliance, and make clear the Trump administration’s full commitment to the United Nations mission for the defense of your democracy, standing as it does as a bedrock countering DPRK’s efforts to destabilize this region and be a threat to the world.”<sup>45</sup> Mattis also noted that “North Korea should harbor no illusions: the DPRK is overmatched [by] the Republic of Korea-United States alliance”; that any attack on the United States or its allies would be defeated; and that “any use of nuclear weapons by the North will be met with a massive military response, effective and overwhelming.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Actions to Be Taken in the Event of Aggression**

The United States has clearly communicated repeatedly and at the highest levels that a large number of U.S. military personnel have been placed at a high level of alert on South Korean territory—and that they will not hesitate to act swiftly in the event of North Korean aggression. The Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting highlighted observations from the commander of the CFC, General Brooks, asserting that the combined defense posture is capable and ready to “fight tonight” and is “prepared to respond effectively to any North Korean provocation, instability, or aggression.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” Seoul, U.S. Department of Defense, October 28, 2017, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” 2017, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” 2017, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> “Joint News Conference with Secretary Mattis and ROK Defense Minister Song,” U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Korea, October 27, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> “Joint News Conference with Secretary Mattis and ROK Defense Minister Song,” 2017.

<sup>47</sup> “Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” 2017, p. 4.

In 2016, the United States and South Korea inaugurated the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group, which established a high-level mechanism for U.S. and South Korean defense and diplomatic organizations to discuss strategy and policy issues regarding extended deterrence against North Korea. The first meeting issued a joint statement to this effect:

The United States reiterated its ironclad and unwavering commitment to draw in the full range of its military capabilities, including the nuclear umbrellas, conventional strike, and missile defense, to provide extended deterrence for the ROK, and reaffirmed the longstanding U.S. policy that any attack on the United States or its allies will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons will be met with an effective and overwhelming response. In particular, the United States emphasized that it remained steadfast in meeting these enduring commitments and providing immediate support to the ROK.<sup>48</sup>

The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy also clearly signals the Trump administration's commitment to protecting South Korea and rolling back North Korea's nuclear program. It states that the United States remains "ready to respond with overwhelming force to North Korean aggression and will improve options to compel denuclearization of the peninsula."<sup>49</sup>

The administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states that nuclear weapons will not give North Korea an advantage, noting that the "Kim regime may mistakenly believe that nuclear capabilities give it freedom to engage in a spectrum of bold provocations, including military attacks on South Korean territory and naval vessels, and test launching missiles over Japan."<sup>50</sup> The document further explicitly threatens the North Korean government with extinction if it uses nuclear weapons:

For North Korea, the survival of the Kim regime is paramount. Our deterrence strategy for North Korea makes clear that any North Korean nuclear attack against

<sup>48</sup> Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group, "Joint Statement for the Inaugural Meeting of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group," Washington, D.C., December 20, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, p. 47. While not specifically referring to North Korea, the 2017 National Security Strategy also notes that the United States "will not allow adversaries to use threats of nuclear escalation or other irresponsible nuclear behaviors to coerce the United States, our allies, and our partners. Fear of escalation will not prevent the United States from defending our vital interests and those of our allies and partners" (White House, 2017, p. 31).

<sup>50</sup> OSD, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 32. North Korea is aware of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review and has decried it as a declaration of war against North Korea meant to justify a preemptive attack ("U.S. '2018 Nuclear Posture Review' Blasted," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 12, 2018). Commentary in *Rodong Sinmun* stated that the U.S. document "is nothing but an open declaration of war by the rogue state, which means to dare make a preemptive nuclear strike on the DPRK in order to bring the Korean peninsula and the world into a nuclear holocaust" (Sim Chol Yong, "Empire of Evil Is Doomed to Ruin," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 14, 2018).

the United States or its allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime. There is no scenario in which the Kim regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive.<sup>51</sup>

### **Forceful and Timely Communication**

Although the United States has few opportunities to directly communicate with North Korea, it has frequently and publicly stated its commitment to defend South Korea. More recently, it has frequently used military deployments and other shows of force to signal its opposition to North Korea's nuclear program. The 48th U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting communiqué emphasized "the increased understanding and confidence in U.S. extended deterrence based on the multiple deployments of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula this year, as well as the B-52, Ground-Based Interceptor (GBI) Launchpad, and Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile demonstrations earlier this year at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California."<sup>52</sup> General Brooks, in his 2017 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, similarly noted that

the Alliance has taken a series of steps—B-52 and B-1 overflights of Osan Air Base and the Demilitarized Zone; naval operations in the waters off Korea's east coast; the deployment of carrier strike groups led by the USS John C. Stennis and later the USS Carl Vinson to the vicinity of the Korean Peninsula at different times in the last year; a combined R.O.K.-U.S. visit to view U.S. strategic assets in Guam, including the ballistic missile submarine USS Pennsylvania; and the Alliance deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. Together, these actions send a persistent, deterrent message to the North while assuring our allies of our committed presence and our extended deterrence beyond the forward presence.<sup>53</sup>

North Korea has clearly noticed these efforts, although it is unclear whether they have bolstered deterrence or increased instability. According to a December 2017 North Korean statement,

the present tense situation of the peninsula is entirely ascribable to the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat and blackmail against the DPRK and that the U.S. has revealed its scheme to make a surprisingly preemptive nuclear strike at the DPRK through the ongoing largest-ever joint aerial drill with all kinds of nuclear strategic bombers involved.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> OSD, 2018, p. 33.

<sup>52</sup> "Joint Communiqué of the 48th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting," Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, October 20, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Brooks, 2017, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> "Report on UN Under-Secretary General's Visit to DPRK," Korean Central News Agency, December 9, 2017.

North Korea is aware of U.S. deterrent signals and mentions them frequently in its public pronouncements. However, these deterrent signals appear to be interpreted as direct threats to North Korea that require further North Korean responses and that are likely to lead to war. Shortly after President Trump came into office, North Korea reacted to U.S. media reports (what it assumed to be official leaks) that the new administration was considering preventive and regime change military operations. Commentary by North Korea's Korean Central News Agency noted that some U.S. analysts warned that such attacks would be a mistake. The commentary warned that the Trump administration "is repeating senseless policy of nuclear blackmail which would bring only defeat, from the outset of its office, far from drawing a lesson from the failed north Korea policy of the preceding regimes."<sup>55</sup> The commentary specifically referred to U.S.–South Korean joint military drills and the deployment of "strategic nuclear assets," such as carrier battle groups and nuclear-capable bombers (B-1Bs, B-52s, and B-2s), as dangerous acts that, in conjunction with plans for a preemptive attack, were "pushing the situation on the Korean peninsula to the brink of nuclear war."<sup>56</sup> As a result, North Korea issued its own deterrent threat, stating that if

even a single shell is fired into the territory in which the sovereignty of the DPRK is exercised, the bases of aggression and provocation will be reduced to such debris that no living thing can be found. The U.S. should properly understand that its slightest misjudgment about the DPRK will lead it to final doom.<sup>57</sup>

North Korea has likewise responded to other U.S. deterrent actions and threats with deterrent threats of its own. Shortly after President Trump made his "fire and fury" remarks on August 8, 2017,<sup>58</sup> the Korean People's Army (KPA) released two statements that directly referred to earlier U.S. actions and statements.

First, on the very next day (August 9, 2017), a statement by the KPA's Strategic Force noted that the United States had threatened North Korea both with the test firing of a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California<sup>59</sup> and with "nuclear strategic bomber formations" flying out

---

<sup>55</sup> "U.S. Slightest Misjudgment of DPRK Will Lead It to Final Doom," Korean Central News Agency, March 13, 2017.

<sup>56</sup> "U.S. Slightest Misjudgment of DPRK Will Lead It to Final Doom," 2017.

<sup>57</sup> "U.S. Slightest Misjudgment of DPRK Will Lead It to Final Doom," 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Jeff Zeleny, Dan Merica, and Kevin Liptak, "Trump's 'Fire and Fury' Remark Was Improvised but Familiar," CNN, August 9, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> The U.S. launched a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile with a test reentry vehicle on August 2, 2017, to verify the accuracy and reliability of the Minuteman III system and to "ensure a continued safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent." The U.S. Air Force's press release for the test noted that, while it was not "a response to recent North Korean actions, the test demonstrated the U.S.' nuclear enterprise is safe, secure, effective and ready to deter, detect and defend against attacks on the U.S. and its allies" (Air Force Global Strike

of Andersen Air Force Base on Guam as part of an “actual nuclear strike drill targeting the strategic objectives of the DPRK.”<sup>60</sup> As a result of these actions, the KPA’s Strategic Force said that it was “examining the operational plan for making an enveloping fire at the areas around Guam with medium-to-long-range strategic ballistic rocket Hwasong-12 in order to contain the US major military bases on Guam . . . to send a serious warning signal to the US.” When completed, this plan was to be reported to Kim Jong Un and then executed upon his orders. The statement also decried U.S. National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster’s August 5, 2017, threat of a preventive war against North Korea:

Will only the US have option called “preventive war” as is claimed by it?

It is a daydream for the U.S. to think that its mainland is an invulnerable Heavenly kingdom.

The US should clearly face up to the fact that the ballistic rockets of the Strategic Force of the KPA are now on constant standby, facing the Pacific Ocean and pay deep attention to their azimuth angle for launch.

It should make a proper option so as not to regret today in the future.

It should immediately stop its reckless military provocation against the state of the DPRK so that the latter would not be forced to make an unavoidable military choice.<sup>61</sup>

Second, on the same day, the KPA’s General Staff released a statement regarding the U.S. threat of a preventive war and efforts to “decapitate” North Korea’s government: The “KPA will start the Korean-style preemptive retaliatory operation of justice to wipe out the group of despicable plot-breeders once a slight sign of the U.S. provocation scheming to dare carry out a ‘beheading operation’ against the supreme headquarters of the Korean revolution out of wild calculation is detected.”<sup>62</sup> These “pre-emptive retaliatory operations” would target South Korean and U.S. military capabilities before they could reach North Korean territory. The statement also warned that the “provocative ‘preventive war’ the U.S. has devised and plans to execute will be countered with a just all-out war of wiping out all the strongholds of the enemies including the US mainland.” North Korea’s actions would be preemptive, and once it “observed a

---

Command Public Affairs, “F.E. Warren AFB Tests Minuteman III Missile with Launch from Vandenberg,” press release, August 2, 2017).

<sup>60</sup> “KPA Strategic Force Issues Statement,” North Korea Leadership Watch, August 9, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> “KPA Strategic Force Issues Statement,” 2017.

<sup>62</sup> The talk of “beheading operations” may be a reference to the U.S. and South Korean Kill-Chain plan which, among other things, targets command and control centers.

sign of action for ‘preventive war’ from the US, the army of the DPRK will turn the US mainland into the theatre of a nuclear war before the inviolable land of the DPRK turns into the one.”<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, North Korea has often justified its missile tests as deterrent messages to the United States. In September 2017, a Korean Central News Agency article stated that the previous Hwasong-12 missile test launch

was conducted with the aim at calming down the belligerence of the U.S. which has recently cried out for using military muscle against the DPRK, and at bolstering up operation capability for attack and counterattack to counter it with swift and powerful military counteraction, examining the order to deal with nuclear warheads and confirming action procedures of actual war.<sup>64</sup>

Countries in the region have also noticed this dynamic. In December 2017, China signaled its concern about a “vicious cycle” of confrontation that increased the probability of war.<sup>65</sup> The harsh rhetoric that characterized this destabilizing cycle was primarily motivated by U.S. efforts to coerce North Korea into eliminating its nuclear weapon capability and not the result of threats to the territorial integrity of South Korea. This dynamic highlights two issues. First, it reinforces the observation that actions taken in the pursuit of one important national security objective may undercut stable deterrent relationships established for another important national security objective. Second, it lends credence to the observation that efforts to deter or intimidate an opponent through threatening deployments and confrontational rhetoric may lead to crisis instability rather than reinforced deterrence stability.<sup>66</sup>

## Assessment

Table 2.2 summarizes the assessments of the four deterrence variables pertaining to the clarity of the U.S. deterrence message for Korea.

<sup>63</sup> “KPA General Staff Issues Statement,” North Korea Leadership Watch, August 9, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> “Kim Jong Un Guides Hwasong-12 Launching Drill Again,” Korean Central News Agency, September 16, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Teddy Ng, “Is There Any Way Back for the US-North Korea Black Hole of Confrontation? China’s Foreign Minister Is Not Optimistic,” *South China Morning Post*, December 9, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Analysts have observed that the “fear of nuclear war made leaders inwardly cautious, but their public posturing convinced their adversaries that they were aggressive, risk-prone, and even irrational,” resulting in spiral model behavior that increased insecurity. Such efforts at intimidation could thus lead to the kind of confrontation that both sides may be seeking to avoid (Richard N. Lebow and Janice G. Stein, “Deterrence and the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 162, 180). See also discussion of signaling in Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974, pp. 577–579; and Robert Jervis, “Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence,” *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2, January 1989, pp. 191, 198–199.



**Table 2.2**  
**Variables Related to the Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Korea**

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Clarity on the types of aggression to be deterred	Strong	U.S. and South Korean statements are very clear in calling out ranges of interstate aggression to be deterred.
Clarity on the actions that will follow attack	Strong	Both formal statements and historical precedent indicate the scope and strength of responses.
Forceful communication	Strong	U.S. officials and policy documents make repeated, unambiguous statements about U.S. commitments.
Timeliness of warnings	Strong	Especially after 2010, the United States and South Korea signal very quickly in response to provocations.
Overall assessment	Strong	Criteria for deterrence are strongly met.

## Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message

The U.S. deterrent message is credible because it is supported by significant military force, from both South Korean and U.S. forces, that can be immediately brought to bear should North Korea decide to invade South Korea. Furthermore, South Korea's indigenous capability to defend itself is significant and rivals that which can be brought to bear by North Korea. As a result, the coalition has the local capability to prevent North Korea from rapidly achieving its presumed military goals. In addition, the significant U.S. military presence on the peninsula virtually ensures that the conflict would rapidly escalate to involve the United States. This escalation is made even more probable by the political and military commitment of the United States to the defense of South Korea and the importance of an independent South Korea to U.S. national interests. We outline these variables in this section.

One issue that we do not treat in detail here is the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrent pledges to South Korea.<sup>67</sup> Our focus here is on conventional interstate aggression, and while the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent hangs in the background of the U.S. commitment, the primary U.S. deterrent threats and policies in Korea rely on conventional capabilities. Although the United States has never issued a formal no-first-use pledge, it reduced the profile of its nuclear deployments in Korea in the

<sup>67</sup> For background on this issue, see Se Young Jang, "The Evolution of U.S. Extended Deterrence and South Korea's Nuclear Ambitions," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2016; Peter Hayes, "Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Global Abolition and Korea," NAPSNet Special Reports, December 17, 2009; and Terence Roehrig, "The U.S. Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 132, No. 4, Winter 2017–2018.



early 1990s,<sup>68</sup> and, since then, the nuclear threat has appeared to be more existential and generic than immediate. Although North Korea's recent demands in negotiations have focused on perceived U.S. regional nuclear threats,<sup>69</sup> there is little expectation that a U.S. response to a North Korean attack would involve nuclear use.

One way in which the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence might be specifically engaged in the equation of interstate deterrence is in helping to dissuade North Korea from using its own growing nuclear arsenal as a blackmail tool in conjunction with conventional attack. Some analysts believe that the North is building up its nuclear arsenal precisely for this purpose—to create a veto power for any U.S. response to a still-hoped-for invasion of South Korea. If true, this would mean that growing North Korean nuclear capabilities could undercut deterrence. It would also imply that the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear pledges—in effect, the U.S. guarantee against being blackmailed by North Korean nuclear threats—is an essential component of effective deterrence. At least for the moment, however, North Korea appears to believe that the U.S. would respond to any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea with a devastating counterstrike of its own. One North Korean diplomat reportedly stated that “it would be suicidal to attack the U.S. first, especially with nuclear weapons. We understand that it would be the last day of our country.”<sup>70</sup>

The credibility of the U.S. nuclear threat is already sufficiently reflected in the overall framework for assessment here. Other evidence of the credibility of the U.S. commitment applies to nuclear deterrence in addition to conventional deterrence: Nuclear extended deterrence will be believed to the extent that the United States has strong interests in Korea, U.S. leaders reaffirm their country's commitment even in the face of North Korean nuclear work, and overall U.S. military capabilities are sufficient to effect threatened responses. The U.S. nuclear arsenal vastly exceeds anything that would be required for nuclear retaliatory strikes on North Korea, so the credibility of extended nuclear deterrence depends on other political factors assessed in the frame-

<sup>68</sup> Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, “A History of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in South Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 6, October 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Min Joo Kim, “North Korea Rejects Denuclearization Unless U.S. ‘Nuclear Threat’ Is Eliminated,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Vorontsov, “Is the US Preparing for Preventive War? Views from North Korea,” *38 North*, January 10, 2018. It should also be noted that the previous two rulers of North Korea appear to have been aware of the dangers that U.S. nuclear weapons posed for the survival of their regimes. In 1986, Kim Il Sung told the leader of East Germany that he did not intend to attack South Korea and that he could not do so because just two of the 1,000 U.S. nuclear weapons stored in South Korea would be enough to destroy North Korea. Similarly, his son Kim Jong Il was reported to have noted, “let's assume we . . . produce intercontinental ballistic missiles and fire two or three at the United States. Would we be able to win?” (Cold War International History Project, *The History of North Korean Attitudes Toward Nuclear Weapons and Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Capability*, Washington, D.C., May 17, 2005, p. 31; and “ROK's Yonhap: N.K. Leader Speaks about Missiles, Still Leaves Some Questions,” Yonhap, via Open Source Enterprise, August 13, 2000).

work (see the next sections). In sum, then, we consider extended nuclear deterrence to be a subset of the overall extended deterrent issue we are testing in the framework.

### **Strength of the Local Military Capability**

The inter-Korean border is one of the most heavily fortified and guarded frontiers in the world. South Korea is defended by a large, modern, and well-trained military consisting of some 655,000 active military personnel, including 522,000 soldiers in the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA). The ROKA defends the DMZ with 19 divisions and could be augmented during wartime by up to 23 additional reserve infantry divisions.<sup>71</sup> To the north, North Korea fields a numerically superior, but technically inferior, military with some 1,190,000 personnel, of whom more than 1 million are in the KPA's ground forces. This active force can be potentially augmented by several million reservists with varying degrees of capability and readiness.<sup>72</sup>

There are 28,500 U.S. military personnel stationed in South Korea. U.S. Army forces include the 8th Army headquarters, the 2nd Infantry Division headquarters, a rotational armored brigade combat team (ABCT), a combat aviation brigade, an artillery brigade, an air defense brigade, and numerous support forces. The U.S. Air Force maintains combat aircraft in Korea. The United States maintains an additional 54,000 personnel in Japan.<sup>73</sup> Beyond the U.S. forces already stationed in Korea, Japan, and Guam, an additional 690,00 U.S. military personnel, 2,000 aircraft, and 160 naval vessels stationed in the continental United States or elsewhere could potentially be called upon to reinforce South Korea during a war.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> IHS Markit, "Korea, South—Army," *Jane's World Armies*, September 2017c; IHS Markit, "Armed Forces—South Korea," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, September 4, 2017d.

<sup>72</sup> IHS Markit, "Armed Forces—North Korea," *Jane's World Armies*, March 27, 2017a; and IHS Markit, "Korea, North—Army," *Jane's World Armies*, March 27, 2017b.

<sup>73</sup> These figures are drawn from U.S. Forces Korea, homepage, undated-a; U.S. Forces, Japan, "About USFJ," webpage, undated; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2017*, London, February 2017, pp. 58–59, 238.

<sup>74</sup> Kathleen J. McInnis, Andrew Feickert, Mark E. Manyin, Steven A. Hildreth, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44994, November 6, 2017, p. 50.

The North Korean military appears to be better prepared to conduct sustained guerilla operations in defense of its own territory than it does to conduct rapid offensive operations against a technologically superior opponent that will have total control of the air and would thus be able to interdict the movement of large mechanized maneuver forces. North Korean soldiers are often described as being “tough, disciplined, and politically well-indoctrinated,” but they are also said to be generally undernourished, to be in poor physical shape, and to have low to average morale.<sup>75</sup> North Korean soldiers are also required to spend a part of their time engaged in agricultural work to raise food or in industrial work to support the economy.<sup>76</sup> Their training, much of which occurs at small local facilities, appears to focus more on individual combat skills and less on larger-scale combined arms operations. This training would tend to produce soldiers who are capable of conducting guerilla operations or defensive operations in restricted terrain but who would be less prepared for high-intensity and rapid offensive operations.<sup>77</sup>

The defense resources available to South Korea outstrip those available to North Korea. The South Korean economy is roughly 50 times larger than that of North Korea,<sup>78</sup> which allows South Korea to significantly outspend the North while devoting a much smaller percentage of its gross domestic product (GDP) to defense. As a result, South Korea has a defense budget of roughly \$45.2 billion (2.3 percent of its GDP), while North Korea is estimated to spend between \$10 billion and \$12 billion (25 to 30 percent of its GDP) on defense.<sup>79</sup> This disparity also allows South Korea to spend significantly more per soldier than North Korea does—roughly \$37,845 to North Korea’s \$3,470 to \$6,550 per soldier.<sup>80</sup>

It is generally believed that, although North Korea has the capability to inflict significant damage on South Korea, the North would be unable to reunite the penin-

---

<sup>75</sup> A South Korean medical study reportedly found that male North Korean defectors were, on average, 5 inches shorter and in poorer overall health than their South Korean counterparts (IHS Markit, 2017b).

