

China Brief

Volume 1, Issue 5

September 12, 2001

- [Willy Wo-Lap Lam: PRC Leadership Still Uncertain](#)
- [Nan Li: Future Military Leadership in China](#)
- [Keith Payne: Can PRC Be Deterred from Attacking Taiwan?](#)
- [June Teufel Dreyer: A Political-Criminal Nexus Emerging](#)

POST-COLD WAR DETERRENCE AND A TAIWAN CRISIS

By Keith B. Payne

Over the course of the Cold War decades, U.S. nuclear doctrine reflected great confidence that deterrence of the Soviet Union could be "ensured" by a "stable" deterrence relationship. "Stable" deterrence came to be viewed as the near-certain product of a nuclear stalemate based on secure mutual retaliatory threats, a "balance of terror."

The underlying belief was that significant mutual vulnerability would produce mutual prudence, hence a "stable" deterrence relationship. It was assumed that neither side in such a relationship would pursue highly provocative brinkmanship because of the enormity of the risk involved. In the context of mutual vulnerability, rational leaders are expected to consider the risks and potential cost of war to be wholly unacceptable virtually regardless of the "stakes" involved in a crisis, and make their policy decisions accordingly.

The apparent success of this form of deterrence in U.S.-Soviet relations throughout the Cold War led to extreme confidence in the reliability and predictability of deterrence strategies based on mutual nuclear vulnerability. Unfortunately, the Cold War deterrence framework, and the confidence drawn from it, largely ignore many factors that can prevent deterrence from functioning predictably even in the context of high risks and potential costs.

BRINKMANSHIP

For example, two general imperatives can drive leaders to surprising and extraordinarily risky brinkmanship: grave foreign and/or domestic threats that leaders believe necessitate their military action. In such circumstances, leaders have in the past understood their foe's seemingly credible and capable deterrence commitments, and nevertheless willingly undertaken highly risky military initiatives. Leaders can consciously choose a high-risk course involving potentially great cost because the alternative of inaction appears to lead to wholly intolerable consequences. In the context of such need-driven decisionmaking, leaders accept and rationalize high-risk brinkmanship because of the expected unacceptable cost of inaction. There are numerous historical examples of such imperatives leading to high-risk brinkmanship.

In addition, whether a foreign leadership actually judges a U.S. deterrent threat to be so potentially severe that it overshadows all other considerations will depend on how that foreign leadership calculates loss, what other losses it fears and the goals it may pursue. How a specific leadership interprets cost and benefit may be unique to its particular culture, worldview, political circumstances, notion of honor, values and goals, or even the personal health of an individual leader. Because there can be enormous variation in how leaders interpret such factors, foreign responses to deterrence commitments often can appear wholly unreasonable, even irrational.

Deterrence can fail or not apply when leaders are very highly motivated, perceive concession as intolerable, are willing to absorb great cost or are unwilling/unable to count the expected cost, are dubious of their opponent's commitment, are ignorant of the risks they are running, or encounter any of a myriad of other factors frequently found in the real-world behavior of leaders under stress.

Consideration of a case study involving the United States, China and Taiwan illustrates the potential significance of these types of factors that undermine the predictable functioning of deterrence. In the event of an unambiguous declaration of independence by Taiwan, what factors are likely to dominate Chinese decisionmaking, and how might they shape deterrence?

Subduing Taiwan following a declaration of independence would be a survival interest for Chinese leaders. Doing so would be the priority value, and China's freedom to conciliate on the issue would be very low. Its freedom to provoke Washington, in contrast, would be high, because Chinese leaders would likely be skeptical of a U.S. threat to take decisive military counteraction. Years of circumspect U.S. support for Taiwan and the conscious policy of "strategic ambiguity" emphasized by the Clinton administration are unlikely to have communicated U.S. resolve to Chinese leaders, who will be predisposed to see softness in the U.S. commitment because they want such softness. A variety of cognitive defense mechanisms could easily move Chinese perceptions of U.S. will toward skepticism even if Washington were in fact fully prepared to intervene.

