

INKSTICK

Deterring a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan

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What does successful deterrence look like for the United States, and what cost are we willing to pay for it?

“Adults in a Room” is a series in collaboration with The Stimson Center’s Reimagining US Grand Strategy program. The series stems from the group’s monthly networking events that call on analysts to gather virtually and hash out a salient topic. It aims to give you a peek into their Zoom room and a deep understanding of the issue at hand in less than the time it takes to sip your morning coffee without the jargon, acronyms, and stuffiness that often come with expertise.

Ahypothetical Chinese invasion of Taiwan occupies a prominent place in the minds of US policymakers. First and foremost, the goal of the United States is to deter an invasion from ever happening, but how it can best go about doing that remains a vexing question. Differing understandings of US interests in the region, the varying capabilities of the actors involved, and Chinese intentions towards Taiwan lead to conflicting recommendations about how to ensure Taiwan’s defense.

January’s Reimagining US Grand Strategy roundtable brought members of the foreign policy community together to examine the assumptions guiding US efforts to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The group widely agreed that US capabilities are being mishandled, with the United States both overvaluing the strategic importance of Taiwan and prioritizing the sale of traditional weapons systems that are less beneficial to Taiwan in an invasion scenario. US actions also tend to act more as an irritant to China rather than a salve, risking conflict and bloodshed. The debate centered primarily on the matter of deterrence by denial versus deterrence by punishment. Denial involves deterring an actor by removing their ability to achieve their goals, often by extensive military means. Punishment deters through promises of repercussions if an attack takes place — typically economic, military, diplomatic, or political.

Below, four participants from the roundtable provide their perspectives on the role of the United States in deterring a Chinese attack on Taiwan and best courses of action for the United States and Taiwan alike.

Eric Gomez, Senior Fellow, Cato Institute

Taiwan’s best military strategy for deterring a Chinese invasion is one that relies on asymmetric defense to prevail in two critical operations: surviving a conventional strike campaign

and denying amphibious forces from establishing a beachhead or capturing a logistics hub like a port.

An asymmetric defense strategy, also called a “porcupine” strategy, uses large numbers of smaller, less complex capabilities to counter a stronger opponent instead of matching them system-for-system. For example, when facing a large navy, an asymmetric defense strategy would lean on ground-based missiles and unmanned air and watercraft instead of building larger ships.

Focusing Taiwan’s self-defense posture on asymmetric defense is a change from Taiwan’s current approach, which tries to walk a middle path between asymmetric capabilities and traditional military capabilities like manned fighter aircraft and large warships. Taiwan wants to have a flexible military that it can use to respond to a wide variety of threats. Arguments favoring flexibility emphasize that China is likely to pursue coercive pressure tactics against Taiwan, which traditional capabilities are better at countering.

Continuing to pursue flexibility, however, carries real risks for Taiwan. Traditional military capabilities are generally more expensive to acquire and maintain than asymmetric ones, and Taiwan — despite a recent spending uptick — has chronically underspent on defense. This creates significant tradeoffs between traditional and asymmetric capabilities. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is also well-equipped to target and destroy Taiwan’s traditional capabilities and the logistics facilities that support them. Without prioritization, Taipei risks fielding a military that is poorly prepared to do many things instead of doing one thing well.

The United States should use its considerable leverage as Taiwan’s primary source of military aid to push Taipei toward asymmetric defense.

Taiwan should prioritize asymmetric defense because it is the strategy that can best offset the PLA’s advantages. Mobile anti-ship and anti-air capabilities with large stockpiles of munitions are the most critical kinds of capabilities for Taiwan to build up. Unmanned vehicles of all ranges and sizes, especially those that can be operated with a small logistics footprint, are essential for conducting battlefield reconnaissance and attacking ground forces.

Operationally, Taiwan needs to use these asymmetric capabilities to survive against a Chinese conventional strike campaign and deny the PLA’s ground forces a lodgment on the island. Prevailing in these two operations is essential for Taiwan’s defense for three reasons. First, Taiwan will likely be fighting these operations alone even in the event of rapid US military intervention. Second, Taiwan’s current, flexible military posture is not optimized to prevail in these operations. Third, success or failure in these operations could prove decisive to the entire conflict.