<sup>76</sup> IHS Markit, 2017b.

<sup>77</sup> IHS Markit, 2017b.

<sup>78</sup> The Central Intelligence Agency estimates that South Korea’s GDP in 2016 was \$1.967 trillion, while the GDP of North Korea in 2014 was \$40 billion. Figures are in purchasing power parity dollars. See Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook,” web tool, undated.

<sup>79</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, undated; and IHS Markit, “Defense Budget—North Korea,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, December 3, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> IHS Markit, 2015; IHS Markit, “Defense Budget Overview—South Korea,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, October 4, 2017e.

sula by force. OSD assesses that North Korea is unlikely to risk its survival by “inviting overwhelming counterattacks by the ROK and the United States.”<sup>81</sup> According to Kathleen McInnis and her colleagues at the Congressional Research Service, many “students of the regional military balance contend that the overall advantage rests with the U.S. and its ally, the Republic of Korea . . . , and the U.S./ROK forces would likely prevail in any conflict within a matter of weeks.”<sup>82</sup> Raymond Farrell, of the Modern War Institute, concurs that North Korea has only a small chance of victory during a narrow time frame and that this requires a successful surprise attack before South Korea can mobilize and the coalition can bring its airpower to bear on the attacking forces. North Korea is also aware of its technological disadvantage, according to Farrell.<sup>83</sup> Finally, Andrew Scobell and John Sanford, of the Strategic Studies Institute, echo their peers:

Over the past 2 decades, due largely to economic decline and the lack of financial resources, as well as force improvements and urban build up in South Korea and the continued presence of U.S. forces in South Korea, North Korea’s conventional forces have become weaker, relative to those of South Korea and the United States. As a result, any North Korean option to invade South Korea has become less credible.

While causing tremendous damage, a North Korean attack on South Korea would most likely be defeated by a U.S.-South Korean counterattack. . . . The United States and South Korea would more than likely prevail in a full-scale war, but the human and material costs would be very high—even if unconventional weapons were not employed.<sup>84</sup>

Moreover, the past few decades have seen substantive improvements in the capabilities of the ROKA. *Jane’s World Armies* notes that “decades of ROKA transformation and modernization, combined with a strong alliance with the United States, has largely negated the vast numerical and artillery advantages of the otherwise qualitatively inferior North Korean People’s Army” and that “today’s modern, mobile, well-equipped, well trained and digitally networked ROKA is more than a match for the

---

<sup>81</sup> OSD, 2016, p. 8

<sup>82</sup> McInnis et al., 2017, p. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Raymond Farrell, *Thunder Run to Seoul: Assessing North Korea’s War Plan*, Modern War Institute, April 25, 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford, *North Korea’s Military Threat: Pyongyang’s Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Naval War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2007, p. 3. Since this was published in 2007, the conventional balance has tilted further in the favor of South Korea and the United States.

largely static” KPA.<sup>85</sup> *Jane’s World Armies* goes on to say that “the ROKA is capable of defending against a North Korean conventional attack without substantial US ground forces on the DMZ.” It further notes that “there is a growing consensus that North Korean conventional capabilities are so overmatched that general hostilities initiated by Pyongyang would result in a military defeat and, ultimately, an end to the communist regime and re-unification of the Korean peninsula.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Automaticity of a U.S. Response**

There is no reason to believe that South Korea, which will provide the bulk of the forces defending its territory, would not immediately respond to an invasion by North Korea. The primary mission of the South Korean military is to defend South Korea from an invasion from the north. South Korea’s 2016 Defense White Paper identifies North Korea as an enemy and the primary threat to South Korea and asserts, “The ultimate and unchanging goal of the ROK military is to ‘fight the enemy and win.’”<sup>87</sup>

The white paper also highlights the U.S. role:

In preparation for the threats of a full-scale war from North Korea, the ROK military is continuously developing ROK-U.S. joint operational plans to new levels of effectiveness and increasing its wartime operational capabilities through scientific and systematic training. During a contingency, the ROK-U.S. combined and joint forces, based on the robust military alliance between the two countries, will be operated in an offensive manner to carry out simultaneous, integrated operations on land, at sea and in the air, as well as in cyber-space, to seize the initiative at the earliest stages of war. By annihilating North Korea’s warfighting capabilities and destroying its will to fight, the combined and joint forces will achieve a decisive victory in a short period of time.<sup>88</sup>

The presence of some 28,500 U.S. military personnel in South Korea and their integration with the South Korean military virtually guarantees that the United States will be involved in the fighting from the outset. In the near term, military operations in Korea would be led by the CFC, which was established in November 1978. The CFC is a standing warfighting headquarters with the mission of deterring and, if necessary, defeating outside aggression against South Korea. It has peacetime operational control over more than 600,000 active-duty U.S. and Korean military personnel. During a conflict, this force could be augmented by 3.5 million South Korean reservists and additional U.S. forces deployed from elsewhere.

---

<sup>85</sup> IHS Markit, 2017c.

<sup>86</sup> IHS Markit, 2017d.

<sup>87</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, *2016 Defense White Paper*, Seoul, December 2016, pp. 41, 44.

<sup>88</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, 2016, p. 59.

If South Korea were attacked by North Korea, the CFC would provide a coordinated defense of South Korea. The CFC has a combined staff commanded by a U.S. four-star general, with a four-star ROKA general serving as the deputy commander. Each staff section is binational and has a chief of staff from one nation and a deputy chief of staff from the other nation. All CFC components are tactically integrated through continuous combined and joint planning, training, and exercises.<sup>89</sup> U.S. forces in Korea are further augmented by integrated South Korean military personnel provided under the Korean Augmentation to the U.S. Army program. These personnel are draftees with strong English-language proficiency and military aptitude. They are selected by lottery, receive special training, and are subsequently assigned to a U.S. Army unit stationed in Korea.<sup>90</sup> The Eighth Army also includes the 2nd Infantry Division/ROK-U.S. Combined Division.<sup>91</sup> Finally, the United States has agreed to keep U.S. counterfire forces north of the Han River to enable a rapid response to North Korean long-range artillery fire.<sup>92</sup>

After the 2015 land mine crisis near the DMZ, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter reiterated the commitment to immediately support South Korea. In response to a question by a soldier stationed on the DMZ, Carter said,

[Korea] is one of these places that is a tinder box and we have to be ready every single day. We had a little dust up out there about a week ago and this is a place where, since 1953, American troops have been deterring North Korean aggression. I don't need to tell you about North Koreans, to put it mildly, an odd place and a threatening place.

And so if you say, "What's my thought about the Korean peninsula?" Job one is fight tonight. We need to be ready, we need to make sure that the North Koreans always understand that any provocation with them will be dealt with and that they stand no chance of defeating us and our allies in South Korea. And sadly, even though it sounds like it's a relic of the distant past, it's very much a part of today.

So it's probably the single place in the world where war could erupt at the snap of our fingers. That's why people like Jonathan [who asked the question] have to be ready every minute, every morning.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> U.S. Forces Korea, "Mission of the ROK/US Combined Forces Command," webpage, undated-b.

<sup>90</sup> United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, and U.S. Forces Korea, *Korea Strategic Digest 2017*, 2017, p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> Brooks, 2017, p. 9.

<sup>92</sup> "Joint Communiqué: The 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting," Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, October 23, 2014, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> Ash Carter, "Remarks by Secretary Carter in a Worldwide Troop Talk at the Defense Media Activity," transcript, U.S. Department of Defense, September 1, 2015.

Indeed, “fight tonight” is the catchphrase of the Eighth Army and is embodied in its Commander’s Guidance:

Vigilance and deterrence are our watchwords—and in readiness, lies deterrence. Eighth Army’s “Fight Tonight” readiness is imperative in Korea’s high-risk environment. The risk of further provocation is high. . . . Crisis, when it occurs, will likely confront Eighth Army with sudden regime instability, potential environmental disaster, humanitarian crisis and the threat of [weapons of mass destruction]. “Fight Tonight” is a core plank of Eighth Army’s Campaign Plan and represents our determination to be trained, capable and fully partnered with our ROK allies. The motto embodies Eighth Army’s focus on watchfulness and role in deterring aggression. We must [be] prepared to execute our mission at all times, if deterrence fails.<sup>94</sup>

The United States continually and actively plans to respond to aggressive actions by North Korea against South Korea. In April 2017, General Brooks gave the following testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee:

[U.S. Forces Korea] planning continues to move forward with the approval of a new bilateral effort and U.S. initiatives in support of the Alliance. CFC efforts concluded with approval of a new plan that accounts for regional interests in the event of conflict with North Korea. Contingency planning between the United States and South Korea continues to progress to increase responsiveness to a variety of potential North Korean provocations. [U.S. Forces Korea] also drove refinements of the flow of U.S. forces and continues to refine plans to counter the changing challenges posed by North Korea and other actors in the region. The key to our success continues to be integration with our R.O.K. allies and other partners.<sup>95</sup>

### **U.S. Political Commitment**

The United States has a long-standing commitment to defend South Korea from foreign attack. The legal foundation for the security relationship between the two nations is their mutual defense treaty, which was signed by the two parties on October 1, 1953, and ratified by the U.S. Senate on January 26, 1954. The treaty explicitly states that its intention is to prevent an external armed attack against South Korea.<sup>96</sup> Its preamble

<sup>94</sup> Eighth Army, “How We Fight’: Eighth Army Commander’s Guidance,” undated.

<sup>95</sup> Brooks, 2017, p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> When the treaty was signed, the U.S. Senate feared that South Korea might seek to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force. Thus, the Senate ratified the treaty with the understanding that its Article III does not obligate either party to come to the assistance of the other “except in the case of an external armed attack” and that nothing in the treaty can be construed as “requiring the United States to give assistance to Korea except in the event of an armed attack against territory which has been recognized by the United States as lawfully brought under



states that both the United States and South Korea desire “to declare publicly and formally their common determination to defend themselves against external armed attack so that no potential aggressor could be under the illusion that either of them stands alone.” Furthermore, Article II states, “Separately and jointly, by self-help and mutual aid, the Parties will maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack and will take suitable measures in consultation and agreement to implement this Treaty and to further its purposes.” Per Article III, “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories [under their control] . . . would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.” The treaty grants the United States the right to deploy its forces in South Korea, by mutual agreement, as it sees fit. On two occasions during the treaty negotiation, U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles formally stated that, should an unprovoked attack occur against South Korea during the armistice, the United States and its allies would “at once and automatically react” and that such a reaction would “not be a new war but rather a resumption by the Communist forces of the active belligerency which the armistice has halted.”<sup>97</sup>

The unwavering U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea has been reinforced publicly on numerous occasions by U.S. Presidents. In 2009, on a visit to Osan Air Base in South Korea, President Obama told an audience of U.S. military personnel,

In Seoul, President Lee [Myung-bak] and I reaffirmed the enduring alliance between our countries—an alliance rooted in shared sacrifice, common values, mutual interest and mutual respect. And as we look to the future with a shared vision of our alliance for the 21st century, I made it clear—America’s commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea will never waver, and our alliance has never been stronger.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, on the 60th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice, President Obama honored an audience of Korean War veterans standing before the Korean War Memorial in Washington, D.C.: “Our soldiers stand firm along the DMZ; when our South Korean friends can go about their lives, knowing that the commitment of the United States to the security of the Republic of Korea will never waver—that is a victory, and that is your legacy.”<sup>99</sup> In addition, following the land mine incident in 2015, Obama

---

the administrative control of the Republic of Korea” (United States and Republic of Korea, “United States of America–Republic of Korea Treaty,” *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1954, p. 148).

<sup>97</sup> United States and Republic of Korea, 1954, pp. 147–152.

<sup>98</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President to the Troops at Osan Air Base, Osan, Republic of Korea,” Pyeongtaek, South Korea, White House, November 9, 2009.

<sup>99</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at 60th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice,” White House, July 27, 2013.



reassured South Korean President Park: “I want to commend you and the people of South Korea for the resolve that you displayed this summer following North Korea’s reckless actions in the DMZ that wounded two of your soldiers. North Korea was reminded that any provocation or aggression will be met by a strong, united response by South Korea and the United States.”<sup>100</sup>

Most of the time, President Trump has made similar unqualified commitments to defend South Korea. He reaffirmed the U.S. commitment on June 30, 2017, during President Moon Jae-in’s visit to the United States. The joint statement following the visit said, “the commitment of the United States to the ROK’s defense remains ironclad.”<sup>101</sup> And as noted earlier, the joint statement further reaffirmed the alliance’s fundamental mission to defend South Korea and reiterated the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence. More bluntly, in a speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Trump said that the “United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.”<sup>102</sup>

Trump’s 2018 suggestion that the United States would postpone military exercises in Korea could be taken as a weakening of this commitment.<sup>103</sup> For the time being, however, the U.S. commitment remains highly conditional and temporary, and the 2017 joint statement made it clear that the overall U.S. military commitment to South Korea remains firm.

To support that commitment, the United States has maintained a significant military presence in South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953. The post-war drawdown stabilized at between 50,000 and 60,000 U.S. personnel in the 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s, troop levels averaged some 41,000, with a peak of 45,000 personnel in 1988. The next 14 years saw an average of 37,000 troops deployed before the numbers began to fall greatly after 2004 during the war in Iraq.<sup>104</sup> By 2017, the U.S. presence in South Korea had stabilized at some 28,500 military personnel.<sup>105</sup> This troop presence is coupled with a major investment in military infrastructure in South Korea. As of the end fiscal year 2014, the Department of Defense had bases worth some \$15 billion in South Korea, consisting of nearly 7,000 buildings on 28,442 acres

---

<sup>100</sup> Barack Obama and Park Geun-hye, “Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference,” Washington, D.C., White House, October 16, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> “Joint Statement Between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” 2017.

<sup>102</sup> Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” New York, White House, September 19, 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Lamothe, “Trump Pledged to End Military Exercises with South Korea. But Will It Ever Happen?” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Tim Kane, *Global U.S. Troop Deployments, 1950–2005*, Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006.

<sup>105</sup> McInnis et al., 2017, p. 50.

of land.<sup>106</sup> The South Korean government provides significant financial support for the U.S. military presence on its soil, amounting to some \$826 million in 2016. In addition, the South Korean government is providing 92 percent of the \$10.8 billion required to support the relocation of U.S. forces within Korea.<sup>107</sup>

South Korea is also a major purchaser of U.S. military hardware, acquiring 75 percent of its defense purchases from U.S. companies, and is one of the top U.S. foreign military sales customers. Between 2008 and 2016, South Korea contracted for some \$22.5 billion in foreign military and commercial acquisition sales.<sup>108</sup> In addition, South Korea has been designated a North Atlantic Treaty Organization “plus five” arms purchaser, which increases the spending threshold for congressional notification and reduces the time for Congress to block proposed sales.<sup>109</sup> South Korea has purchased advanced U.S. weapon systems, such as the F-35 fighter, the Apache AH-64E attack helicopter, and the Phased Array Tracking to Intercept of Target Advanced Capability-3 (or Patriot PAC-3) surface-to-air missile.<sup>110</sup>

U.S. and South Korean forces annually conduct a series of combined military exercises, but these efforts may now be postponed or, in the event of significant agreements on security issues, permanently suspended. They include Exercise Key Resolve, Exercise Foal Eagle, and Exercise Ulchi Freedom Guardian. Foal Eagle is the largest of these exercises, consisting of several joint and combined field exercises conducted over an eight-week period and involving some 17,000 U.S. forces and their South Korean partners. The CFC also conducts frequent unit-level no-notice alerts, musters, and operational readiness inspections to ensure the combat readiness of both U.S. and South Korean forces.<sup>111</sup> In addition, there are some large combined service-level exercises, such as Exercise Vigilant Ace (formerly Beverly Bulldog), which is an annual bilateral exercise of combined air power. In December 2017, this week-long exercise involved some 230 aircraft and some 12,000 personnel operating from eight airfields and provided “realistic air combat training and enhancing operational and tactical coordination through combined and joint combat training.” It focused on “full spectrum operations to deter, and if necessary defeat a rapidly evolving threat.”<sup>112</sup> In addi-

---

<sup>106</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Base Structure Report—Fiscal Year 2015 Baseline: A Summary of the Real Property Inventory*, Washington, D.C., undated, p. 83.

<sup>107</sup> Brooks, 2017, pp. 6–7.

<sup>108</sup> Mark E. Manyin, Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, Brock R. Williams, and Jonathan R. Corrado, *U.S.-South Korea Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R41481, May 23, 2017, p. 25.

<sup>109</sup> Manyin et al., 2017, p. 27.

<sup>110</sup> Brooks, 2017, p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> U.S. Forces Korea, “CFC Announces Start of Key Resolve and Foal Eagle 2016,” press release, March 6, 2016; and U.S. Forces Korea, undated-b.

<sup>112</sup> Alex Echols, “Exercise Vigilant Ace 18 Kicks Off,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, December 4, 2017.

tion, South Korean military officials stated that the exercise would include simulated precision strikes against mock North Korean nuclear and missile targets under wartime conditions.<sup>113</sup>

### **U.S. National Interest**

The U.S. relationship with South Korea stretches back to 1945, when U.S. troops first landed on the peninsula to take control of the area below the 38th parallel from the defeated Japanese Army. The relationship deepened the following year when the United States installed Syngman Rhee as the leader of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea. In June 1950, the United States committed military force to defend the Rhee government from an attack by Communist forces from Korean territory north of the 38th parallel. During the ensuing Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, the United States had a peak deployment of more than 300,000 personnel and lost some 36,600 personnel killed in action.<sup>114</sup> Following the armistice in 1953, which ended the fighting, the United States committed itself by treaty to defend South Korea and has maintained a large military presence on the Korean Peninsula ever since to honor this commitment.

Although the initial Cold War geostrategic reasons for the U.S. commitment to South Korea ended with the demise of the Soviet Union, South Korea is still considered to be strategically important to the security of the United States. The alliance is seen as a key component of maintaining regional security and prosperity and undergirding the U.S. ability to remain a Pacific power.<sup>115</sup>

South Korea is also a critical U.S. economic partner and an integral part of the global economy. With a GDP of \$1.93 trillion, South Korea's economy is the world's 15th largest; the nation is also the world's sixth-largest exporter (\$511.8 billion) and 11th-largest importer (\$391.3 billion).<sup>116</sup> South Korea is the United States' sixth-largest trading partner, with roughly \$144.6 billion worth of goods and services being traded in 2016. In addition, this economic relationship is undergirded by a free trade agreement, which took effect in March 2012.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>113</sup> Lee Chi-dong, "S. Korea, U.S. Begin Massive Air Combat Drills," Yonhap, December 4, 2017; and Gerry Mullany, "U.S. and South Korea Start Air Force Drills amid Heightened Tensions," *New York Times*, December 4, 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Barbara Salazar Torreon, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2017*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42738, October 12, 2017, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., February 2015, pp. 7, 24.

<sup>116</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, undated. These figures are for 2016. In contrast, North Korea is one of the world's poorest countries, with a GDP of some \$40 billion (roughly the size of the Laotian or Estonian economy) and a GDP per capita of some \$1,700 (similar to that of South Sudan or Guinea-Bissau).

<sup>117</sup> United States and Republic of Korea, "U.S.–Korea Free Trade Agreement," Office of the United States Trade Representative, June 30, 2007.

