



What Deters and Why

The State of Deterrence in Korea and the Taiwan Strait

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As 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.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the state of the U.S. deterrence posture with regard to North Korean interstate aggression against South Korea?
- What is the state of the U.S. deterrence posture with regard to Chinese interstate aggression against Taiwan?



KEY FINDINGS

The state of deterrence in Korea is healthy

- The United States and its ally South Korea have a robust military presence on the Korean Peninsula that, at a minimum, would make any effort by North Korea to reunify the nations by force extremely costly.
- 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.
- 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.
- Two changes could weaken the current U.S. posture: (1) a change in North Korea's perception of its

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

The state of deterrence in 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.
- 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.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 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.
- 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. However, the intersecting U.S. interests at stake in the Taiwan issue demand some degree of caution.