The United States should use its considerable leverage as Taiwan’s primary source of military aid to push Taipei toward asymmetric defense. Washington should only sell Taiwan asymmetric capabilities from this point forward and support Taiwan’s defense industrial base so it can manufacture more US-designed weapons and avoid long wait times for US-made weapons. The United States should also assure China that arms sales are limited to improving asymmetric

defense and avoid actions that stoke Beijing's ire but do nothing to help Taiwan. This mix of security assistance and assurances is essential for buying Taiwan the time it needs to fully implement the asymmetric defense strategy.

Michael Swaine, Senior Research Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

The vast majority of the analysis appearing in the policy community that addresses how to deter a crisis or conflict with China over Taiwan focuses almost exclusively on the kind and level of military or other “hard power” capabilities that the United States or Taiwan should deploy against Beijing. The underlying assumption of such analysis is that China’s primary calculus in determining whether or not to attack or apply extreme pressure on Taiwan involves an assessment of the level of physical punishment it can or cannot endure or how highly it prizes the level of benefits it might gain from using force. In other words, the analysis employs a largely military-centered, material-based, cost/benefit set of measures to determine what constitutes an effective deterrence policy.

This approach significantly distorts Beijing’s calculus toward Taiwan and in the process neglects the most essential feature of any successful deterrence strategy: striking the right balance between deploying effective punishment and/or denial capabilities and conveying credible assurances to the adversary that those capabilities will not be used to threaten his most vital interests. This balance is essential because, if the level of punishment or denial capability acquired is in fact seen as threatening the adversary’s most vital interests, the adversary, rather than being deterred from taking aggressive action, will become more inclined to undertake or threaten preemptive or punishing moves of its own in order to protect those interests, thus increasing, rather than decreasing, the chance of conflict.

This is particularly relevant regarding China’s calculus toward Taiwan. In this case, Beijing’s most vital interest by far lies in preventing the permanent separation of the island from mainland China, not, as a one-sided stress on physical deterrence would suggest, in avoiding the defeat (whether by punishment or denial) of a Chinese attempt to seize the island. This is because the permanent loss of Taiwan, unlike a first-round defeat in what would likely be a prolonged effort to seize or subdue the island, would inevitably result in overwhelming domestic nationalist pressure on the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government, almost certainly leading to the removal of the senior leadership and very possibly the destabilization of the entire regime.

Deterrence in the absence of reassurance is a dangerous game.

This means that if Beijing were to conclude that Washington was in fact employing its physical deterrence capabilities in an effort to detach Taiwan (e.g., by discarding the long-standing US One China policy in favor of efforts to make the island into a formal or de facto security ally), no amount of physical deterrence would prevent Beijing from using every means possible, including military force, to prevent such an outcome. And, as suggested above, this would be the case even if Beijing faced a militarily superior Washington, because to try and fail in this instance would be immeasurably preferable to not trying at all, i.e., giving in to a US effort to detach Taiwan.

And so, when US defense analysts stress physical deterrence while ignoring or (worse yet) abandoning credible reassurance signaling toward China, they are actually increasing, not decreasing, the chance of a major crisis or conflict with Beijing. Deterrence in the absence of reassurance is a dangerous game.

Melanie Sisson, Fellow, Brookings Institute – Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology

Taiwan alone cannot present a conventional military deterrent sufficient to convince the PRC not to pursue unification by force. This is the core truth embedded in the constellation of acts and assurances that together constitute the US One China Policy, the vehicle through which the United States demonstrates its abiding interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. It is therefore not the question of whether the United States has a role in deterring an attack on Taiwan, but rather of how the United States ought to fulfill that role, which is a matter of great debate in national security and defense policy circles today.

The debate is as lively as it is consequential, and so it is important that it proceeds absent the distorting influence of two persistent myths and one common confusion. Myth one is that a strategy of deterrence by military denial is feasible. This myth proposes that the United States, with some assistance from Taiwan and possibly other allies and partners, can convince Beijing that it would lose any attempt to unify with the island by force. The logic of deterrence by denial is outwardly appealing, but it is also conceptually frail and practically implausible. Wars happen even when measurements of relative power suggest they shouldn't — either because the odds of potential belligerents arriving at similar, and similarly accurate, conclusions about their respective prospects of victory are low, or because those calculations simply don't matter. What's more, the United States is unlikely to be able to reverse the shrinking margin of observable difference between its own and China's regional military capability. This makes all comparisons less certain and denial, therefore, ever more difficult to achieve — both as a deterrent and, if deterrence fails, in application.