The nature of the close economic relationship between the United States and South Korea is also a potential source of tension between the two countries. South Korea's export-driven economy and the resultant competition with U.S. producers of steel products, polyester, chemicals, and washing machines has led to U.S. antidumping investigations and the imposition of countervailing duties. The United States has also accused South Korea of inhibiting U.S. investment in Korean firms and creating regulatory barriers that discriminate against U.S. companies.<sup>118</sup> In addition, the Trump administration has been critical of the nations' free trade agreement, and the President has called it a "horrible deal" and sought to renegotiate it on terms more favorable to the United States.<sup>119</sup> This belief led the United States to impose steep tariffs on South Korean washing machines, a move that was criticized by the South Korean government and for which its leaders threatened to take their complaint to the World Trade Organization.<sup>120</sup>

North Korea is fully aware of the U.S. strategic interest in South Korea. The North frequently denounces the presence of U.S. military personnel in South Korea, calls for their removal, blames the United States for the continued division of Korea, and accuses the United States of being a threat to peace. North Korea's official history on reunification underscores the message:

The countries responsible for Korea's division and its neighbours should refrain from inciting distrust and confrontation between the north and south and should act in ways beneficial to Korea's reunification. The US, the main culprit in the division of the Korean nation and the prevention of its reunification, should discontinue its sanction-and-stifle schemes against the DPRK, and stop egging the south Korean authorities on to step up inter-Korean confrontation; in short, it should stop interfering on the Korean peninsula.<sup>121</sup>

Kim Jong Un echoed this sentiment at the 7th Workers Party Congress:

The United States, the very one that caused the division of our nation and has obstructed its reunification, should stop the scheme for putting sanctions and stifling the DPRK. And it should not instigate the south Korean authorities to confrontation with their fellow countrymen but hand off the Korean Peninsula issue.<sup>122</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Manyin et al., 2017, pp. 31–34.

<sup>119</sup> Manyin et al., 2017, pp. 32–34; Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Trump Wants to End 'Horrible' South Korea-U.S. Trade Deal. Koreans Disagree," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2017; and Ana Swanson, "U.S. to Start Korean Trade Talks amid Rising Tensions," *New York Times*, January 5, 2018.

<sup>120</sup> Ana Swanson and Brad Plumer, "Trump Slaps Steep Tariffs on Foreign Washing Machines and Solar Products," *New York Times*, January 22, 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Kim, 2017, p. 89.

<sup>122</sup> "Kim Jong Un—Speeches at the 7th Party Congress," National Committee on North Korea, May 9, 2016.

More vituperatively, January 2018 commentary in *Rodong Sinmun* stated,

The U.S. real intention is to prevent the detente on the Peninsula and the improvement of the north-south relations at any cost while being displeased with them. . . .

The U.S. does not hope to see an advent of a peaceful world as it lives on war and aggression.

Its ulterior motive is that it can realize its strategy to dominate Asia-Pacific with south Korea as an outpost to invade the DPRK and the continent only when it keeps tension heightened on the Peninsula.

That is why the U.S. is being displeased with the defusing of detente on the Peninsula and the creation of peaceful atmosphere in Asia-Pacific.<sup>123</sup>

### Assessment

Table 2.3 summarizes the assessments of the four deterrence variables pertaining to the credibility of the U.S. deterrence message in Korea.

**Table 2.3**  
**Variables Related to the Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Korea**

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Strength of the local military capability	Strong	Although the local U.S. military presence is modest, it is linked into powerful regional air and naval assets that could impose devastating costs in response to large-scale conventional attacks.
Degree of automaticity of a U.S. response	Strong	The U.S. tripwire, military alliance, and public commitments make a U.S. response automatic.
Credibility of the U.S. political commitment	Strong	The commitment is shared by all elements of the U.S. political spectrum
Degree of U.S. national interest in South Korea	Strong	U.S. commitments have created a strong disposition to respond in order to maintain the United States' overall credibility
Overall assessment	Strong	Criteria for deterrence are strongly met.

<sup>123</sup> Ri Hyon Do, "DPRK Will Resolutely Counter Maneuvers of Wrecking Peace," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 26, 2018b.

## Conclusion

The underlying fundamentals of the deterrence posture on the Korean Peninsula are strong. The United States and its South Korean ally have a robust local military presence that, at a minimum, would make any North Korean effort to reunify by force extremely costly and would more likely bloodily rebuff such an attempt and result in ending the Kim family's rule. The deterrent effect of this military presence is enhanced by the fact that the bulk of it is provided by indigenous South Korean military personnel who are committed to defend their homeland. The United States has also communicated its willingness to defend South Korea against a North Korean attack on numerous occasions, at the highest levels, and in unambiguous terms. Meanwhile, although North Korea has an interest in reunifying the Korean Peninsula, this does not appear to be a high priority or one that its leaders believe must be accomplished in the near term. North Korea has lived with a divided Korea since 1953, and there are no indications that it cannot continue to do so in the future. All of this suggests that the current deterrent posture is quite strong.

Moreover, the U.S. and South Korean conventional military capability is backed up by the United States' overwhelming nuclear superiority. North Korea's emerging nuclear capacity is estimated to include enough fissile material to produce between 30 and 60 nuclear weapons, of which ten to 20 might have been assembled by early 2018. The ability of North Korea to deliver these weapons beyond the Korean Peninsula, particularly with the potential to hit the U.S. homeland, remains uncertain and rests on missile systems that remain largely untested and for which functioning warheads may not yet have been developed. Furthermore, the United States has deployed missile defense systems with an ability to somewhat degrade a North Korean nuclear strike.<sup>124</sup> In contrast, the United States has an advanced and proven nuclear arsenal consisting of some 4,480 nuclear warheads (of which 1,740 are immediately available) that can be reliably delivered to targets throughout North Korea by a range of weapon systems.<sup>125</sup> As noted earlier, North Korea is aware of the U.S. nuclear capability, fears it, and appears to accept that a nuclear attack on the United States would be suicidal.<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>124</sup> Should North Korea develop a more robust nuclear capability with a credible ability to target the United States, North Korea could change its calculations of the U.S. willingness to use such weapons. It is our assessment, however, that, to run the risk of nuclear destruction, North Korean leaders would have to become significantly less risk averse and greatly increase the importance they place on the reunification of Korea under the North's auspices. Such a change would be captured in the framework applied in this chapter and would lead to re-evaluating the underlying strength of deterrence in Korea.

<sup>125</sup> Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "United States Nuclear Forces, 2017," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 1, January 2017; and Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, No. 1, January 2018.

<sup>126</sup> As noted earlier, one diplomat interviewed by Alexander Vorontsov stated that "it would be suicidal to attack the U.S. first, especially with nuclear weapons. We understand that it would be the last day of our country" (Vorontsov, 2018).

Deterrence is, of course, not a static condition. There are two changes that could potentially weaken the current posture: (1) a change in North Korea's perception of its need to act to reunify the peninsula and (2) a significant divergence of interests between South Korea and the United States. Neither of these seems likely at the moment, but trends in North Korean beliefs and in South Korean and U.S. interests should be monitored.

Deterrence can break down when a state under pressure embraces unrealistic, or “magical,” thinking, which transforms a strategy with an objectively low probability of success into a preferred solution. The Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 is often used as an example of such thinking. Some analysts have suggested that North Korea's pursuit of asymmetric strategies—particularly the uses of special forces and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons—is how it seeks to overcome the South Korean–U.S. coalition's overwhelming conventional superiority. These analysts argue that North Korea realizes that it cannot win a long war and hopes to use its special forces and CBRN weapons to disrupt the mobilization of the South Korean military and the flow of U.S. reinforcements to Korea long enough to quickly conquer South Korea. These capabilities would also be used, at least temporarily, to neutralize the alliance's overwhelming superiority in airpower. This potential strategy has sometimes been labeled the “seven-day war.” Although the odds of this strategy succeeding appear to be low, North Korean planners could embrace it more fully under the stress of a perceived irrevocable change in their strategic situation or the pressure to find a workable strategy to unify Korea by force.<sup>127</sup> It will thus be important to monitor changes in North Korean strategic thinking, because the embrace of “magical thinking” by North Korean planners and strategists would weaken South Korean and U.S. deterrence on the peninsula.

The other change that could weaken deterrence on the Korean Peninsula would be a drifting apart of South Korea and the United States in their assessments of their national interests. This threat is largely mitigated by the indigenous military capability of South Korea and the enduring common security interests of South Korea and the United States. Inter-alliance tensions could arise, however, from divergent economic interests, shifts in threat perceptions, and disagreements over whether and how to engage with North Korea. The Trump administration has adopted a more protectionist and unilateral approach to international trade, which has the potential to raise tensions within the alliance. There might also be some emerging tension between the two governments over how best to address the nuclear program with North Korea. The South Korean administration of President Moon appears to be more open to efforts to improve relations with North Korea than does the Trump administration. While both allies currently agree on the need to continue to exert “maximum pressure” on North Korea until it denuclearizes, this agreement could break down if there is a noticeable

---

<sup>127</sup> IHS Markit, 2017a; Farrell, 2017.



thaw in relationships between North and South Korea or if the United States is perceived as an obstacle to a Korean détente. Some Koreans also worry that the Trump administration could take unilateral actions that would harm South Korea's fundamental interests. In 2017, for instance, the South Korean government expressed concern about the Trump administration's rhetoric concerning a possible preventive military strike against North Korea. President Moon warned the United States in a nationally televised speech that no military action should be taken without South Korea's agreement. President Moon stated that "[o]nly the Republic of Korea can make the decision for military action on the Korean Peninsula." At the time, this led some observers to suggest that alliance coordination had become more contentious.<sup>128</sup> Currently, these differences appear to have been papered over, but they could resurface.

---

<sup>128</sup> Amy F. Woolf and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *Redeploying U.S. Nuclear Weapons to South Korea: Background and Implications in Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44950, September 14, 2017, p. 8.



## The State of Deterrence in Taiwan

---

China's ambition for "national reunification" and Taiwan's legacy as a key security partner of the United States have made the Taiwan Strait a persistent flashpoint in Asia. For years, the United States has maintained a policy that aims to deter China (officially the People's Republic of China) from aggression while dissuading Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) from pursuing provocative actions that could provoke Beijing, an approach frequently described as *dual deterrence*. With the goal of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, the U.S. government has historically calibrated its approach to Taiwan to both promote democracy and discourage reckless actions that might entrap the United States in a conflict with China. A complete analysis that includes an accounting of U.S. efforts to deter Taipei is beyond the scope of this study, but the dual deterrence goals of the U.S. policy toward Taiwan should be borne in mind when considering relevant U.S. actions and statements.

Changes in the regional balance of power have raised fresh questions about U.S. commitments to Taiwan. China's economy has surged to become the second largest in the world since 2010 and a top trading partner of the United States. Moreover, China's military continues to undergo rapid and extensive modernization. The sophistication and quantity of missiles, advanced fighters, and warships has allowed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to field a formidable network of anti-access/area denial capabilities that spans well beyond Taiwan. As the potential costs and risks of a military intervention on Taiwan's behalf climb, experts have begun to raise fresh questions about the wisdom and feasibility of an implied U.S. security commitment to the island.

A shift in the status of U.S. deterrence in the Taiwan Strait potentially holds considerable political and strategic significance. Asian countries monitor how the United States handles its commitments when deciding whether to prioritize relations with Washington or Beijing. Perceptions that the United States cannot or will not honor its commitment could spur countries in the region to doubt the wisdom of forging closer ties with the United States. As China and the United States step up their competition for leadership in Asia, the strategic importance of credibility could increase in value for both countries. How Washington manages its security relationships in Asia could affect its alliances and partnerships in other parts of the world. More directly, deterrence failure could result in war, which could wreak havoc on the global economy and

inflict massive casualties. Because both the United States and China are well armed with nuclear weapons, major war unavoidably carries the risk of escalation to nuclear annihilation. Finding ways to accurately assess the quality of the U.S. deterrence posture thus remains essential to managing the risks of conflict while maintaining the strategic and political advantage.

This chapter on the U.S. deterrence posture regarding a potential Chinese attack against Taiwan proceeds in the following manner. First, we describe the methodology and sources used in the study. We then evaluate the 12 variables drawn from the initial study on deterrence, as in Chapter Two. Our analysis suggests that a low Chinese motivation to attack Taiwan masks serious weaknesses in the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence message. The appendix provides a comparison of U.S. deterrence of China in periods of Taiwan presidential elections in 1996, 2004, and 2016 to illustrate how these variables have evolved over time.

To evaluate the deterrence variables regarding Taiwan, we examined both Chinese and Western sources. For insight into China's motivation, we relied principally on official documents and commentary by Chinese academics and experts. Among the most important official documents are the work reports produced at the Party Congress every five years. These provide authoritative judgments about the country's domestic and international situation and serve as guiding documents for all elements of state power. White papers and other documents issued in the name of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee also provide authoritative judgments by government officials. Speeches by the general secretary of the CCP and other top leaders likewise offer important sources of authoritative pronouncements. Commentary by academics and experts, especially those affiliated with the CCP, can illuminate the meaning of the directives contained in the official documents and provide a sense of the debate and discussion carried out within elite circles that likely informed the development of policy. To analyze the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence message, we examined official U.S. policy documents, statements by senior officials, and news reporting in Chinese and Western media regarding military movements, diplomatic initiatives, and commentary on the perceived effectiveness of such actions. The remainder of this section draws from these sources to assess the indicators for the 12 deterrence variables across three categories.

## **China's Motivation**

A close look at the four indicators associated with the most important drivers of potential aggression suggests that China's motivation to attack Taiwan has declined in recent years, owing to China's increasing optimism about its prospects; confidence in its ascendant position relative to Taiwan; and preoccupation with more-pressing priori-

ties, such as the transformation of the economy's mode of development and party strife incurred by Chinese President Xi Jinping's anticorruption drive.

### **Dissatisfaction with the Status Quo**

Chinese leaders generally exhibit cautious confidence about the country's strategic situation. The 19th Party Congress report stated, "China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity for development; the prospects are bright but the challenges are severe." The report exuded confidence about China's international situation, advising that China should "stay on the path of peaceful development, and continue to pursue a mutually beneficial strategy of opening up." The report also suggested that China identifies with and remains largely satisfied with the existing order, noting that China intends to "safeguard world peace, contribute to global development, and uphold international order."<sup>1</sup>

Regarding Taiwan, official documents suggest that China's leadership continues with its status quo approach, featuring peaceful methods, although officials have stepped up diplomatic pressure on Taiwan to curb any perceived separatist behavior. The 19th Party Congress promoted a "peaceful development of cross-Straits relations" through "economic cooperation and cultural exchange between the two sides of the Straits."<sup>2</sup> A 2016 article by State Councilor Zhang Zhijun, responsible for Taiwan affairs, quoted President Xi as having observed, "Fundamentally, the development of [the] cross-strait relationship hinges on the development and progress of the motherland, mainland China."<sup>3</sup> Zhang explained that it had become "evident" that the development and progress of the mainland remained "key" to "determining the configuration and development of [the] cross-strait relationship." He confidently assessed that China's development "offered a solid base and reliable safeguard for resolving the Taiwan issue and realizing peaceful reunification of the motherland." Peaceful development is not incompatible with diplomatic coercion aimed at pressuring Taiwan toward unification, however. Since Tsai Ying-wen's election as president of Taiwan in 2016, observers have noted an increase in low-level propaganda, military demonstrations, and other measures aimed at curbing perceived pro-separatist behavior.<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, years of successful growth, trends that suggest an increasing Chinese advantage over Taiwan, and relatively stable cross-strait ties have generally created

<sup>1</sup> Xi Jinping, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xinhua, October 18, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Xi, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Zhang Zhijun, "Maintaining and Promoting Peaceful Development of Cross-Straits Relations to Jointly Materialize Chinese People's Great Dream of Rejuvenation of China," *Seeking Truth*, October 15, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Edward White, "Taiwan Warns of 'Rampant' Fake News amid China Interference Fears," *Financial Times*, April 2, 2019.

conditions that Beijing likely regards as satisfactory for now, even as Beijing remains wary of Taiwan's current leadership and eager for evidence of progress toward unification. For the near term at least, Beijing is likely to maintain its commitment to the peaceful development of cross-Strait ties while seeking to deter Taiwan's independence.

### **Fear That the Strategic Situation Is About to Turn**

Despite cautious confidence, Chinese officials acknowledge a diversity of threats and worry about increasing tensions with the United States. The 19th Party Congress report noted issues of a "sluggish global economic recovery, frequent outbreaks of regional conflicts and disturbances, and intensifying global issues." The report depicted China's greatest challenges in terms of uneven development but provided no suggestion that the challenge might prove insurmountable or threaten the survival of the state: "The more prominent problem is that our development is unbalanced and inadequate." The report described such unbalanced development as the "main constraining factor in meeting the people's increasing needs for a better life."<sup>5</sup>

Chinese authorities have noted with concern the deepening tensions with the United States. Under President Trump, the United States has identified China as a "strategic competitor," and senior officials have labeled China a threat.<sup>6</sup> Washington's imposition of tariffs and pursuit of a trade war has surprised many Chinese officials and commentators. China has, in turn, retaliated with its own tariffs and intensified its criticism of the United States, leading commentators to anticipate deepening bilateral strains.<sup>7</sup>

These growing bilateral tensions take place amid an unsettled international situation characterized by rising global competition and diverse threats. China's 2015 defense white paper, for example, described an "intensifying" international competition for the "redistribution of power, rights, and interests." In terms of more-concrete threats, the white paper focused on limited, localized, nontraditional threats. It highlighted "terrorist activities" as "increasingly worrisome." It also noted "complex and volatile" local "hotspot issues," such as "ethnic, religious, border and territorial disputes."<sup>8</sup>

Official Chinese documents warn against the threat of separatism and the sentiment for independence in Taiwan, a concern that has increased as U.S. relations with Taiwan have warmed. On the one hand, authorities seem generally satisfied with the trajectory of cross-Strait ties. China's 2015 defense white paper described cross-Strait relations as having "sustained a sound momentum of peaceful development," even

---

<sup>5</sup> Xi, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> White House, 2017; and Christopher Wray, "FBI Director Christopher Wray's Remarks Regarding Indictment of Chinese Hackers," Washington, D.C., Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 20, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Bremmer, "Deal or No Deal, the U.S.-China Relationship Is Beyond Repair," *Time*, February 28, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, white paper, Beijing, May 26, 2015.

as it admitted the “root cause of instability has not yet been removed.”<sup>9</sup> And despite the election of a pro-independence President in Taiwan in 2016, China’s Xi counseled in favor of staying the course: “Our policy toward Taiwan is clear and consistent and will not change because Taiwan’s political situation has changed.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, efforts by Trump administration officials to cultivate relations with Taiwan have stirred fears in Beijing that pro-independence sentiment may grow. Symptomatic of the warming ties, the White House hosted a Taiwanese mayor for a visit, and the United States has sent several deputy assistant secretaries to the island.<sup>11</sup> U.S. naval warships have increased their patrols through the Taiwan Strait as well, further irritating Beijing.<sup>12</sup> Chinese officials have intensified their criticisms of U.S. policy accordingly. A typical 2018 *China Daily* commentary warned that reports that U.S. officials were mulling arms sales to Taiwan threatened to “cross a red line.”<sup>13</sup>

In sum, Chinese officials worry about the prospects for China amid stalling reform efforts and slowing growth. And in an unsettled international environment, apprehension has increased over the strained relationship with the United States. Moreover, warming U.S.-Taiwanese ties have increased fears among Chinese leadership, even if the United States has continued to adhere to the “One China” policy and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen’s cautious politics have offered some measure of reassurance to China.<sup>14</sup> We assess that China may judge its long-term prospects to be uncertain.

### China’s National Interest

Chinese leaders unequivocally accord Taiwan the highest level of national interest. In the 19th Party Congress report, President Xi Jinping stated, “We will never allow the historical tragedy of national division to repeat itself.” He further affirmed the country’s “resolve, confidence, and ability” to defeat “Taiwan independence in any form.”<sup>15</sup> Xi’s statements reflect considerable consistency with previous Chinese leaders. For example, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao warned on November 22, 2003, that China would “pay any price to safeguard the unity of the motherland.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Zhang, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Strong, “Taiwanese Mayor Visits White House,” *Taiwan News*, March 6, 2019; and Lawrence Chung, “Second Senior US Official Sent to Taiwan Under New Travel Act,” *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Idrees Ali, “U.S. Navy Ships Pass Through Strategic Taiwan Strait, Riling China,” Reuters, February 25, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> “US Threatening to Cross Red Line of Bilateral Ties,” *China Daily*, September 25, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “What Is the ‘One China’ Policy?” BBC News, February 10, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Xi, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> “China to Pay ‘Any Price’ for National Unity,” *China Daily*, November 23, 2003.

In sum, there is little question that Chinese leaders have consistently regarded Taiwan as a “core interest” (*hexin liyi*), a term that Chinese leaders have applied to vital national interests deemed essential to the nation’s survival and development.<sup>17</sup> However, when considered against other pressing national priorities, reunification with Taiwan might be regarded as a lower priority than overhauling the economy, consolidating the CCP’s rule, and carrying out major projects (such as the Belt and Road Initiative). As a stopgap for now, Beijing remains determined to prevent Taiwan’s permanent separation through *de jure* independence.