STRATEGIC PROFILE

Although much remains unknown about Chinese decisionmaking, it is possible to construct an empirically based strategic profile of the Chinese leadership pertinent to this scenario. It includes the following summary points:

- PRC leaders are rational and calculating.
- The fate of Taiwan is a survival issue for them.
- There is a political consensus in China for reunification.
- Taiwanese independence is wholly intolerable for the CCP regime.
- PRC leaders are ready to use force to deny Taiwan independence.
- PRC leaders would be willing to take significant risks to prevent Taiwanese independence.
- PRC leaders would be willing to absorb high costs to prevent Taiwanese independence.
- PRC leaders believe the "stakes" over Taiwan are far less significant for the United States than they are for China, and view the U.S. commitment to Taiwan in this regard as uncertain.
- PRC leaders consider Washington unwilling to absorb significant costs for the purpose of preventing China from subduing Taiwan.
- PRC leaders believe that Washington will be vulnerable to Chinese nuclear deterrence threats in a crisis over Taiwan.

This suggests that following a declaration of independence by Taipei, China's leadership may not be susceptible to U.S. deterrence threats, regardless of their severity, largely because denying

Taiwan independence would be a near- absolute goal for Chinese leaders. They may easily conclude that they do not have the freedom to concede to U.S. threats. Indeed, a domestic political imperative, such as the one shaping Chinese decisionmaking regarding Taiwan, is very likely to encourage Chinese brinkmanship over the issue.

In this case, Washington's capacity to deter China is likely to be undermined by several factors operating simultaneously. Despite overwhelming U.S. nuclear superiority, the Chinese may rationally see victory over Taiwan as practicable at a level of risk that is acceptable relative to the wholly intolerable consequences of successful Taiwanese independence. Of greater possible significance than U.S. deterrence threats are the apparent Chinese beliefs that: first, the stakes involved over Taiwan are much greater for China than for Washington; and, second, China is more able and willing to absorb cost and run risks to subdue Taiwan than is the United States to prevent China from doing so. In a contest of wills involving serious mutual threats, these likely asymmetries in the stakes and willingness to absorb cost and to run risks are all likely to undermine the effectiveness of U.S. deterrence threats.

"ENSURING" DETERRENCE

To establish a deterrence policy suited to these circumstances, the United States would have to make blatantly clear its will and capability to defeat Chinese conventional and WMD attacks against Taiwan and against its own power projection forces. This would require the manifest capability to project sizable and suitable forces to the theater to demonstrate the U.S. commitment to Taiwan and to deny China any hope for a fait accompli. The U.S. would need to be, and to be seen as being, capable of intervening decisively to prevent China from subduing Taiwan before U.S. forces could be brought to bear.

Perhaps the most limiting factor for Washington in this regard is the obvious fact that U.S. intervention would risk escalation to a large-scale theater war and Chinese ICBM threats against the U.S. homeland. Preserving the credibility of U.S. deterrence commitments in such circumstances would require Chinese leaders to believe that Washington would persevere despite their nuclear threats and possible regional nuclear use. Washington would have to deny Chinese leaders confidence that such threats could deter U.S. intervention, a hope to which they would likely cling. Consequently, U.S. deterrence policy in this case could require that the United States be able to limit its own prospective losses to a level compatible with the stakes involved.

In sum, a U.S. deterrence policy for this case would focus on a "denial" deterrence threat, that is, a threat to defeat China militarily while significantly limiting potential U.S. civilian and military losses. The U.S. military posture supporting deterrence in this case would be capable of limiting prospective U.S. military and civilian losses, while also defeating China militarily, that is, a combination of offensive and defensive capabilities, including missile defense. The defensive side of this deterrence threat would be intended to bring the stakes involved for Washington into greater balance with the prospective costs and risks involved in a conflict with China.

The approach described here by no means would "ensure" an effective deterrent in the postulated crisis; there can be no such assurances, particularly given the various asymmetries favoring China in this case. It would, however, be tailored specifically to the opponent and context, and, if effective, provide the enormous benefit of preventing war in the Taiwan Strait as envisaged in the scenario.

Dr. Keith B. Payne is CEO and president of the National Institute for Public Policy.

[This article draws with permission from Keith B. Payne, *The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001. (c) National Institute for Public Policy, 2001.]