Myth two is the claim, largely divorced from empirical evidence, that it is only the prospect of operational failure that prevents Xi Jinping from taking a swipe at Taiwan. This myth depicts Xi as one of a special breed of autocrat, unencumbered by domestic politics, insensitive to economic or diplomatic costs, and free to act only upon his own appetite-driven rationale. Myth two thus supports myth one, insofar as it implies that there is only one way to prevent an attack on Taiwan, and that way is not to convince Xi that he would suffer losses, but to convince him that he would lose.

Some analysts suggest splitting the baby, proposing that the United States implement strategies of deterrence by denial and deterrence by cost imposition simultaneously. This confuses tactics with strategy. A strategy of deterrence by cost imposition can include denial tactics, making some attack paths less likely to succeed than others. This use of denial tactics, however, is not a strategy of deterrence by denial because it is limited and selective: it does not rely on convincing Beijing that it will fail no matter what operational plan it executes. A strategy of deterrence by

denial, by contrast, lives and dies by the sword. If it succeeds, it is by convincing Beijing that military success is impossible no matter how the attempt is made.

The United States rightly accepts that it has a responsibility to contribute to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Contributing responsibly means implementing a strategy that is built not on nostalgia and myth, but on empiricism and clear-eyed analysis.

Renanah Miles Joyce, Assistant Professor of Politics, Brandeis University

Deterring the PRC from using force to retake Taiwan is central to US policy in East Asia. Yet there is no consensus on *how* to deter the PRC. Some argue for deterrence by denial; others for deterrence by punishment. The lack of agreement is perhaps unsurprising because both options have drawbacks. Proponents of deterrence by punishment argue that it is the more pragmatic choice that gives the United States more options should it fail. To make this case convincingly, proponents need to address three core problems.

Deterrence by punishment means convincing China that the costs it would incur retaking Taiwan by force would outweigh the benefits. But what costs? Deterrence theory traditionally invokes costs against civilian populations (think strikes on cities). Proponents of deterrence by punishment suggest that costs could be military, economic, even diplomatic and could be imposed on Chinese interests anywhere. The notion of doing something, somewhere has lots of appeal to US policymakers — it is flexible and leaves the initiative with Washington.

On the one hand, more ways to punish could enhance deterrence, if Washington can commit to act along multiple axes at once. But the availability of many options, none of them triggered automatically, could undermine deterrence if Beijing expects Washington to go for the least costly option. Thomas Schelling argued that deterrence is more effective when the initiative is with the adversary — if they act, the deterrer is forced to act, signaling commitment. The less committed Washington is *ex ante*, the more Beijing will reasonably wonder whether the costs would be that steep and whether, given the choice, the United States would act at all.

Even if the United States can solve the commitment problem — let's say it is resolved to impose costs and the PRC believes it — then we confront the escalation problem. How do you punish enough to deter without risking the very conflict that deterrence by punishment is supposed to avoid? Modern states are tough nuts to crack; it takes a lot of punishment to deter a determined state, and large amounts of punishment could trigger a spiral of conflict.

Imposing military costs would likely involve offensive US attacks on Chinese assets and infrastructure, whether on the PRC mainland or abroad. Economic punishment, if severe enough, could be equally escalatory; a blockade of Chinese commerce, for example, could be seen as an act of war. Lesser measures that minimize escalation risk — avoiding kinetic attacks, for example — would constrain US ability to impose costs and make it the one being deterred, not the other way around.

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Imposing truly painful punishment is not only risky, it is also expensive, which raises the credibility problem. How credible is a threat of punishment that will hurt me as much as it hurts you? Efforts to punish China, especially economically, will impose potentially steep costs on the countries doing the punishing. Even if the United States' powerful economy can withstand the infliction of economic costs on China — through imposition of a severe sanctions regime, for example — crippling China will require the participation of many smaller allies with fewer resources to cushion the blow. Allies will face strong temptations to choose cheaper (and less effective) punishments. If preserving Taiwan's status is a vital interest, then paying high costs to maintain the status quo is worth it; if not, then the case for deterrence by punishment weakens.

Ultimately, both deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial have serious limitations. The best deterrence strategy is likely one that combines elements of both, imposing costs and reducing the likelihood that China can get what it wants by force.

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