### **Sense of Desperation or Urgent Need to Act**

Chinese official documents evince hopeful confidence about China’s security situation and future and have signaled little interest in resorting to arms to resolve Beijing’s differences with Taipei. The 2015 defense white paper stated, “The forces for world peace are on the rise, so are the factors against war.”<sup>18</sup> It assessed the prospects for world war as “unlikely” and judged that the “international situation” is “likely to remain generally peaceful.” Similarly, the 2017 white paper for security in Asia judged the situation in the Asia Pacific as “stable on the whole” and judged “regional hot spot issues and disputes” as “basically under control.”<sup>19</sup>

Official Chinese documents suggest that the country’s growing strength provides reasons to believe that time is on China’s side. The 2015 defense white paper observed, “China’s comprehensive national strength, core competitiveness and risk-resistance capacity are notably increasing, and China enjoys growing international standing and influence.”<sup>20</sup> In his article, Zhang Zhijun said that authorities had assessed the “peaceful development” of cross-Strait relations to be “fruitful.” Accordingly, Xi has directed increased efforts to “deepen the development of cross-Strait economic and social integration.” Xi reportedly emphasized that “we will continue pushing cross-Strait exchanges and cooperation in various sectors” and “deepen the development of cross-Strait economic and social integration.”<sup>21</sup>

These same sources acknowledge persistent strains in the cross-Strait relationship. Commentaries in Chinese journals and news sources anticipate that relations will cool, given Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s policy inclinations and the warming U.S.-Taiwanese relationship. One commentator warned, “Both sides of the Strait are facing a long period of coolness, and it may escalate into confrontation.” However, the com-

<sup>17</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Peaceful Development*, white paper, Beijing, September 6, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, white paper, Beijing, January 11, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Zhang, 2016.



mentator confidently noted that China had “defeated crazy Chen Shuibian” (former leader of Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party [DPP]) and his attempt to advance Taiwan independence and that China could carry out the ongoing struggle in a “calm” manner through such measures as “downgrading exchanges” between the two sides and “squeezing the DPP’s international activities.”<sup>22</sup>

In sum, Chinese leaders remain wary of Taiwan’s President Tsai and warming U.S.-Taiwanese ties but regard the overall strategic situation and the cross-Strait situation as stable. Taipei’s largely nonconfrontational posture, its military weakness, and the trajectory of PLA modernization and economic growth, though slowing, continue to provide Beijing with reasons to believe that its leverage may increase over time.

### Assessment

A close look at each of the four motivation-related variables suggests that China’s motivation for attacking Taiwan remains low. Indeed, a look at China’s posture regarding Taiwanese elections since 1996, as described in the appendix, suggests that Beijing’s anxiety over Taiwan appears to have eased over time, at least through about 2016. Beijing’s confidence about its strategic situation has grown, and although the pace of cross-Strait unification might be disappointing to Beijing, tensions had eased through at least 2018 (when this research was completed). This statement does not imply a projection for future events, only a current judgment. Some more-recent Chinese statements have been exceptionally bellicose in explicitly preserving the use of force as an eventual option for ensuring unification, and China’s degree of confidence that trends are moving in the direction of unification could change.<sup>23</sup> This, indeed, is precisely the danger that this analysis highlights: Because of the decaying credibility of the military and political components of deterrence, highly changeable Chinese perceptions are the major factors keeping deterrence robust.

Part of the reason for China’s current patience is that long-term trends offer reasons for optimism. The country’s periphery is largely peaceful and stable; the economy, though slowing, continues to enjoy steady growth; and China’s modernizing military has gained a clear edge over Taiwan’s atrophying armed forces. The ruling CCP has also realized that the country’s long-term prospects will ultimately depend on its ability to deliver prosperity and ensure competent governance, and it has accordingly prioritized these goals over unification.

Despite these positive trends, Beijing has reason to fear that the situation could worsen. Tensions with the United States have deepened over a broad range of issues, and Washington’s cultivation of ties with Taipei has stirred fears in Beijing about the future trajectory of the U.S.-Taiwanese relationship. Loss of Taiwan to independence

<sup>22</sup> “Editorial: Cross Straits Coolness Has Become a Fact, the DPP Must Be Stopped,” *Global Times*, June 1, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Chris Buckley and Chris Horton, “Xi Jinping Warns Taiwan That Unification Is the Goal and Force Is an Option,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2019.

would undoubtedly inflict a severe blow on the ruling party's credibility, and the leaders have therefore focused their rhetoric and military preparations on preventing that possibility. However, so long as Taiwan avoids moves to *de jure* independence, Beijing has little incentive to provoke a crisis or conflict with Taiwan. For the near term, at least, these variables favor continued deterrence against Chinese aggression, as summarized in Table 3.1. In each table in this chapter, the color-coding represents our judgments based on the evidence gathered in the research. Green represents strong deterrence, gray represents mixed deterrence, and red represents weak deterrence.

### Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message

For years, U.S. officials have provided ambiguous or contradictory statements regarding the U.S. commitment to Taiwan, reflecting, in part, the tensions inherent in the U.S. policy. On the one hand, Washington seeks to deter China from aggression, and this desire provides an incentive for U.S. officials to maintain ambiguity about the possibility of U.S. intervention in a cross-Strait conflict. On the other hand, Washington also seeks to dissuade Taipei from rash actions that could entrap the United States in an unwanted war with China. By refraining from clarifying the conditions that might trigger U.S. military involvement, Washington hopes to induce caution in Taipei regarding actions that might provoke Beijing. The tensions in the U.S. policy regarding Taiwan are further complicated by the tendency of Congress to involve itself in Taiwanese policy by passing legislation or bills. The net result can appear to be a confusing and, at times, contradictory U.S. policy regarding Taiwan, even if the United States succeeds in the two goals of deterring both Beijing and Taipei.

**Table 3.1**  
**Variables Related to China's Motivation**

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Dissatisfaction with the status quo	Strong	Beijing is generally satisfied with its economic growth, stability, and expanding influence.
Fear that the situation will turn against China	Mixed	Beijing is wary of Taiwan's president and concerned about warming U.S.-Taiwanese ties despite cautious confidence about China's prospects.
China's national interest	Mixed	Economic reform and anticorruption are currently higher priorities than Taiwan unification.
Sense of desperation or urgent need to act	Strong	Beijing is cautiously confident in its situation, with little incentive to pursue unification with Taiwan through conquest.
Overall assessment	Strong	Beijing has low motivation to pursue a military attack.



U.S. officials have remained vague regarding the details of what types of actions the United States might take in response to Chinese aggression against the island. In the following sections, we review the four variables in this category in more detail.

### **Types of Aggression to Be Prevented**

U.S. officials have identified a Chinese invasion of Taiwan as a threat but have remained imprecise and vague on what other sorts of Chinese military courses of action might merit a military response. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 expresses an expectation that the future of Taiwan “will be determined” by peaceful means. The act specifies that it is U.S. policy to “maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion’ jeopardizing the security, or social or economic system of Taiwan’s people.”<sup>24</sup> Some U.S. actions under President Trump could be interpreted as signaling a clearer commitment to helping the island, such as Congress’s issuance of the Taiwan Travel Act and visits to Taiwan by deputy assistant secretaries. However, even in these cases, U.S. officials have remained vague about the potential threats to Taiwan that might trigger a U.S. response.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Taiwan Travel Act reflects the will of Congress, not necessarily that of the executive branch. And in providing no clear message on how such visits might affect U.S. security commitments, the act raises the possibility that such legislation could encourage pro-independence behavior in Taiwan.

Part of the issue stems from the ambivalence that U.S. officials express toward Taiwan’s status and the U.S. policy on China. Despite broadly consistent statements, the U.S. approach to the One China policy remains somewhat ambiguous and subject to different interpretations.<sup>26</sup> For example, Washington consistently has stated its strong interest that there be a peaceful settlement, but China has not renounced its claimed sovereign right to use force if necessary. Washington terminated the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954 on December 31, 1979, and promised to gradually decrease arms sales to Taiwan in the 1982 Shanghai Communiqué. Yet, years later, President Ronald Reagan appeared to reverse this with the “Six Assurances” to Taiwan, which contained pledges that the United States “not set a date for termination of arms sales” and would not “consult with China in advance before making decisions about United States arms sales to Taiwan.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Shirley A. Kan, *China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei*, Washington, D.C., Congressional Research Service, RL30341, August 26, 2013, p. ii.

<sup>25</sup> “Second Senior U.S. Official Sent to Taiwan Under New Travel Act,” *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Kerry Dumbaugh, *Taiwan: Texts of the Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S.-China Communiques, and the “Six Assurances”*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Report 96246, May 21, 1998, p. 18.

In sum, the United States may appear to be inconsistent in its messaging even if it is successfully communicating deterrence messages to both Beijing and Taipei. U.S. officials have vaguely warned against Chinese military attack, usually couched in diplomatic language about the need to maintain stability and about U.S. opposition to efforts by either side to unilaterally change the status quo. U.S. officials have also frequently issued statements and taken actions to restrain Taiwanese authorities from rashly enacting provocative measures. Less clear are the possible U.S. responses to scenarios short of unilateral actions to change the status quo. Officials have abstained from indicating whether Washington would regard Chinese coercive activities below the threshold of military attack as meriting a response, for example.

### **Actions to Be Taken in the Event of Aggression**

U.S. officials have offered vague and inconsistent language regarding potential U.S. actions in the event of a conflict between China and Taiwan—again, partly reflecting the imperative to deter both Beijing and Taipei from rash actions. The U.S. security commitment to Taiwan draws principally from the Taiwan Relations Act, which authorizes the President and Congress to “determine, in accordance with constitutional processes, appropriate action by the United States” in response to “any threat to the security or the social or economic system of the people on Taiwan and any danger to the interests of the United States arising therefrom.”<sup>28</sup> Military force is not explicitly mentioned, but it falls within the category of appropriate action that the United States could take.

Commentators have widely noted that the United States has adopted a deliberate policy of inconsistency and ambiguity as a way to restrain both Taiwan and China. For example, commentators have described Washington’s approach during the later years of Taiwan’s Lee Teng-hui (1988–2000) and most of the Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) administrations as one of *dual deterrence*. Under dual deterrence, the United States issued a combination of warnings and reassurances to both China and Taiwan to prevent either from unilaterally changing the status quo.<sup>29</sup> Others have proposed the concept of *strategic ambiguity*, which they similarly claim has served the United States well by encouraging restraint by both Taiwan and China.<sup>30</sup>

U.S. officials have signaled to China that the United States does not necessarily have an obligation to aid Taiwan if the island precipitated rash actions. In 2006, Senator John Warner, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told ADM William Fallon, commander of U.S. Pacific Command, at a committee

---

<sup>28</sup> Dumbaugh, 1998, pp. 2–3.

<sup>29</sup> Richard C. Bush, *Taiwan’s January 2016 Elections and Their Implications for Relations with China and the United States*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Asia Working Group Paper 1, December 2015b, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Brett V. Benson and Emerson M. S. Niou, *Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity: US Security Commitment to Taiwan*, November 12, 2001.

hearing on March 7, 2006, that “if that conflict were precipitated by just inappropriate and wrongful politics generated by the Taiwanese elected officials, I’m not entirely sure that this nation would come full force to their rescue if they created that problem.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, during his meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao in 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush stated that he opposed Chen’s efforts to change the status quo. Further complicating the U.S. message, congressmen of the House of Representatives’ Taiwan caucus criticized this statement as a victory for Beijing at the expense of Taiwan’s democratic reforms.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, U.S. officials have cultivated a deliberately ambiguous policy regarding security commitments toward Taiwan as a means of restraining Taipei and deterring Beijing, thereby achieving the U.S. objectives of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Deliberately vague stances about possible U.S. military response options serve goals that are inherently in tension with one another.

### **Forceful and Timely Communication**

U.S. officials have generally avoided making forceful statements to China regarding the U.S. obligation to Taiwan. Without clear statements, observers have sought to infer U.S. intentions through actions and limited statements. On the one hand, some actions and statements have hinted at a stepped-up commitment to Taiwan—for example, remarks from a U.S. diplomat that U.S. military contacts with Taiwan’s military have “nearly doubled” in recent years.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, some officials have made statements that seem to privilege China’s interests over Taiwan. On a 2011 tour of Asia, for example, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted at a press conference that the Chinese had been given a “heads-up” on an arms package to Taiwan.<sup>34</sup>

For years after the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, U.S. officials displayed a declining willingness to project a forceful message to deter China. Throughout most of the 2000s and 2010s, U.S. officials sought to balance messages of deterrence with gestures that reassured Beijing of U.S. respect for Chinese sensitivities about the island. However, U.S. efforts to cultivate defense relations with Taiwan under President Trump have signaled a less accommodating stance. Even with the strengthening military relationship between the United States and Taiwan, Washington has, in many ways, followed the pattern of dual deterrence in refraining from pledges to Taiwan’s security or otherwise communicating forceful threats against Beijing.

---

<sup>31</sup> Senior US Senator Warns Taiwan Not to Precipitate a Crisis with China,” Voice of America, October 31, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Thornton, “Taiwan: A Vital Partner in East Asia,” U.S. State Department, May 21, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> “Panetta Praises China for Response to Taiwan Arms Sales,” Voice of America, October 22, 2011.

### Assessment

The four variables in this category suggest that the U.S. message toward both Taipei and Beijing has been contradictory at times. U.S. officials have generally hinted that U.S. military assistance to Taiwan would be conditioned on unprovoked Chinese aggression and, even then, would be employed primarily to enable Taiwan's defense; at the same time, officials have emphasized that rash actions to promote Taiwan independence may not merit U.S. military backing. Although this broad policy has generally remained consistent, U.S. officials have not clarified how Washington might respond to Chinese military coercive actions that fall below the threshold of unprovoked military attack. Moreover, gestures, actions, and statements intended to deter both Taipei and Beijing have frequently resulted in the appearance of an infrequent, inconsistent, and hesitant U.S. commitment.

U.S.-Chinese economic and strategic interests have gained in importance to both countries, and neither side seems inclined to risk provoking a conflict. Despite these broader incentives toward cooperation, U.S. policy under President Trump has leaned toward a more sharply competitive nature and adopted a closer embrace of Taiwan, albeit still under the One China policy. The overall effect on deterrence may have shifted slightly toward a clearer resolve, but the change should not be overstated. Table 3.2 summarizes the clarity of the U.S. deterrence message, which we assess to be mixed.

**Table 3.2**  
Variables Related to the Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Taiwan

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Clarity on the types of aggression to be deterred	Mixed	U.S. officials have maintained an ambiguous stance, urging "peaceful" resolution.
Clarity on the actions that will follow attack	Mixed	U.S. policy has conditioned a potential response to Chinese aggression while renouncing U.S. backing for Taiwan independence activities.
Forceful communication	Weak	U.S. officials have generally adopted a restrained response to Chinese saber-rattling at Taiwan.
Timeliness of warnings	Mixed	There have been no recent large-scale military crises; in general, U.S. officials rarely comment on Chinese-Taiwanese developments.
Overall assessment	Mixed	The U.S. deterrent posture is not as unqualified as in cases of formal alliance; communication is uneven.

## Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message

The credibility of the U.S. deterrence message depends, in part, on the combined might of U.S. and Taiwanese military forces against Chinese forces. While China's increasing military capability has raised the potential cost and risk of U.S. military intervention and underscored Taiwan's declining capability, the Chinese military's ability to invade and subjugate Taiwan remains questionable, owing partly to the PLA's inexperience with combat operations and to the inherent challenges of executing an opposed amphibious invasion.

### Strength of the Local Military Credibility

Taiwan's military strength has been widely appraised as being in deep decline relative to China's. Taiwan's deteriorating military situation has increased the value and urgency of U.S. military assistance in any conflict with China.<sup>35</sup> Taiwan's spending woes have affected several defense programs, including a planned transition to an all-volunteer force. Scheduled to be completed in 2014, the transition has been indefinitely put on hold due to resource constraints and manpower shortfalls.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, since approximately 2009, the Taiwan military has focused on developing and fielding innovative and asymmetric platforms and weapon systems, including a fleet of stealthy patrol craft and additional mobile missile squadrons and radars.<sup>37</sup>

Taiwan's military remains numerically inferior to that of China in every category of weapon and platform. According to the OSD's *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, China has 190,000 troops in the area, compared with Taiwan's 130,000 troops, but China can easily deploy more troops from its force of 850,000 personnel. China has about 2,000 tanks and 2,600 artillery pieces near the Taiwan Strait, compared with Taiwan's 1,000 tanks and 1,600 artillery pieces. These ratios average less than 2:1, but China can augment its forces with units from other parts of the country. China's surface ships also far outnumber Taiwan's. And China's aircraft advantage is overwhelming as well: China has 1,700 fighter aircraft to Taiwan's 400, as well as 200 bombers while Taiwan has none.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Craig Murray and Kyle Churchman, *Taiwan's Declining Defense Spending Could Jeopardize Military Preparedness*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 11, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Easton, Mark Stokes, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Arthur Chan, *Transformation of Taiwan's Reserve Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1757-OSD, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> William Lowther, "National Self-Defense Key to Peace, Stability: Official," *Taipei Times*, May 1, 2013; and Phillip Saunders, "The 2013 Quadrennial Defense Review of the ROC," presentation, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, April 29, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> OSD, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2017, pp. 93–95.

Observers have also begun to raise questions about the relative strength of U.S. military forces available to fight in a Taiwan contingency, especially given the PLA's increasingly robust array of anti-access/area denial capabilities. According to a 2015 RAND study, "a Taiwan [conflict] scenario will be extremely competitive by 2017, with China able to challenge U.S. capabilities in a wide range of areas."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, a 2015 Congressional Research Service study on China's naval modernization observed that China's improving naval capabilities could pose a "challenge in the Western Pacific to the U.S. Navy's ability to achieve and maintain control of blue-water ocean areas in wartime—the first such challenge the U.S. Navy has faced since the end of the Cold War."<sup>40</sup>

In sum, the credibility of military deterrence has arguably eroded in the face of China's growing military capability, Taiwan's declining military readiness, and the eroding position of U.S. forces regarding a potential military intervention.

### **Automaticity of a U.S. Response**

U.S. officials have carefully avoided language that might obligate the United States to involve itself in any conflict with China. The last time a U.S. President suggested anything resembling an automatic response was in 2001, when President Bush stated that the United States would do "whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan.<sup>41</sup> But even then, officials quickly backed away from the statement, and the administration avoided repeating such language for the rest of Bush's tenure.

### **U.S. Political Commitment**

There are sound reasons for an adversary to both believe and question the U.S. willingness to fulfill its commitments to employ military forces against a capable adversary. On the one hand, Washington has fulfilled its pledges to carry out military operations against adversaries that pose a threat, as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated. Recent U.S. actions to strengthen its political and military relationship with Taiwan also underscore the importance placed on ties with Taipei, raising the credibility of potential U.S. commitments to the island. On the other hand, the United States has hesitated to use force against more-powerful adversaries or when the risks of escalation have seemed especially great. In 2012, President Obama posed a redline in which he promised that Syria's use of chemical weapons would result in military retaliation, but

---

<sup>39</sup> Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015, p. 330.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33153, May 31, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> David E. Sanger, "U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says," *New York Times*, April 26, 2001.



he did not fulfill that threat when evidence surfaced of such use.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, President Trump has threatened military strikes against North Korea numerous times, yet U.S. forces have avoided such actions, likely reflecting concern about the risks of escalation.

### **U.S. National Interest**

Taiwan is an important economic partner of the United States. The island retains considerable strategic value because of its location astride a critical waterway in Asia. The United States has a vested interest in the security and safety of a thriving liberal democracy with which it shares many political values. In economic terms, Taiwan was the fourth-largest trade partner of the United States in 2015.<sup>43</sup> Geostrategically, Taiwan occupies an important piece of geography astride a vital shipping lane for Japan and Northeast Asia. U.S. Army GEN Douglas MacArthur reportedly called Taiwan an “unsinkable aircraft carrier”—a well-situated base for aircraft and ships projecting power out to the western Pacific.<sup>44</sup> In political terms, Taiwan’s democracy is among the world’s freest, an achievement for which the population justifiably feels proud.<sup>45</sup> Freedom House, an independent watchdog organization, rated the island an aggregate score of 89 out of 100 in its index of freedom.<sup>46</sup> In sum, Taiwan holds considerable economic, strategic, and political importance for the United States, although experts debate how much.

### **Assessment**

Overall, the four indicators in this category suggest a weakening of credibility of the U.S. deterrence message. The Chinese gains in military modernization, the continued atrophy of Taiwan’s military capabilities, and uncertainty about the U.S. willingness to carry out military operations to fulfill its political commitments provide Beijing with growing reason to doubt the credibility of the U.S. deterrence message. However, strengthening U.S.-Taiwanese ties, especially under President Trump, raises the political credibility of U.S. commitments to the island. Beijing accordingly cannot be absolutely confident of the U.S. response to a potential contingency, and any miscalculation could therefore prove disastrous if the PLA is unprepared to fight U.S. forces. Moreover, given the PLA’s inexperience and the high risks involved in any major war to subjugate Taiwan, a Chinese military attack to compel reunification would remain a high-risk endeavor. Table 3.3 summarizes these findings. Our overall assessment is that the deterrence posture is mixed, but it seems to be weakening.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Rhodes, “Inside the White House During the Syrian ‘Red Line’ Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Da-nien Liu, “The Trading Relationship Between Taiwan and the United States,” Brookings Institution, November 2016.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Mazza, “Why Taiwan Matters,” American Enterprise Institute, March 8, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Grigorij Mesežnikov, “Democratization and Civil Society Development in Taiwan: Some Lessons for Central Europe,” Bratislava, Slovakia: Institute for Public Affairs, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016*, Washington, D.C., 2016.

**Table 3.3**  
**Variables Related to the Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message for Taiwan**

Variable	Level of Deterrence	Explanation
Strength of the local military capability	Weak	The PLA's anti-access/area denial capabilities raise the cost and risk of U.S. intervention.
Degree of automaticity of a U.S. response	Weak	U.S. officials have avoided statements implying an automatic response.
Credibility of the U.S. political commitment	Mixed	China perceives the U.S. commitment to be credible but is skeptical.
Degree of U.S. national interest in Taiwan	Mixed	Taiwan represents U.S. commitment and support for democratic values.
Overall assessment	Mixed	Chinese regional military advantages are growing.

## Conclusion

In summary, then, a review of the indicators across the three categories suggests that those related to the clarity and credibility of U.S. deterrence of a Chinese attack against Taiwan may have weakened over time. However, the effect of a declining deterrence posture has been masked, in large part, by Beijing's own declining motivation to attack. As long as China continues to prioritize other pressing concerns over unification and Chinese leaders believe that peaceful methods could succeed, the uncertain risks and costs of war could prove a daunting enough reason for Beijing to avoid military aggression to compel unification.

If China's motivation changes, then weaknesses in the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence message could become apparent. Because the consequences of miscalculation could be catastrophic, Beijing would probably seek to clarify the potential for U.S. intervention as early as possible. If Beijing hoped to achieve its goals regarding Taiwan without war involving the United States, the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture could prove especially critical during such a period of crisis. Chinese misjudgment of the U.S. commitment in such a case could result in disaster.



## Conclusions and Implications for the U.S. Army

---

Our analysis leads us to conclude, based on examining the 12 variables developed in the first phase of this project, that U.S. deterrence of interstate aggression in Korea is healthy; indeed, we judged all of the major variables for effective deterrence to be robust or effective. In the Taiwan case, however, the situation is very different: Many of the variables governing capability, commitment, and national will appear to have degraded over the past two decades, leaving only China's motivations as the major barrier to a seriously imperiled deterrence posture. Because China's motivations could change very quickly, this is a potentially dangerous situation for the United States. The U.S. Army is not involved in shaping the Taiwan context on a day-to-day basis, but if deterrence were to fail and the United States were to go to war, the Army would surely become engaged in a major way. In this chapter, we outline the implications for the Army and potential steps to improve the deterrence posture in each case.<sup>1</sup>

### Deterrence in Korea

In Korea, the deterrent posture could be enhanced by reducing potential vulnerabilities that could prompt North Korean strategists to engage in unrealistic ("magical") thinking that could erode deterrence. Such efforts should focus on convincing North Korean strategists that asymmetric attacks will fail to hinder the defense of South Korea, the generation of aircraft sorties, and the flow of U.S. reinforcements to the peninsula. These efforts could include an improved CBRN posture to reduce the risk that North Korea's chemical weapons would degrade the coalition's combat capability and to ensure that any such degradation would be fleeting. This posture could include realistic exercises that demonstrate the coalition's ability to defend South Korean territory, generate aircraft sorties, and move personnel and equipment through ports and airfields during and following the use of North Korean chemical weapons. It could

---

<sup>1</sup> We note again that the research and writing for this report were completed in mid-2019. Events and developments since that time are not captured in this narrative. However, although some facts may have changed or new circumstances developed, we believe that the general interpretations, findings, and recommendations remain valid.

also include a demonstrated ability to defeat or degrade any North Korean attempt to deliver chemical weapons aboard its short-range or medium-range ballistic missiles. Finally, the United States and South Korea could further strengthen and demonstrate the ability to prevent and counter the infiltration of North Korea's light infantry and irregular forces into South Korea.

Ultimately, however, the most immediate threat in Korea is not the breakdown of deterrence but the potential for crisis instability; indeed, both sides appear to be moving toward preventive or preemptive military strategies. If both sides feel that they need to strike first to survive or prevail, the possibility of a miscalculation that leads to an undesired conflict increases. This danger is magnified by the proximity of the opposing militaries and thus the speed at which a crisis could unfold. In the long run, reducing tensions on the peninsula is not really a military effort but a political one. However, it will be difficult to reconcile the competing coalition and North Korean positions after 70 years of strong mutual mistrust along a heavily fortified border and amid the fears of preventive and preemptive attacks. The fundamental issue thus is not about deterring a North Korean ground invasion but reinforcing crisis stability.

This analysis carries several implications for the U.S. Army:

- The current deterrent posture in Korea is generally sufficient to deter a large-scale North Korean attack.
- Continued attention to the U.S. deterrent posture will be required in the event that North Korean nuclear capabilities continue to grow. There is no reason that deterrence of interstate conflict cannot also prevent North Korean blackmail-based aggression.
- One useful investment would be enhanced CBRN protection and treatment capabilities, both in the U.S. and South Korean armies.
- In Korea, as in other theaters, the Army could benefit operationally from enhanced long-range fire capabilities, including treaty-compliant ballistic missiles.
- Specifically, one scenario of limited war in which the North could test deterrence would be an artillery barrage directed at Seoul. Attention to ways of mitigating or counteracting this threat—including reducing forces to counter-battery capabilities in relevant areas and persistent sensing of the area north of the DMZ where artillery fire would originate—would represent an important investment in enhanced deterrence.

## Deterrence in Taiwan

With regard to Taiwan, the United States could bolster its deterrence in peacetime by stepping up military deployments into the theater; issuing clear statements of intent to uphold security commitments to all allies and partners, including Taiwan; and taking other actions to signal an elevation of Taiwan in strategic importance.

As noted in Chapter Three, however, the intersecting U.S. interests at stake in the Taiwan issue demand some degree of caution. Even unilateral U.S. actions to enhance its military capabilities would risk stoking Beijing's motivation to consider military action against Taiwan and possibly U.S. forces, because such U.S. actions could be perceived as evidence of hostile intent. Moreover, steps to suggest a more elaborate and unconditional U.S. deterrent involvement could encourage Taiwan to seize the moment and move toward *de jure* independence while it has top cover from the United States. This would likely be impossible for Chinese leaders to ignore, given the stakes to China's legitimacy. The risk may be especially significant because the effectiveness and credibility of the U.S. role in a Taiwan scenario can be expected to decline over time, as China's relative military capabilities, especially close to its borders, continue to overtake those of the United States. A sudden, momentary surge in U.S. deterrent promises could lead some to believe that Taiwan faced one last opportunity to move in the direction of independence.

Thus, U.S. decisionmakers face an inherent trade-off between actions to bolster the clarity and credibility of U.S. deterrence and actions to dissuade both Taiwan from taking unnecessarily provocative steps and China from using its military against Taiwan. Policies that lean too far in the former direction risk aggravating Chinese insecurity and spurring Beijing to contemplate military attack, while policies that lean too far in the latter direction could further damage the credibility of U.S. security commitments not only regarding Taiwan but worldwide.

This analysis carries implications for the U.S. Army:

- Many of the necessary defense investments, especially in such areas as anti-ship missiles and enhanced air defense, would be most properly incurred by the government of Taiwan rather than by U.S. forces.
- Broad-based U.S. Army investments to enhance capabilities for warfighting in a denied environment would contribute to deterrence in this theater. These could potentially include ground-based, long-range fire systems; improved short-range air and missile defense; and ground-based, anti-ship missiles. As part of this analysis, however, we did not evaluate the operational scenario involving Taiwan or conduct analysis of that scenario sufficient to recommend specific operational capabilities.

The level of priority they should receive could depend on the role of the Taiwan contingency in U.S. defense planning and the role of the U.S. Army in that contingency.



## U.S. Deterrence of China in Three Taiwan Elections

---

Among potential U.S. security obligations, those related to Taiwan have experienced serious challenges, owing principally to China's rapid military modernization gains and the inherent challenges of projecting combat power over so vast a distance against so well equipped an adversary. For now, China's leaders adhere to a policy of "peaceful development" of the cross-Strait relationship, which suggests that they are willing to subordinate the issue of immediate unification to the higher strategic priority of national development. However, China's growing military advantage over Taiwan and deepening cross-Strait economic integration has not led to notable progress toward political unification. The possibility that a Taiwan crisis could erupt remains a persistent reality. After all, Beijing has repeatedly insisted that it would be willing to use force to prevent independence and has refused to rule out the possibility of armed action to compel unification.

As noted in Chapter Three, U.S. policy has maintained a difficult balance between deterring aggressive actions by China to force unification and deterring provocative actions by Taiwan that could incite Beijing. In many ways, Washington has deliberately cultivated ambiguity regarding its defense obligations to Taiwan in a policy widely characterized as *dual deterrence*. Taiwan's maturity as a democracy regularly provides opportunities for the island to select leaders who could appeal to popular demand for greater autonomy but whom Beijing might perceive as advancing independence. The phenomenal rise and success of Taiwan's DPP, a political party committed to the principle of independence, has especially alarmed and worried Beijing over the past two decades. Even before Taiwan elected its first DPP president in 2000, however, China regarded with alarm the 1996 election of a Kuomintang (KMT) president, Lee Teng-hui, whom Chinese leaders suspected of harboring separatist tendencies. U.S. policymakers have accordingly calibrated their responses to possible elections and crisis situations to respect the island's democracy while restraining political developments on both sides of the Taiwan Strait that might lead to conflict.

Taiwan's presidential elections provide opportunities to analyze a periodic, regular opportunity for observers to monitor and compare instances of deterrence. Employing the deterrence framework described earlier in this report, we review three case studies

of Taiwan's presidential elections in 1996, 2004, and 2016. Through these case studies, we compare the 12 variables over the three elections to discern long-term trends.

## 1996 Election of Lee Teng-hui

After serving as unelected president beginning in 1988, Lee Teng-hui contended in the island's first popular presidential election in 1996. As Taiwan underwent democratization, Lee also pursued an ambitious policy of advocating for more international support for Taiwan's government and for a Taiwan identity distinct from that of mainland China. China regarded Lee's moves with alarm. To Beijing, he was laying the foundations for independence. Lee visited the United States in June 1995, ostensibly to speak at his alma mater, Cornell University. He also pushed for Taiwan's membership in the United Nations and for improved relations with Japan and other Asian countries. Beijing responded to these measures with angry denunciations and extensive military demonstrations in 1995 and 1996. Chinese coercive measures ultimately backfired and possibly helped fuel Lee to victory with 54 percent of the vote.<sup>1</sup>

### China's Motivation

In the years leading up to the election, Chinese leaders had reason to feel insecure and worried about their country's position. In 1989, China endured a breach in relations with the United States and the West following the Tiananmen Square massacre. The incident exacerbated fears among the political leadership and tempered hopeful expectations about the country's economic prospects. By 1992, some of the fears had eased, owing to efforts by U.S. and Chinese leaders to ease tensions. Reflecting the leadership's cautious optimism, President Jiang Zemin's report to the 14th Party Congress asserted that the international environment "favored rapid development."<sup>2</sup> Regarding foreign policy, he stated, "peace and development are the two top priorities," suggesting that China sought to avoid war and maintain a stable external environment. However, Jiang clearly indicated that Taiwan remained a high-level national interest for China, saying "the reunification of the motherland is in the fundamental interest of the Chinese nation." He also warned, "We resolutely oppose in any form . . . [or] any acts aimed at bringing about the independence of Taiwan." These statements suggest that Beijing prioritized boosting economic growth and sought to avoid war but regarded Taiwan as a pressing issue.

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the election, see Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 1999; and John Franklin Copper, *Taiwan's Mid-1990s Elections: Taking the Final Steps to Democracy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 14th Party Congress," *Beijing Review*, October 12, 1992.

Leading up to 1996, the Chinese government grew increasingly anxious about Taiwan's possible moves toward independence and what appeared to be greater U.S. support for such moves. U.S. President George H. W. Bush's 1992 sale of F-16 fighters and President Bill Clinton's 1994 decision to allow higher-ranking U.S. cabinet members to visit Taiwan intensified Chinese fears about U.S. intentions. In 1995, Jiang set a firm tone when he declared that China would "not tolerate foreign interference" and would not forswear the use of force to reunify with the island.<sup>3</sup>

The accelerant for the first part of the crisis was President Clinton's decision to issue a visa to allow Taiwan's President Lee to speak at Cornell University in an unofficial private capacity. This alarmed the Chinese government because U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher had said weeks earlier that it would not happen.<sup>4</sup> Beijing feared that this would embolden Lee to take more steps toward independence. China's Vice Premier Qian Qichen called it "disastrous," and Premier Li Peng demanded that the United States cancel Lee's visa. Commentary in *People's Daily* warned ominously that Lee's actions were "splitting up China as well as a factor undermining cross-strait peace and stability in East Asia."<sup>5</sup> An article in Xinhua denounced Lee for "arrogance" and warned that his trip could lead to the "international community's recognition of Taiwan's 'political status.'"<sup>6</sup> Evoking terms that the Chinese government employed as threats in past wars, the *People's Daily* commentator warned that "if Taiwan pursues its so-called 'independence,' China will not sit idly by."<sup>7</sup> These statements strongly suggest that Beijing feared that the situation could turn against it.

Despite political pressure from Beijing, Washington rejected demands to forswear future visits by Lee or other Taiwanese politicians. When Beijing saw that neither the United States nor Taiwan would accede to its demands, it began to consider military options.<sup>8</sup> In August 1995, the Chinese military carried out a series of highly publicized exercises and launched missiles. The military maneuvers did not have the intended effect, however, as Taiwan conducted its own military exercises in response, and the United States refused to bar future visits. China relented temporarily to allow a leader summit between Clinton and Jiang to occur in October, but the issue was unresolved.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Continue to Promote the Reunification of the Motherland," People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Robert S. Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000, pp. 91, 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ren Fan, "The U.S. Government Should Change Its Course Immediately," *People's Daily*, June 13, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> "The Protective Umbrella and Chief Behind-the-Scenes Back for 'Taiwan Independence,'" Xinhua, August 2, 1995; and Ross, 2000, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ren, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Scobell, "China and Taiwan: Balance of Rivalry with Weapons of Mass Democratization," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 129, No. 3, Fall 2014, pp. 457–458.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Atlas, "Clinton and Jiang Meet, Try to Mend Fences," *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1995.

Chinese fears and anxieties re-emerged in early 1996 with Taiwan's first free election, which Beijing feared would confer more international legitimacy on Taiwan and make it easier for activists to pursue independence. This provided reasons for Chinese leaders to regard the situation as trending in an intolerable direction. To deter Taiwan and signal its resolve, China conducted more high-profile military exercises near the coast opposite Taiwan in October and November 1995.<sup>10</sup> Chinese fears intensified when the Clinton administration issued more visas to Taiwan officials and Lee reached out to Japan. Accordingly, Chinese authorities stepped up the harsh rhetoric, with Premier Li Peng warning, "The Chinese PLA has the obligation, determination, and ability to safeguard our national sovereignty and territorial integrity."<sup>11</sup> Facing the impending election, China conducted three major military exercises in the month of the election. These included missile tests in which PLA missiles landed off the coast of Taiwan. The exercises ran from March 8–15, 12–20, and 18–25, the last of which concluded one day before the election. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly set the redlines for Chinese policy, saying that, "if Taiwan declares 'independence' or if foreign forces meddle, the Chinese government will not sit by idly."<sup>12</sup>

### Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message

The U.S. government's response to the events evolved slowly over 1995 but generally followed a pattern that conditioned potential U.S. military involvement on unprovoked aggressive action by China to change the status quo. At the same time, U.S. officials have warned that efforts by Taiwan to unilaterally change the status quo would not merit U.S. military backing. In the summer and fall of 1995, the U.S. government tacitly and publicly supported Taiwan's position, evidenced by the visa for Lee, but Washington did not clearly promise to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression or do so in a timely manner. U.S. officials did not publicly criticize the exercises. Observers noted only private criticism and a conditional promise to defend Taiwan if it was attacked unprovoked.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. Department of State criticized the Chinese exercises in a muted tone, observing simply that they do not contribute to "peace and stability in the region."<sup>14</sup> President Clinton did not directly criticize Chinese action or commit the United States to the defense of Taiwan during his press conference with Jiang at the

---

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Scobell, "Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 2, Summer 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 106. See also Hsieh Ying, "Solemn and Just Stand of Chinese People and Army," *Wei Wen Po*, March 14, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ross, 2000, pp. 107–108.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 96.



October 1995 summit.<sup>15</sup> Clinton's general downplaying of the tensions meant that the Chinese leadership believed that its earlier relatively conciliatory overtures succeeded only in eroding the credibility of Chinese deterrence, according to Robert Ross.<sup>16</sup> The uncertain U.S. response raised questions about how well the United States understood China's anxieties and may have contributed to Beijing's decision to step up the scale and scope of military activities in the following year.

U.S. criticism increased in February 1996, but U.S. officials did not publicly commit to defend Taiwan, likely to dissuade Taipei from overly provocative actions. Only in March 1996 did the Clinton administration begin to more clearly criticize Chinese actions and threaten military involvement. After the start of the March missile launches, Secretary of Defense William Perry issued the administration's harshest rebuke to that point, saying the moves were "reckless" and "aggressive" and that the United States "is prepared to demonstrate" its ability to "protect its vital national security interests." Three days after the Chinese missile launches began, the United States announced that it would dispatch two aircraft carriers close to Taiwan, and the action was described as showing that "the United States has a national interest in the security and the stability in the western Pacific region." The Department of State added that the carriers were "a signal meant to convey the strong interests that we have in a peaceful outcome" of the dispute.<sup>17</sup>

### **Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message**

By March 1996, therefore, the Clinton administration had taken clear and forceful military steps to signal opposition to Chinese actions and to bring an end to the crisis. From Beijing's perspective, the United States had high credibility regarding its commitments toward Taiwan, even though the United States had sent mixed messages. From a military standpoint, U.S. operations to defend Taiwan would pose some challenges, given the immediate proximity to the mainland and the availability of Chinese naval and air forces.<sup>18</sup> However, in 1996, the United States would have been able to dominate a Taiwan conflict in virtually all aspects, as it "enjoyed overwhelming advantages in almost all operational areas," as a RAND assessment noted.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. Air Force would have been able to quickly gain air superiority over the PLA Air Force's antiquated aircraft. And U.S. aviation assets could have expected to operate with virtual impunity, given China's lack of an ability to threaten U.S. bases in Asia. The

<sup>15</sup> Bill Clinton, "The President's News Conference with President Jiang Zemin of China," American Presidency Project, October 29, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Robert S. Ross, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 137.

<sup>17</sup> Robert S. Ross, "Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations," *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 2002, p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 332.

<sup>19</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 332.

PLA Navy similarly lacked credible modern weapons to contest maritime superiority against the U.S. Navy. China's lack of antisatellite capabilities also meant that U.S. space assets, demonstrated to be an important part of U.S. warfighting in the 1991 Gulf War, would not be threatened.<sup>20</sup> Taiwan was also confident in its ability to defeat a Chinese invasion, evidenced by Lee's claim during the election that the island could "inflict a 'heavy price' on the mainland."<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps sensing its disadvantage and fearing an unwanted escalation, China exhibited some restraint, as press reports at the time relayed that it was "sending unambiguous signals to the United States that China does not intend to invade or attack Taiwan."<sup>22</sup> Chinese leaders appear to have believed the United States' implicit suggestions that it would intervene to defend Taiwan. The deployment of two aircraft carriers in particular likely bolstered U.S. credibility; many Chinese leaders were reportedly surprised, suggesting that they had miscalculated U.S. resolve. Chinese analysts acknowledged that the March 1996 deployment of two U.S. carriers was a "strong military signal" of U.S. readiness to intervene in a possible war.<sup>23</sup> The credibility of the U.S. commitment may have also been strengthened by the delivery of several items of military hardware to Taiwan during the crisis, even though the delivery had been planned long in advance.<sup>24</sup>

U.S. commitment and credibility were strong, but inconsistencies persisted. Although the Clinton administration's decision to allow Lee's visit in 1995 had suggested that the United States supported Taiwan, President Clinton's reported "Three Noes" letter to Chinese President Jiang that August undercut this impression because it said that the U.S. government would "oppose" Taiwan independence. Moreover, in their October 1995 summit, Clinton told Jiang privately that future visits by Taiwan's leadership would be "unofficial, private and rare" and that the United States opposed Taiwan's independence but would not say this publicly.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Clinton administration made no clear statements guaranteeing the defense of Taiwan even during the March 1996 tensions. After the PLA exercises started, Washington announced on March 10 that it would send the *Nimitz* aircraft carrier to the region, and Secretary Christopher said that the Chinese moves "smack of intimidation and coercion."<sup>26</sup> However, on March 14, Assistant Secretary of State Winston Lord told

---

<sup>20</sup> At the time, Chinese missiles could reach U.S. bases only in Korea, and even those would not have been operationally consequential (Heginbotham et al., 2015, pp. 332–334).

<sup>21</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, "China Signaling U.S. That It Will Not Invade Taiwan," *New York Times*, March 13, 1996b; and Ross, 2000, p. 111.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> James Risen, "U.S. Warns China on Taiwan, Sends Warships to Area," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1996.

Congress that “the present situation does not constitute a threat to Taiwan” suitable under the Taiwan Relations Act and that Chinese “pressure against Taiwan to date does not add up to a ‘threat to the security or the social or economic system’ of Taiwan.”<sup>27</sup>

Washington’s strategic interests in Taiwan included the credibility of U.S. defense commitments, the U.S. role in ensuring stability in Asia, and Taiwan’s security as a fellow democracy. During the tensions, Lord’s testimony to Congress described the “fundamental interest” of the United States as one of “peace and stability,” which was a common refrain for the following administrations.<sup>28</sup> Yet observers have noted that U.S. commitments were “interdependent,” so U.S. interests in Taiwan also involved the United States’ regional and even global reputation.<sup>29</sup> Along those lines, the United States upheld its commitment despite indirect and implicit threats of a nuclear attack on Los Angeles when Chinese military sources warned a visiting former U.S. official that U.S. leaders “care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan.”<sup>30</sup> However, U.S. officials generally did not take Chinese threats of war, especially nuclear war, credibly.<sup>31</sup>

### Assessment

The 1996 crisis posed a significant test for U.S. deterrence. During the tensions, Chinese leaders had sufficient motivation to consider some form of military attack, owing to their fear that Taipei was moving toward separation from the mainland and perhaps even toward a declaration of *de jure* independence. Chinese authorities also feared that the United States supported Lee’s actions and that neither Taipei nor Washington heeded Beijing’s warnings.

The strategic ambiguity of the United States’ Taiwan policy complicated U.S. deterrence against China because the policy also sought to avoid emboldening Taiwanese leaders. Accordingly, the Clinton administration resisted publicly and clearly guaranteeing that the United States would defend Taipei, but after China increased its threats, the White House communicated more clearly its warnings through statements and military actions. The United States’ immense military superiority over the PLA bolstered the credibility of the U.S. security commitment. In the end, despite strong Chinese motivation to consider some form of military action against Taiwan, Beijing restrained itself in the face of a clear and credible deterrence message by the United States.

---

<sup>27</sup> Winston Lord, “Security of Taiwan,” testimony presented before the House International Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, Washington, D.C., March 14, 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Lord, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, 2000, p. 89; Ross, 2002, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick E. Tyler, “As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1996a.

<sup>31</sup> Tyler, 1996a.

## 2004 Election of Chen Shui-bian

A few years later, Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian, a member of the pro-independence DPP political party, ran for his second term in the 2004 elections. First elected in 2000, Chen had originally promised to avoid moves toward independence.<sup>32</sup> However, China sought to cultivate ties with his political opponents and largely wait out his term, with the hopes of the pro-China KMT coming back to power in the 2004 election.<sup>33</sup> Although Chen's polling during his reelection campaign was abysmal at times, it recovered as he promoted more high-profile discussion of Taiwan's status as an independent entity. These measures infuriated Beijing, which then ramped up its rhetorical opposition but stopped short of military action.<sup>34</sup>

### China's Motivation

Chinese concerns were likely driven by Chen's public support for reforming Taiwan's legal system and political institutions to consolidate the island's status as distinct from the mainland. Chinese leaders were generally satisfied with the status quo in the early 2000s: President Jiang's 2002 speech to the 16th Party Congress and President Hu Jintao's 2003 speech to the 10th National People's Congress both upheld a favorable view of the international environment and maintained a cautious tone on the Taiwan issue.<sup>35</sup> China, for all intents and purposes, was not interested in provoking a conflict but instead wanted to maintain the status quo, which meant maintaining the "peaceful development" of cross-Strait relations while preventing independence. Indeed, Jiang in 2002 said, "The basic configuration and development trend of the cross-straits relations remain unchanged."<sup>36</sup> Hong Kong and Macao had both recently come back under Chinese control—a major propaganda victory for the CCP. This also bolstered Chinese confidence regarding the cross-Strait situation. China's main objective was to avoid the island's permanent loss.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Willy Lam, "Chen Attempts to Placate Beijing," CNN, May 28, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Robert L. Suettinger, "China's Foreign Policy Leadership: Testing Time," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 9, Winter 2004; and Thomas J. Christensen, "The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> According to a 2005 OSD report, China did engage in "two large-scale amphibious exercises in 2004 (division to group-army level in size), one of which explicitly dealt with a Taiwan scenario, bringing the total number of amphibious exercises to ten over the past five years" (OSD, *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2005, p. 3). See also John M. Glionna, "China, U.S. Each Hold Major War Exercises," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at 16th Party Congress on Nov 8, 2002," People's Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 18, 2002; and Robert L. Suettinger, "Leadership Policy Toward Taiwan and the United States in the Wake of Chen Shui-bian's Reelection," Hoover Institution, undated.

<sup>36</sup> Jiang, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "Trouble in Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2, March/April 2004, pp. 40–41.

Following the 1995–1996 tensions, the views of Chinese leaders oscillated between “severe pessimism” and “irredentist impatience,” according to Thomas Christensen.<sup>38</sup> Although China initially worried that it lacked the military capabilities to credibly deter Taiwan’s independence, China’s improved economic position with regard to Taiwan in the early 2000s meant that the mainland could pursue peaceful economic integration to bolster its position, lessening the need to rely purely on military coercion. However, the DPP’s success in Taiwan’s 2001 elections “reduced the level of optimism about Taiwan” once again.<sup>39</sup> Eager to forestall further trends toward separatism, China’s leaders decided to change tack and explore greater flexibility in reaching out to the island’s leaders. In 2002, Jiang called for the two sides to “shelve for now certain political disputes” and “resume the cross-straits dialogue and negotiations as soon as possible,” so long as Taiwan accepted the “one China principle.” Chen refused to commit to the principle.

Chinese anxieties grew when Chen publicly seemed to embrace the concept of Taiwan as an independent country and planned moves to formalize this stance short of a full declaration of independence. In 2002, Chen said that “Taiwan is a sovereign independent country. . . . Taiwan and China are each one country on each side of the strait.”<sup>40</sup> As the election campaign intensified in fall 2003, Chen proposed writing a new constitution for Taiwan as a “sovereign, democratic country” and later proposed that the constitution would be drafted by 2006 and finalized by 2008.<sup>41</sup> Chen also decided to hold, on election day, a referendum criticizing China’s military buildup across from Taiwan.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Chen visited the United States on his way to Panama and made a high-profile stop in New York, reviving memories of Lee’s visit to Cornell a decade earlier.<sup>43</sup> Chinese authorities perceived a growing risk of separatism, evident in references to “Taiwan independence” (台独) in authoritative Chinese media beginning around 2000 and proliferating during Chen’s second term.

In response to Chen’s actions and statements, China began issuing more-direct criticisms and threats.<sup>44</sup> In November 2003, a senior Chinese official in charge of Taiwan affairs said, “If the Taiwan authorities collude with all splittist forces to openly engage in pro-independence activities and challenge the mainland and the one-China

---

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, 2004, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Christensen, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 70.

<sup>41</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Keith Bradsher, “Taiwan’s Leader Tones Down Referendum Opposed by Beijing,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2004.

<sup>43</sup> “Taiwan’s Chen to Accept Award,” CNN, October 29, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> For an overview of Chinese statements, see Suettinger, 2004.

principle, the use of force may become unavoidable.”<sup>45</sup> Later that month, new premier Wen Jiabao told U.S. media that China would “pay any price” and warned that “referendums of various kinds [would be an] excuse to pursue Taiwan independence.”<sup>46</sup> Mainland media referred to Chen’s referendum as a “radical separatist step,” and an official said “the timetable for Taiwan independence is the timetable of our fight against Taiwan Independence.”<sup>47</sup> PLA media stepped up the pressure, with a December 2003 article saying, “If they refuse to come to their senses and continue to use referenda as an excuse to seek Taiwan independence, they will push Taiwan compatriots into the abyss of war.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the escalating rhetoric, the threats were conditional upon certain acts, such as referenda, that Taiwan authorities eventually chose not to pursue.

Moreover, China’s political and military posture reflected less fear about the situation compared with 1996. Although it carried out military exercises, for example, these were of a smaller scale and a less provocative nature than those of 1996. Overall, Chinese behavior exhibited a greater degree of confidence than in the previous case, partly reflecting a changing economic and military balance of power across the Taiwan Strait and reassurances provided by the United States.

### Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message

President George W. Bush appeared to favor the status quo for both sides but sent mixed messages on his commitment to Taiwan, reflecting Washington’s apprehension about emboldening Taipei. Early in his administration in 2001, Bush said that he would do “what it takes” to defend Taiwan.<sup>49</sup> However, at a meeting with Premier Wen as tensions built in late 2003 in the run-up to the election, Bush chided Chen for considering a referendum and said “the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose.”<sup>50</sup> Bush also mentioned at the same meeting that “we oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo,” seemingly suggesting to China that the United States would intervene if China attempted to invade Taiwan and may not intervene if Taipei precipitated a military

<sup>45</sup> “Independence Stance May Trigger War,” *China Daily*, November 18, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> “Referendum Bill Prompts Tougher Talk,” China Internet Information Center, November 27, 2003; and David Stout, “Bush Tells China Leader He Opposes Taiwan’s Referendum,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> “Independence Stance May Trigger War,” 2003; and “Taiwan Warned of Grave Consequence of Independence,” China Internet Information Center, November 26, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph Kahn, “Chinese Officers Warn That Taiwan Referendum Could Lead to War,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2003; and Scobell, 2014, pp. 457–458.

<sup>49</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 68.

<sup>50</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 73. This was a change from comments by senior officials and Bush earlier in 2002 and 2003 saying that the United States didn’t “support” Taiwan independence, which was explained as being distinct from “opposing” independence. See also Stout, 2003.



crisis with reckless political gestures.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the Bush administration did not clearly push back when President Hu and Chinese media portrayed Bush's position on Taiwan at a meeting with Hu in October 2003 as "opposing" independence, whereas the official U.S. policy was "not supporting" independence—a nuance that the Chinese nevertheless changed through translation.<sup>52</sup> Providing insight into Bush's thinking on Taiwan, in June 2005, President Bush said, "If China were to invade unilaterally, we would rise up in the spirit of the Taiwan Relations Act. If Taiwan were to declare independence unilaterally . . . that would then change the U.S. equation."<sup>53</sup> Although the statement came after the 2004 Taiwan elections, it suggests some reluctance to clarify U.S. commitments to a somewhat unpredictable Taiwan leader and in the face of an increasingly capable PLA.

### **Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message**

The mixed signals by the United States complicated its deterrent messaging to China. By 2004, China's military threat to Taiwan was growing, but the United States was still likely to succeed in stopping an invasion. According to a RAND study, the "degree of U.S. dominance declined somewhat by 2003, but the United States continued to enjoy advantages in most areas."<sup>54</sup> Despite modernization of the PLA Air Force, the U.S. ability to strike the Chinese homeland increased from 1996 because of the prowess of U.S. stealth aircraft.<sup>55</sup> Although U.S. surface vessels, especially aircraft carriers, would become more vulnerable over time, they were generally safe in 2004, and the U.S. ability to deny China's successful invasion was intact thanks to U.S. submarine capabilities. Military trends, however, were beginning to shift in China's favor. The 2005 OSD report on Chinese military power noted that the PLA was deploying about 100 additional missiles near Taiwan per year and already had "more than 700 aircraft within un-refueled operational range of Taiwan."<sup>56</sup>

During the 2004 election campaign, Chinese leaders understood that the United States still held the military advantage. Because of the PLA's military inadequacies, Chinese leaders likely recognized the low prospects of success and the extremely high risks of war. Following the U.S. military's impressive performances in the Middle East, U.S. forces remained superior to Chinese forces through the early 2000s. Chinese analysts believed that China's nuclear capabilities were still not enough to match the

---

<sup>51</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 73.

<sup>52</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 77.

<sup>54</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 329.

<sup>55</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, pp. 334–336.

<sup>56</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 336.

United States and that U.S. conventional capabilities would probably be highly effective against Chinese forces operating in the Taiwan theater.<sup>57</sup>

However, China appears to have had some doubts about the credibility of the U.S. commitment and the likelihood of U.S. intervention. A senior Chinese official in late 2003 said, “The Americans will protect their own national interests but are expected to neither protect Taiwan independence nor shed blood for Taiwan independence.”<sup>58</sup> Inconsistency in U.S. statements led another Chinese official to say, “The U.S. should stop sending wrong signal[s] to the separatist forces of Taiwan by clearly opposing . . . Taiwan’s provocative actions of having a national referendum and writing a constitution.”<sup>59</sup>

U.S. interests in Taiwan have also been debated by commentators. The United States had signaled continued national interest in Taiwan through the 2002 National Security Strategy, which mentioned a “commitment to the self-defense of Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act” and hailed that “democratic processes [have taken] hold among our friends in Taiwan,” reflecting the U.S. administration’s emphasis on democracy promotion.<sup>60</sup> Writing in 2002, Ross argued that “Chinese leaders respect not only U.S. military capabilities but also U.S. resolve, and thus believe that American retaliatory threats are credible.”<sup>61</sup> However, according to Swaine, “many Chinese believe that, in the final analysis, Taiwan matters far more to China than [it does to] the United States.”<sup>62</sup> Washington’s commitment to Taiwan, in Swaine’s eyes, was based on interests and values that superseded the island itself—for example, “the credibility of U.S. commitments to other potentially destabilizing regional or global issues” and “U.S. interests in nurturing newly established democracies.”<sup>63</sup> Chinese commentators also doubted U.S. tolerance for casualties. One Chinese analyst argued that the United States was no longer used to large-scale casualties and that, “although the United States’ military strength is the greatest in the world, its ‘fragile’ soldiers greatly offset its other military advantages; its military intervention capability is not as strong as its military force.”<sup>64</sup> Other sources expressed more caution and respect for the credibility of U.S. intervention. For instance, an article in the Guangzhou Military Region’s mili-

---

<sup>57</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 66.

<sup>58</sup> “Independence Stance May Trigger War,” 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Suettinger, 2004.

<sup>60</sup> White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., September 2002.

<sup>61</sup> Ross, 2002, p. 50.

<sup>62</sup> Swaine, 2004, p. 42.

<sup>63</sup> Swaine, 2004, p. 43.

<sup>64</sup> Yu Yongsheng, “US Military Intervention in the Taiwan Strait: It Wants to Intervene, But Does It Have the Ability,” *World Affairs*, April 2005.



tary newspaper argued that “the U.S. military’s plan to protect Taiwan is consistent with the intentions of the Bush administration.”<sup>65</sup>

### Assessment

Chinese leaders were evidently more confident about their nation’s strategic situation and the trajectory of cross-Strait relations in the run-up to the 2004 election, even as Chen made very public moves touting Taiwan’s independence. China’s growing economic and military power was beginning to translate into a better chance to deter U.S. intervention, although the actual tipping point was much further down the road. More importantly, the Bush administration did not provide anywhere near the support to Taiwan that the Clinton administration did to Lee Teng-hui in 1996, reflecting, in part, the Bush administration’s apprehension about the unpredictable nature of the Chen government. China could be reassured by statements by the U.S. government that it opposed Chen’s efforts to expand Taiwan’s international stature. With long-term trends amenable to the mainland, Beijing had less incentive to conduct aggressive military actions in 2004 than it did in 1996. In terms of the clarity of the U.S. deterrence message, reluctance to defend Taiwan’s leader in public made that message relatively weak. However, U.S. forces still maintained a clear edge in any potential contingency, so the credibility of any security commitment remained substantial.

The long-term result of this round of tensions was that the CCP enacted a new law in 2005, the Anti-Secession Law, that provided a domestic legal basis for China to use force to stop Taiwan’s separation. This hardline measure was presaged by a 2000 white paper and was intended to codify Chinese policy preventing further provocations by Chen and future Taiwan politicians.<sup>66</sup> A 2005 OSD report described the law as a “means to pressure the Taiwan leadership, build a legal foundation to justify a use of force, and form a rhetorical counter to the U.S. Taiwan Relations Act.”<sup>67</sup> The law also could have some impact on how the United States justified its intervention in a conflict. If China could plausibly argue that developments in Taiwan were tantamount

<sup>65</sup> Li Wei and Liu Bin, “The US Military’s Plan to Intervene in Taiwan’s Affairs Exposed—Means Applied in the Plan Include Long-Range Strike Forces and Even Nuclear Force,” *Zhanshi Bao*, June 10, 2006, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> “PLA General on Taiwan Issue,” *People’s Daily Online*, March 6, 2000; and “‘Taiwan Independence’ Means War: Army Paper,” *People’s Daily Online*, March 6, 2000. The white paper said,

if a grave turn of events occurs leading to the separation of Taiwan from China in any name, or if Taiwan is invaded and occupied by foreign countries, or if the Taiwan authorities refuse, sine die, the peaceful settlement of cross-Straits reunification through negotiations, then the Chinese Government will only be forced to adopt all drastic measures possible, including the use of force, to safeguard China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and fulfill the great cause of reunification. (Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, “The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue,” February 21, 2000)

See also Edward Cody, “China Sends Warning to Taiwan with Anti-Secession Law,” *Washington Post*, March 8, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> OSD, 2005.

to separatism and thus merited a military response according to its domestic laws, U.S. intervention could appear to Beijing as direct support for independence. Although Chinese domestic laws have no bearing on U.S. military actions, their existence could spur Washington to hesitate at the prospect that intervention in a crisis could quickly escalate to major war.

After the 2004 election cycle, China also pressed forward with military modernization, including double-digit increases in the defense budget continuing through 2015. In 2008, China's defense budget surpassed that of the United Kingdom. More importantly, China expanded its inventory of weapons and platforms designed to deter and defeat U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan conflict.<sup>68</sup>

## 2016 Election of Tsai Ing-wen

The election of Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou (of the KMT) in 2008 resulted in relatively stable cross-Strait ties for eight years. Ma's tenure focused largely on cross-Strait stability and accepted closer relations with the mainland as a promising part of Taiwan's future. Ma and Chinese President Hu signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement in 2010, which opened up trade and personal links between the two sides and led to a dramatic deepening of ties over the next several years. This progress led to Ma becoming the first Taiwanese leader to meet with his mainland counterpart, then Xi Jinping, in Singapore in 2015 as his term drew to a close.<sup>69</sup>

However, a popular backlash to such ties with China grew in Taiwan. Protestors associated with the youth-led Sunflower Movement stopped the passage of another cross-Strait economic agreement in 2014. The DPP recruited a savvy candidate, Tsai Ing-wen, who downplayed inflammatory rhetoric and instead sought a pragmatic relationship with the mainland while upholding the DPP's agenda. Resounding KMT defeats in the election underscored the declining appeal of closer ties with the mainland.<sup>70</sup>

### China's Motivation

In the lead-up to the 2016 election, Beijing remained focused on higher-level priorities, such as managing the political tensions generated by Xi's anticorruption campaign and overseeing a difficult and protracted effort to overhaul the economy amid slowing growth rates. The 18th and 19th Party Congresses highlighted these issues as top

---

<sup>68</sup> Richard Bitzinger, "China's Double Digit Defense Growth," *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Austin Ramzy, "Leaders of China and Taiwan Talk of Peace Across the Strait," *New York Times*, November 7, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> For a preview of the 2016 Taiwan election, see Richard C. Bush, "The Return of the Taiwan Issue to U.S.-China Relations," Brookings Institution, September 21, 2015a; and Bush, 2015b.

priorities.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Xi embarked on the Belt and Road Initiative, which became a premier foreign policy initiative to deepen China's trade and diplomatic ties with countries throughout Eurasia.<sup>72</sup>

To be sure, Chinese leaders regarded the likelihood of a DPP victory with dismay. Beijing sought to maintain pressure on the likely incoming DPP president to deter provocative behavior but overall maintained a flexible stance. Regarding Taiwan, Xi in 2013 repeated directives that resembled those issued by his predecessors, stating, "the issue of political disagreements that exist between the two sides must reach a final resolution, step by step, and these issues cannot be passed on from generation to generation," suggesting some potential future deadline for Taiwan's integration with the mainland.<sup>73</sup> Xi did not stray from warnings against separatism used by his predecessor, but, like his predecessors, Xi neither issued nor hinted at any firm deadlines for unification.<sup>74</sup>

Before the election, Xi did set a bottom-line expectation that Taiwan's next leader must accept the "1992 consensus" or else "the ship of peaceful development will meet with great waves and even suffer total loss."<sup>75</sup> Yet this demand was not matched with any specific military actions. Some commentators assessed that China believed that it could set the conditions for stable cross-Straits relations with such statements.<sup>76</sup> However, the overall restrained official rhetoric and military posture suggest that Beijing hoped to avoid a crisis.

Despite concerns over the DPP's pro-independence stance, China has not demonstrated an urgent sense of desperation. The CCP likely feared that Tsai, according to Richard Bush, would "act incrementally and covertly to create an independent Taiwan, thus foreclosing China's central goal of future unification." According to Bush, Chinese leaders believed Tsai's apparent moderation to be a "ruse."<sup>77</sup> This echoes comments by mainland academics in 2011 that Beijing was worried about the "risk that [Tsai] would be driven to back more clearly pro-independence positions under pressure from radicals in her party," even though she was a "moderate."<sup>78</sup> Yet, in reality,

---

<sup>71</sup> Xi Jinping, "Full Text: China's New Party Chief Xi Jinping's Speech," BBC News, November 15, 2012; and Xi, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Timothy R. Heath, "China's Endgame: The Path Towards Global Leadership," *Lawfare*, January 5, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> James Pomfret and Ben Blanchard, "China's Xi Says Political Solution for Taiwan Can't Wait Forever," Reuters, October 6, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Jiang said, "China will be reunified, and the Chinese nation will be rejuvenated. The Taiwan question must not be allowed to drag on indefinitely" (Jiang, 2002).

<sup>75</sup> Richard C. Bush, "Decoding Xi Jinping's Latest Remarks on Taiwan," Brookings Institution, March 17, 2016.

<sup>76</sup> Bush, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Bush, 2015a.

<sup>78</sup> Anna Fifield, Robin Kwong, and Kathrin Hille, "US Concerned About Taiwan Candidate," *Financial Times*, September 15, 2011.

Tsai studiously avoided raising tensions by pledging to uphold the status quo, and, in a speech in Washington, D.C., in 2015, she said, “if elected President, I will push for the peaceful and stable development of cross-strait relations in accordance with the will of the Taiwanese people and the existing [Republic of China] constitutional order.”<sup>79</sup> Compared with the comments of Lee and Chen, these comments do not suggest any moves toward independence, although Tsai has also continued to resist Xi’s demands regarding the 1992 consensus. In sum, China’s distraction with higher-order strategic priorities likely motivated Beijing to avoid measures that might spark a crisis, even as its apprehension about the newly elected Taiwan president grew.

### Clarity of the U.S. Deterrence Message

The Obama administration did not substantially change the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity. President Obama did not issue policy statements on Taiwan regarding potential U.S. responses to Chinese actions, leaving open questions about the U.S. interest and willingness to defend Taiwan. The United States supported the improvement of cross-Strait ties under Ma; however, in 2009, the U.S.-China Joint Statement said that both nations would “[respect] each other’s core interests,” which some believed included Taiwan. Yet, in 2010, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted the U.S. government’s “continued opposition to independence for Taiwan.”<sup>80</sup> The slow pace and limited capabilities involved in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan—despite being larger in dollar value than during past administrations—led some observers to criticize the administration’s Taiwan policy as lacking “credibility and clarity.”<sup>81</sup> Although U.S.-Taiwanese relations improved in Obama’s second term, the U.S. government’s stance regarding the potential defense of Taiwan remained as ambiguous as before.<sup>82</sup> The 2011 National Security Strategy emphasized “reducing tensions” across the Strait, but the 2015 version did not mention Taiwan at all.<sup>83</sup>

The Obama administration had an uneven history of support for Tsai’s leadership, which could have led China to regard the U.S. stance as uncertain. When Tsai first ran for the presidency in 2012 against Ma, a senior U.S. official suggested that the U.S. government favored Ma, provoking a protest by some Taiwanese officials.<sup>84</sup> In 2016, the U.S. government did not comment directly on the candidates, although senior officials stressed cross-Strait stability in the lead-up to the election, and a State

<sup>79</sup> “Tsai Ing-wen at CSIS, DPP Transcript of Speech and Q&A,” *The View from Taiwan* blog, June 4, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Kan, 2013, p. 82.

<sup>81</sup> Shirley A. Kan, “PacNet #39: Obama’s Policy on Arms Sales to Taiwan Needs Credibility and Clarity,” Pacific Forum, July 7, 2015; and Jim Wolf, “US Business Group Accuses Obama of Shorting Taiwan,” Reuters, January 1, 2010.

<sup>82</sup> John Franklin Copper, “Obama Turns Toward Taiwan,” *National Interest*, September 12, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., May 2010; and White House, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Fifield, Kwong, and Hille, 2011.

Department press statement on Tsai's win said that the United States has a "profound interest in the continuation of cross-Straits peace and stability."<sup>85</sup> At the same time, Obama did mention the Taiwan Relations Act in several summits with Xi, which the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) considered as showing "active support of Taiwan."<sup>86</sup> Commentators also debated how U.S. relations with Taiwan might evolve with the advent of the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia, which emphasized reengagement with the region through diplomatic, economic, and military means. Although the rebalance did not explicitly mention Taiwan, the overall strategic shift to the region suggested that the United States was taking greater interest in the island's well-being. In sum, during Taiwan's 2016 election cycle, Washington maintained the same mixed message aimed at restraining both Taipei and Beijing.

### **Credibility of the U.S. Deterrence Message**

Over the intervening period since Taiwan's 2004 election, the PLA made substantial gains in modernization. The new capabilities threatened to raise the cost and risk of a U.S. intervention. According to a 2015 RAND study, "the initial stages of a Taiwan scenario will be extremely competitive by 2017."<sup>87</sup> The primary reason for this was China's acquisition of many advanced asymmetric capabilities designed to target U.S. platforms that would likely be involved in any Taiwan contingency.<sup>88</sup> The most-dramatic challenges to U.S. success in such a contingency included the deployment of anti-ship ballistic missiles and integrated air defense systems featuring long-range air-to-surface missiles, but the PLA also saw impressive gains across a broad range of capabilities, including fourth-generation fighter aircraft and modern naval ships. Furthermore, Chinese missiles developed the ability to range key U.S. military bases in east Asia.<sup>89</sup> The United States likely maintained an advantage in the quality of submarine and cyber warfare but had slid to parity in airspace superiority and counterspace operations, according to the RAND assessment.<sup>90</sup> However, despite the growing threat

---

<sup>85</sup> John Kirby, "On Taiwan's Election," press statement, U.S. Department of State, January 16, 2016; William Lowther, "US Not Taking Sides in Elections: US Official," *Taipei Times*, May 23, 2015a; and David Brunnstrom, "Taiwan Poll Looms as Unwanted Headache for Obama in Final Year," Reuters, January 13, 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Obama Affirms US Commitment to Taiwan's Security with Reference to TRA in Joint Press Conference with Xi Jinping," press release, September 26, 2015; and William Lowther, "Obama 'Supports' Taiwan in Xi Talks," *Taipei Times*, September 27, 2015b.

<sup>87</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 330.

<sup>88</sup> Michael S. Chase, Cristina L. Garafola, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Chinese Perceptions of and Responses to US Conventional Military Power," *Asian Security*, Vol. 14, No. 2, March 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, pp. 336–338.

<sup>90</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015.

to U.S. forces, the United States still maintained the ability to defeat a Chinese attempt to conquer Taiwan through amphibious invasion or blockade.<sup>91</sup>

China's dominance over the Taiwan military expanded dramatically over this period. As a result, some Taiwanese officials and experts have bemoaned the island's defensive capabilities and predicted an easy victory for Beijing.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, a 2018 Western analysis still suggested that Taiwan could avoid defeat, owing largely to the inherent complexities of mounting an opposed amphibious invasion.<sup>93</sup> The RAND study argued, for example, that the "task of occupying a large, heavily populated island in the face of opposition by some of the world's best air and naval forces (even if small in number at the outset) would be extraordinarily daunting."<sup>94</sup>

Although growing Chinese capability might raise questions about the credibility of a U.S. intervention, China is still carrying out efforts to modernize and further improve its military readiness. The 2017 OSD report on China's military developments states, "The PLA continues to prepare for contingencies in the Taiwan Strait to deter and, if necessary, compel Taiwan to abandon moves toward independence, or to unify Taiwan with the mainland by force, while simultaneously deterring, delaying, or denying any third-party intervention on Taiwan's behalf."<sup>95</sup> The erosion of the U.S. military advantage, along with the uncertainty manifested in U.S. government statements, has given Beijing reasons to regard the credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture as weakening. Commentators have begun to doubt the willingness of U.S. leaders to risk intervention in a Taiwan contingency in the face of China's increasingly robust anti-access/area denial capability.<sup>96</sup>

## Assessment

Overall, China's motivation to carry out military action against Taiwan remained lower during the 2016 election than during the other two elections examined here. This stance owed principally to the larger strategic and political issues that confronted China's leaders, including the political turmoil engendered by the anticorruption campaign, the leadership's struggle to enact difficult reforms to overhaul the economy

<sup>91</sup> For an assessment of Chinese capabilities and planning for a Taiwan invasion, see Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, 2017. For an assessment of China's challenges in a successful invasion of Taiwan, see Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Fall 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Chen Wei-han, "Chinese War Would Be Swift: Ex-Official," *Taipei Times*, January 18, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> Beckley, 2017; and John Pomfret, "Can China Really Take Over Taiwan?" *Washington Post*, January 5, 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Heginbotham et al., 2015, p. 332.

<sup>95</sup> OSD, 2017, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> See, for example, Mike Pietrucha, "Avoiding the Charge of the Light Brigade Against China," *War on the Rocks*, July 15, 2016; and Eric Gomez, "A Costly Commitment: Options for the Future of the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Relationship," CATO Institute, September 28, 2016.



amid slowing growth rates, and ambitions to carry out the Belt and Road Initiative. The clarity of the U.S. message during this period shared many similarities with previous election cycles in its ambiguity and carefully crafted language designed to deter both Taiwan and China. However, the credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture arguably declined, owing principally to the cumulative effects of China's extensive military modernization program.

Despite the unfavorable trends regarding the credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture, Beijing's disinterest in provoking a conflict remained decisive. Instead of using "hard" power, such as the military activities employed in 1996 or the harsh rhetoric of 2004, Beijing relied primarily on "soft" coercive tools—mostly unofficial economic and diplomatic pressure—to shape the policies of Tsai before she was even elected. This approach might have been informed by lessons learned from the past experiences, although the softer approach proved no more effective in vaulting Beijing's preferred candidate to office. However, in contrast with the more provocative moves by Lee and Chen in the earlier elections, Tsai did employ restrained rhetoric and avoided specific comments or actions that would have suggested movement toward independence.<sup>97</sup>

During the 2016 campaign, China steadfastly insisted that Tsai uphold the 1992 consensus and thus reject the DPP's official party platform of supporting *de jure* independence, and China continued this demand after Tsai was inaugurated. However, despite Tsai's resistance to these demands, China avoided military provocations before and after her election. This suggests that Beijing remains focused on larger political and economic problems and that, although unhappy with Tsai, regards Taiwan as a problem that can be managed through nonmilitary means for now. China's inaction also likely suggests that it remains confident about its position, given the long-term trends that favor the mainland's military advantage and a deepening of Taiwan's economic dependence.

## Conclusions and Implications

Several conclusions can be drawn from the review of U.S. deterrence in the three Taiwan elections. First, China's motivation for taking military action has proven the most important factor in determining whether Beijing might employ the PLA against Taiwan, especially in 2004 and 2016. Thankfully, Beijing has shown a declining interest in risking conflict over Taiwan. The clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture arguably proved decisive in 1996, when it was most needed. However, a confluence of military, economic, and political developments since then has eroded the credibility of U.S. deterrence in a conflict over Taiwan. These trends raise troubling

---

<sup>97</sup> Alan D. Romberg, "The '1992 Consensus'—Adapting to the Future?" *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 49, March 1, 2016.

questions about how reliably the United States can count on its deterrence against China in a future cross-Strait crisis, should Beijing develop the motivation to attack.

Second, China has clearly adjusted its approach to Taiwan over the past two decades, largely abandoning its military bravado in favor of declaratory policy and softer levers of pressure. Beijing appears to have learned the lesson of 1996 that military pressure will not sway Taiwan voters; yet, at the same time, the softer touch adopted for 2016 still did not deliver China's preferred KMT candidate. President Xi has instead relied on primarily peacetime instruments to pressure Taiwan, winning over a growing number of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic allies, pressuring the island's economy, cutting off cross-Strait communication mechanisms, and regularizing military exercises and operations designed to intimidate the island. He has also employed incentives, such as stepping up purchases of agricultural products from Taiwan's farmers, expanding potential commercial collaboration opportunities, and pledging to increase job opportunities for Taiwan's young people.<sup>98</sup>

Third, the credibility of the U.S. deterrence message regarding Taiwan has declined since the 1996 election. The root drivers have been China's impressive economic and military gains, which have made China more competitive with the United States and Taiwan. As China has grown, its importance as a trade partner with the United States has increased as well. As the U.S. relationship with China has gained strategic importance, U.S. authorities have shown greater reluctance to risk that relationship, to the detriment of the U.S. deterrence message regarding Taiwan. Moreover, as the PLA's military modernization efforts expand, the potential cost and risk of a U.S. intervention expand as well, further eroding the credibility of the U.S. commitment.

Fourth, the decline in U.S. deterrence regarding Taiwan, as summarized in Table A.1, raises troubling questions about the future. For now, China seems preoccupied with higher-level strategic issues, but its motivation could change. Beijing has clearly failed to win over the Taiwan public, and recent events in Hong Kong, including growing suppression of independent media, do not bode well for the "one country, two systems" model offered by Beijing. Moreover, if current trends continue, the prospects of a voluntary unification will dim further, owing to a generational decline among people in Taiwan who identify with the mainland. Although some Chinese analysts have begun suggesting that China will have to resort to the use of force to achieve unification, there are no indications that this view is yet shared by senior leadership.<sup>99</sup> In the event that Beijing someday concludes that the situation has grown intolerable and begins to consider military options, it remains an open question whether the U.S. deterrence message will be strong enough to avoid war in the Taiwan Strait.

---

<sup>98</sup> William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016, pp. 143–153.

<sup>99</sup> Deng Yuwen, "Is China Planning to Take Taiwan by Force in 2020?" *South China Morning Post*, January 3, 2018.



**Table A.1**  
**Summary of Deterrence Variables for Three Taiwan Presidential Elections**

Variable Category	Level of Deterrence		
	1996	2004	2016
China's motivation	Weak	Mixed	Strong
Clarity of the U.S. deterrence message	Strong	Mixed	Mixed
Credibility of the U.S. deterrence message	Strong	Mixed	Weak

Table A.1. summarizes the analysis from this appendix. As in Chapter Three, the color-coding represents our judgments based on the evidence gathered in the research. Green represents strong deterrence, gray represents mixed deterrence, and red represents weak deterrence. The table shows that, in 1996, Chinese anxieties were at their highest as a result of fears about Lee Teng-hui's pro-independence actions and a general pessimism about China's prospects. By 2004, China's strategic situation had stabilized, and leaders could feel some confidence about the country's growing economic and military strength. Moreover, Beijing's cooperative ties with Washington provided some degree of reassurance over the Taiwan situation, even as anxieties persisted about the possibilities of a pro-independence gesture or referenda by the unpredictable Chen Shuibian. Years later, in 2016, China had a lower incentive to consider military action, especially because of the DPP's clear signaling that it intended to avoid provocative words and actions. Incentives to consider military attack were also low because of China's formidable economic heft and increasingly capable military, which provided some measure of reassurance. In addition, the country's leaders faced higher priorities in the form of a slowing economy and domestic turmoil over Xi's consolidation of political power and anticorruption drive.

The clarity of the U.S. commitment has shown some consistency. Because Washington has sought to restrain both Taipei and Beijing, U.S. messaging can appear crosscutting and even contradictory at times, resulting in a mixed message. However, the credibility of the U.S. deterrence posture has unfortunately experienced deterioration since 1996. At that time, U.S. leaders communicated forceful and relatively clear statements of resolve to intervene if necessary. Moreover, the warnings were backed by decisive U.S. military advantage, owing to the weaknesses of the PLA. Subsequent years saw the atrophy of Taiwan's military and the rapid expansion of Chinese military modernization efforts. Advances in the PLA's anti-access/area denial capabilities weakened the credibility of U.S. deterrence in 2004, and those trends continued to 2016. In sum, China's declining motivation to attack Taiwan likely provides the greatest restraining influence on its stance regarding the island. If Beijing's motivation should shift toward aggressive action, however, the weaknesses in the U.S. deterrence posture could be exposed.



## References

---

“2013 Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee and 7th Session of Supreme People’s Assembly,” North Korean Economy Watch, March 31, 2013.

Air Force Global Strike Command Public Affairs, “F.E. Warren AFB Tests Minuteman III Missile with Launch from Vandenberg,” press release, August 2, 2017.

Ali, Idrees, “U.S. Navy Ships Pass Through Strategic Taiwan Strait, Riling China,” Reuters, February 25, 2019.

Atlas, Terry, “Clinton and Jiang Meet, Try to Mend Fences,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 25, 1995.

Baron, Jeff, “What If Sanctions Brought North Korea to the Brink? ‘Well, in 1941 . . .,’” *38 North*, September 7, 2017.

Beckley, Michael, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Fall 2017, pp. 78–119.

Benson, Brett V., and Emerson M. S. Niou, *Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity: US Security Commitment to Taiwan*, November 12, 2001.

Bitzinger, Richard, “China’s Double Digit Defense Growth,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2015.

Bradsher, Keith, “Taiwan’s Leader Tones Down Referendum Opposed by Beijing,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2004.

Bremmer, Ian, “Deal or No Deal, the U.S.-China Relationship Is Beyond Repair,” *Time*, February 28, 2019.

Brooks, Vincent K., *Statement of General Vincent K. Brooks, Commander, United Nations Command; Republic of Korea and United States Combined Forces Command; and United States Forces Korea in Support of U.S. Pacific Command’s Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, U.S. Forces Korea, April 27, 2017.

Brunstrom, David, “Taiwan Poll Looms as Unwanted Headache for Obama in Final Year,” Reuters, January 13, 2016.

Buckley, Chris, and Chris Horton, “Xi Jinping Warns Taiwan That Unification Is the Goal and Force Is an Option,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2019.

Bush, Richard C., “The Return of the Taiwan Issue to U.S.-China Relations,” Brookings Institution, September 21, 2015a.

———, *Taiwan’s January 2016 Elections and Their Implications for Relations with China and the United States*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Asia Working Group Paper 1, December 2015b.

———, “Decoding Xi Jinping’s Latest Remarks on Taiwan,” Brookings Institution, March 17, 2016.

Carter, Ash, "Remarks by Secretary Carter in a Worldwide Troop Talk at the Defense Media Activity," transcript, U.S. Department of Defense, September 1, 2015.

Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook," web tool, undated. As of September 17, 2019: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook>

Chase, Michael S., Cristina L. Garafola, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Chinese Perceptions of and Responses to US Conventional Military Power," *Asian Security*, Vol. 14, No. 2, March 2017.

Chen Wei-han, "Chinese War Would Be Swift: Ex-Official," *Taipei Times*, January 18, 2017.

"China to Pay 'Any Price' for National Unity," *China Daily*, November 23, 2003.

Choe Sang-hun, "South Korea Accuses the North After Land Mines Maim Two Soldiers in DMZ," *New York Times*, August 10, 2015.

———, "North Korea Hails 'Openhearted Talk' with South Korean Envoys," *New York Times*, March 5, 2018.

Christensen, Thomas J., "The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Detering a Taiwan Conflict," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004.

Chung, Lawrence, "Second Senior US Official Sent to Taiwan Under New Travel Act," *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2018.

Clapper, James R., "Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," testimony presented before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, D.C., February 25, 2016.

Clinton, Bill, "The President's News Conference with President Jiang Zemin of China," American Presidency Project, October 29, 1997.

Cody, Edward, "China Sends Warning to Taiwan with Anti-Secession Law," *Washington Post*, March 8, 2005.

Cold War International History Project, *The History of North Korean Attitudes Toward Nuclear Weapons and Efforts to Acquire Nuclear Capability*, Washington, D.C., May 17, 2005.

Copper, John Franklin, *Taiwan's Mid-1990s Elections: Taking the Final Steps to Democracy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1998.

———, "Obama Turns Toward Taiwan," *National Interest*, September 12, 2013.

Cornell, Erik, *North Korea Under Communism: Report of an Envoy to Paradise*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002.

Deng Yuwen, "Is China Planning to Take Taiwan by Force in 2020?" *South China Morning Post*, January 3, 2018.

Dumbaugh, Kerry, *Taiwan: Texts of the Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S.-China Communiques, and the "Six Assurances"*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Report 96246, May 21, 1998.

Easton, Ian, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan's Defense and American Strategy in Asia*, Arlington, Va.: Project 2049 Institute, 2017.

Easton, Ian, Mark Stokes, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Arthur Chan, *Transformation of Taiwan's Reserve Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1757-OSD, 2017. As of September 17, 2019: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1757.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1757.html)

Echols, Alex, "Exercise Vigilant Ace 18 Kicks Off," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, December 4, 2017.

“Editorial: Cross Straits Coolness Has Become a Fact, the DPP Must Be Stopped,” *Global Times*, June 1, 2016.

Eighth Army, “‘How We Fight’: Eighth Army Commander’s Guidance,” undated. As of September 18, 2019:  
<https://8tharmy.korea.army.mil/site/assets/doc/mission/how-we-fight.pdf>

Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group, “Joint Statement for the Inaugural Meeting of the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group,” Washington, D.C., December 20, 2016.

Farrell, Raymond, *Thunder Run to Seoul: Assessing North Korea’s War Plan*, Modern War Institute, April 25, 2017.

Feffer, John, “Korean Reunification: The View from the North,” *Huffington Post*, June 16, 2015.

Féron, Henri, “Pyongyang’s Construction Boom: Is North Korea Beating Sanctions?” *38 North*, July 18, 2017.

Fifield, Anna, Robin Kwong, and Kathrin Hille, “US Concerned About Taiwan Candidate,” *Financial Times*, September 15, 2011.

Foreign Languages Publishing House, *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, Pyongyang, 2014.

Frank, Ruediger, “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Speech: Self-Confidence After a Tough Year,” *38 North*, January 3, 2018.

Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016*, Washington, D.C., 2016.

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

Glionna, John M., “China, U.S. Each Hold Major War Exercises,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2004.

Gomez, Eric, “A Costly Commitment: Options for the Future of the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Relationship,” CATO Institute, September 28, 2016.

Hayes, Peter, “Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Global Abolition and Korea,” NAPSNet Special Reports, December 17, 2009.

Heath, Timothy R., “China’s Endgame: The Path Towards Global Leadership,” *Lawfare*, January 5, 2018.

Heginbotham, Eric, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, David R. Frelinger, Burgess Laird, Kyle Brady, and Lyle J. Morris, *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-392-AF, 2015. As of September 17, 2019:  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html)

Hicks, Greg, “Readout of Chairman Dempsey’s Phone Call with Republic of Korea Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Adm. Choi Yoon-hee,” U.S. Department of Defense, Release No. NR-337-15, August 22, 2015.

Hsieh Ying, “Solemn and Just Stand of Chinese People and Army,” *Wei Wen Po*, March 14, 1996.

IHS Markit, “Defense Budget—North Korea,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, December 3, 2015.

———, “Armed Forces—North Korea,” *Jane’s World Armies*, March 27, 2017a.

———, “Korea, North—Army,” *Jane’s World Armies*, March 27, 2017b.

———, “Korea, South—Army,” *Jane’s World Armies*, September 2017c.

———, “Armed Forces—South Korea,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, September 4, 2017d.

———, “Defense Budget Overview—South Korea,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: China and Northeast Asia*, October 4, 2017e.

“Independence Stance May Trigger War,” *China Daily*, November 18, 2003.

International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2017*, London, February 2017.

Jervis, Robert, “Rational Deterrence: Theory and Evidence,” *World Politics*, Vol. 41, No. 2, January 1989.

Jiang Zemin, “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 14th Party Congress,” *Beijing Review*, October 12, 1992.

———, “Continue to Promote the Reunification of the Motherland,” People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 30, 1995.

———, “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16th Party Congress on Nov 8, 2002,” People’s Republic of China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 18, 2002.

“Joint Communiqué: The 46th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, October 23, 2014.

“Joint Communiqué of the 48th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of Defense, October 20, 2016.

“Joint Communiqué of the 49th ROK-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting,” Seoul, U.S. Department of Defense, October 28, 2017.

“Joint News Conference with Secretary Mattis and ROK Defense Minister Song,” U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Korea, October 27, 2017.

“Joint Statement Between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” White House, June 30, 2017.

Kahn, Joseph, “Chinese Officers Warn That Taiwan Referendum Could Lead to War,” *New York Times*, December 3, 2003.

Kan, Shirley A., *China/Taiwan: Evolution of the “One China” Policy—Key Statements from Washington, Beijing, and Taipei*, Washington, D.C., Congressional Research Service, RL30341, August 26, 2013.

———, “PacNet #39: Obama’s Policy on Arms Sales to Taiwan Needs Credibility and Clarity,” Pacific Forum, July 7, 2015.

Kane, Tim, *Global U.S. Troop Deployments, 1950–2005*, Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, May 24, 2006.

Kim Il Bong, *Reunification Question*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, Understanding Korea Series No. 10, July 2017.

Kim Jong Un, “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year Address,” National Committee of North Korea, January 2, 2018.

“Kim Jong Un Guides Hwasong-12 Launching Drill Again,” Korean Central News Agency, September 16, 2017.

- “Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address,” Korean Central News Agency, January 2, 2017.
- “Kim Jong Un Meets Members of Delegation of Special Envoy of S. Korean President,” Korean Central News Agency, March 6, 2018.
- “Kim Jong Un—Speeches at the 7th Party Congress,” National Committee on North Korea, May 9, 2016.
- Kirby, John, “On Taiwan’s Election,” press statement, U.S. Department of State, January 16, 2016.
- “KPA General Staff Issues Statement,” North Korea Leadership Watch, August 9, 2017.
- “KPA Strategic Force Issues Statement,” North Korea Leadership Watch, August 9, 2017.
- Kristensen, Hans M., and Robert S. Norris, “United States Nuclear Forces, 2017,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 1, January 2017, pp. 48–57.
- , “A History of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in South Korea,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 6, October 2017, pp. 349–357.
- , “North Korean Nuclear Capabilities, 2018,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, No. 1, January 2018, pp. 41–51.
- Kristof, Nicholas, “Inside North Korea, and Feeling the Drums of War,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2017.
- Lam, Willy, “Chen Attempts to Placate Beijing,” CNN, May 28, 2001.
- Lamothe, Dan, “Trump Pledged to End Military Exercises with South Korea. But Will It Ever Happen?” *Washington Post*, June 12, 2018.
- Lebow, Richard N., and Janice G. Stein, “Deterrence and the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 110, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 157–181.
- Lee Chi-dong, “S. Korea, U.S. Begin Massive Air Combat Drills,” Yonhap, December 4, 2017.
- Li Wei and Liu Bin, “The US Military’s Plan to Intervene in Taiwan’s Affairs Exposed—Means Applied in the Plan Include Long-Range Strike Forces and Even Nuclear Force,” *Zhanshi Bao*, June 10, 2006.
- Liu, Da-nien, “The Trading Relationship Between Taiwan and the United States,” Brookings Institution, November 2016.
- Lord, Winston, “Security of Taiwan,” testimony presented before the House International Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, Washington, D.C., March 14, 1996.
- Lowther, William, “National Self-Defense Key to Peace, Stability: Official,” *Taipei Times*, May 1, 2013.
- , “US Not Taking Sides in Elections: US Official,” *Taipei Times*, May 23, 2015a.
- , “Obama ‘Supports’ Taiwan in Xi Talks,” *Taipei Times*, September 27, 2015b.
- Manyin, Mark E., Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, Brock R. Williams, and Jonathan R. Corrado, *U.S.-South Korea Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R41481, May 23, 2017.
- Mazarr, Michael J., Arthur Chan, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Alireza Nader, Stephanie Pezard, Julia A. Thompson, and Elina Treyger, *What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2451-A, 2018. As of September 17, 2019:  
[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2451.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2451.html)



Mazarr, Michael J., Joe Cheravitch, Jeffrey W. Hornung, and Stephanie Pezard, *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3142-A, 2020.

Mazza, Michael, "Why Taiwan Matters," American Enterprise Institute, March 8, 2011.

McInnis, Kathleen J., Andrew Feickert, Mark E. Manyin, Steven A. Hildreth, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44994, November 6, 2017.

"Memorial Report of DPRK Foreign Ministry Institute for Disarmament and Peace," Korean Central News Agency, April 8, 2017.

Mesežnikov, Grigorij, "Democratization and Civil Society Development in Taiwan: Some Lessons for Central Europe," Bratislava, Slovakia: Institute for Public Affairs, 2013.

Min Joo Kim, "North Korea Rejects Denuclearization Unless U.S. 'Nuclear Threat' Is Eliminated," *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018.

Mullany, Gerry, "U.S. and South Korea Start Air Force Drills amid Heightened Tensions," *New York Times*, December 4, 2017.

Murray, Craig, and Kyle Churchman, *Taiwan's Declining Defense Spending Could Jeopardize Military Preparedness*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 11, 2013.

Ng, Teddy, "Is There Any Way Back for the US-North Korea Black Hole of Confrontation? China's Foreign Minister Is Not Optimistic," *South China Morning Post*, December 9, 2017.

Norris, William J., *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016.

Obama, Barack, "Remarks by the President to the Troops at Osan Air Base, Osan, Republic of Korea," Pyeongtaek, South Korea, White House, November 9, 2009.

———, "Remarks by the President at 60th Anniversary of the Korean War Armistice," White House, July 27, 2013.

Obama, Barack, and Park Geun-hye, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference," Washington, D.C., White House, May 7, 2013.

———, "Remarks by President Obama and President Park of South Korea in a Joint Press Conference," Washington, D.C., White House, October 16, 2015.

Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2005*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2005.

———, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Annual Report to Congress, 2012*, Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 15, 2013.

———, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Annual Report to Congress, 2013*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 4, 2014.

———, *Military and Security Developments Involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Report to Congress, 2015*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, January 5, 2016.

———, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, May 2017.

———, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2018.



- O'Rourke, Ronald, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33153, May 31, 2016. OSD—See Office of the Secretary of Defense.
- Pak Chol Jun, “National Unity Is Vital to Improved Inter-Korean Relations,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 16, 2018. As of September 20, 2019: [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-01-16-0007](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-01-16-0007)
- “Panetta Praises China for Response to Taiwan Arms Sales,” Voice of America, October 22, 2011.
- Park Young Ho, *South and North Korea's Views on the Unification of the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Relations*, January 21, 2014.
- Pietrucha, Mike, “Avoiding the Charge of the Light Brigade Against China,” *War on the Rocks*, July 15, 2016.
- “PLA General on Taiwan Issue,” *People's Daily Online*, March 6, 2000.
- Pomfret, James, and Ben Blanchard, “China's Xi Says Political Solution for Taiwan Can't Wait Forever,” Reuters, October 6, 2013.
- Pomfret, John, “Can China Really Take Over Taiwan?” *Washington Post*, January 5, 2018.
- “The Protective Umbrella and Chief Behind-the-Scenes Back for ‘Taiwan Independence,’” Xinhua, August 2, 1995.
- Ramzy, Austin, “Leaders of China and Taiwan Talk of Peace Across the Strait,” *New York Times*, November 7, 2015.
- “Referendum Bill Prompts Tougher Talk,” China Internet Information Center, November 27, 2003.
- Ren Fan, “The U.S. Government Should Change Its Course Immediately,” *People's Daily*, June 13, 1995.
- “Report on UN Under-Secretary General's Visit to DPRK,” Korean Central News Agency, December 9, 2017.
- Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, *2016 Defense White Paper*, Seoul, December 2016.
- Rhodes, Ben, “Inside the White House During the Syrian ‘Red Line’ Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, June 3, 2018.
- Ri Chae, *East German Documents on Kim Il Sung's Trip to Beijing in April 1975*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 2012.
- Ri Hyon Do, “DPRK's Strategic Decision Is Just,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 8, 2018a. As of September 20, 2019: [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-01-08-0005](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-01-08-0005)
- , “DPRK Will Resolutely Counter Maneuvers of Wrecking Peace,” *Rodong Sinmun*, January 26, 2018b. As of September 20, 2019: [http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-01-26-0004](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-01-26-0004)
- Rigger, Shelley, *Politics in Taiwan: Voting for Democracy*, New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Risen, James, “U.S. Warns China on Taiwan, Sends Warships to Area,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1996.
- Roehrig, Terence, “The U.S. Nuclear Umbrella over South Korea: Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 132, No. 4, Winter 2017–2018, pp. 651–684.

“ROK’s Yonhap: N.K. Leader Speaks about Missiles, Still Leaves Some Questions,” Yonhap, via Open Source Enterprise, August 13, 2000.

Romberg, Alan D., “The ‘1992 Consensus’—Adapting to the Future?” *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 49, March 1, 2016.

Ross, Robert S., “The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000, pp. 87–123.

———, “Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Fall 2002, pp. 48–85.

———, *Chinese Security Policy: Structure, Power and Politics*, London: Routledge, 2009.

Sanger, David E., “U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2001.

Saunders, Phillip, “The 2013 Quadrennial Defense Review of the ROC,” presentation, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, April 29, 2013.

Schaefer, Bernd, *Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971–1975*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, December 2010.

Scobell, Andrew, “Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 115, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 227–246.

———, “China and Taiwan: Balance of Rivalry with Weapons of Mass Democratization,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 129, No. 3, Fall 2014, pp. 449–468.

Scobell, Andrew, and John M. Sanford, *North Korea’s Military Threat: Pyongyang’s Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Naval War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 2007.

Se Young Jang, “The Evolution of U.S. Extended Deterrence and South Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2016, pp. 502–520.

“Second Senior U.S. Official Sent to Taiwan Under New Travel Act,” *South China Morning Post*, March 22, 2018.

“Senior US Senator Warns Taiwan Not to Precipitate a Crisis with China,” Voice of America, October 31, 2009.

Shear, David, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Assistant Secretary Shear in the Pentagon Press Briefing Room,” transcript, U.S. Department of Defense, August 21, 2015.

Silberstein, Benjamin Katzeff, “Between Sanctions, Drought and Tensions: How Bad Is North Korea’s Food Situation?” *38 North*, November 14, 2017.

Sim Chol Yong, “Empire of Evil Is Doomed to Ruin,” *Rodong Sinmun*, February 14, 2018. As of September 20, 2019:

[http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01\\_02\\_01&newsID=2018-02-14-0005](http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-02-14-0005)

State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Peaceful Development*, white paper, Beijing, September 6, 2011.

———, *China’s Military Strategy*, white paper, Beijing, May 26, 2015.

———, *China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, white paper, Beijing, January 11, 2017.

Stout, David, “Bush Tells China Leader He Opposes Taiwan’s Referendum,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2003.

Strong, Matthew, “Taiwanese Mayor Visits White House,” *Taiwan News*, March 6, 2019.

- Suettinger, Robert L., "Leadership Policy Toward Taiwan and the United States in the Wake of Chen Shui-bian's Reelection," Hoover Institution, undated.
- , "China's Foreign Policy Leadership: Testing Time," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 9, Winter 2004.
- Swaine, Michael D., "Trouble in Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2, March/April 2004, pp. 39–49.
- Swanson, Ana, "U.S. to Start Korean Trade Talks amid Rising Tensions," *New York Times*, January 5, 2018.
- Swanson, Ana, and Brad Plumer, "Trump Slaps Steep Tariffs on Foreign Washing Machines and Solar Products," *New York Times*, January 22, 2018.
- Taiwan Affairs Office and Information Office of the State Council, "The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 21, 2000.
- "'Taiwan Independence' Means War: Army Paper," *People's Daily Online*, March 6, 2000.
- Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Obama Affirms US Commitment to Taiwan's Security with Reference to TRA in Joint Press Conference with Xi Jinping," press release, September 26, 2015.
- "Taiwan Warned of Grave Consequence of Independence," China Internet Information Center, November 26, 2003.
- "Taiwan's Chen to Accept Award," CNN, October 29, 2003.
- Thornton, Susan, "Taiwan: A Vital Partner in East Asia," U.S. State Department, May 21, 2015.
- Torreon, Barbara Salazar, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2017*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42738, October 12, 2017.
- Trump, Donald, "Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly," New York, White House, September 19, 2017.
- "Tsai Ing-wen at CSIS, DPP Transcript of Speech and Q&A," *The View from Taiwan* blog, June 4, 2015. As of September 19, 2019:  
<http://michaelturton.blogspot.com/2015/06/tsai-ing-wen-at-csis-dpp-transcript-of.html>
- Tyler, Patrick E., "As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens," *New York Times*, January 24, 1996a.
- , "China Signaling U.S. That It Will Not Invade Taiwan," *New York Times*, March 13, 1996b.
- United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command, and U.S. Forces Korea, *Korea Strategic Digest 2017*, 2017.
- United States and Republic of Korea, "United States of America–Republic of Korea Treaty," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1954, pp. 147–152.
- , "U.S.–Korea Free Trade Agreement," Office of the United States Trade Representative, June 30, 2007.
- "U.S. '2018 Nuclear Posture Review' Blasted," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 12, 2018.
- U.S. Department of Defense, *Base Structure Report—Fiscal Year 2015 Baseline: A Summary of the Real Property Inventory*, Washington, D.C., undated.
- , *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., January 2018.

U.S. Forces, Japan, "About USFJ," webpage, undated. As of January 7, 2020:  
<https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ>

U.S. Forces Korea, homepage, undated-a. As of January 7, 2020:  
<https://www.usfk.mil>

———, "Mission of the ROK/US Combined Forces Command," webpage, undated-b. As of September 17, 2019:  
<http://www.usfk.mil/About/Combined-Forces-Command>

———, "CFC Announces Start of Key Resolve and Foal Eagle 2016," press release, March 6, 2016.  
"U.S. Slightest Misjudgment of DPRK Will Lead It to Final Doom," Korean Central News Agency, March 13, 2017.

"US Threatening to Cross Red Line of Bilateral Ties," *China Daily*, September 25, 2018.

Vorontsov, Alexander, "Is the US Preparing for Preventive War? Views from North Korea," *38 North*, January 10, 2018.

"What Is the 'One China' Policy?" BBC News, February 10, 2017.

White, Edward, "Taiwan Warns of 'Rampant' Fake News amid China Interference Fears," *Financial Times*, April 2, 2019.

White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., September 2002.

———, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., May 2010.

———, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., February 2015.

———, "Joint Fact Sheet: The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: Shared Values, New Frontiers," press release, October 16, 2016.

———, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017.

Wolf, Jim, "US Business Group Accuses Obama of Shorting Taiwan," Reuters, January 1, 2010.

Woolf, Amy F., and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *Redeploying U.S. Nuclear Weapons to South Korea: Background and Implications in Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44950, September 14, 2017.

Work, Clint, "What Do Younger South Koreans Think of North Korea?" *The Diplomat*, February 2, 2018.

Wray, Christopher, "FBI Director Christopher Wray's Remarks Regarding Indictment of Chinese Hackers," Washington, D.C., Federal Bureau of Investigation, December 20, 2018.

Xi Jinping, "Full Text: China's New Party Chief Xi Jinping's Speech," BBC News, November 15, 2012.

———, *Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era*, report delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xinhua, October 18, 2017.

Ye Hee Lee, Michelle, "Trump Wants to End 'Horrible' South Korea-U.S. Trade Deal. Koreans Disagree," *Washington Post*, September 14, 2017.

Yu Yongsheng, "US Military Intervention in the Taiwan Strait: It Wants to Intervene, But Does It Have the Ability," *World Affairs*, April 2005.

Zeleny, Jeff, Dan Merica, and Kevin Liptak, "Trump's 'Fire and Fury' Remark Was Improvised but Familiar," CNN, August 9, 2017.

Zhang Zhijun, "Maintaining and Promoting Peaceful Development of Cross-Strait Relations to Jointly Materialize Chinese People's Great Dream of Rejuvenation of China," *Seeking Truth*, October 15, 2016.



s part of a series of reports in which RAND researchers examine the established concepts of deterrence and develop a framework for evaluating the strength of deterrent relationships, this report explores two ongoing examples of extended deterrence. In particular, RAND researchers apply the established framework to U.S. efforts to deter North Korean aggression against South Korea and U.S. efforts to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan. The researchers conclude that the state of deterrence in Korea is healthy, and all examined variables (including those related to North Korea's motivations and the clarity and credibility of the U.S. deterrence message) are robust or effective. In contrast, the state of deterrence with regard to China and Taiwan is mixed. Many of the variables governing capability, commitment, and national will appear to have degraded over the past two decades, leaving only China's motivations as the major barrier to a seriously imperiled deterrence posture.

\$25.00

ISBN-10 1-9774-0400-6  
ISBN-13 978-1-9774-0400-8



[www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)