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### **Pitfalls in Deterring a Taiwan Strait Conflict: “Unpreparable War”**

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#### **Introduction**

With the end of the Cold War, the fear of all-out nuclear war drastically declined. However, armed conflicts often break out in the world: the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War in the Middle East; the prolonged Afghanistan War in Central Asia; and multiple ethnic conflicts in Africa. Even in Europe, conflicts have been experienced in Bosnia, Kosovo, Georgia, and Crimea. Compared to these regions, East Asia enjoyed relative peace and stability in the three decades after the end of the Cold War. But this stability in Asia was an ostensible one, as the sources of armed conflicts have not been removed at all from Asia. Two leftovers from the Cold War, the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, remain serious geostrategic flash points with the danger of nuclear escalation.

Reflecting China’s highly assertive behavior on Taiwan and reigniting the era of “great power competition,” concerns about the situation in the Taiwan Strait are growing.<sup>1</sup> Because of China’s significant decades-long effort to modernize its military both in quality and quantity, the ability to deter or defeat China’s possible attempt to forcibly reunify Taiwan is getting more and more challenging.

If deterrence in the Taiwan Strait fails, the United States and its allies may engage in the war to defend Taiwan. In such a scenario, political and institutional challenges associated with



fighting a major war need to be considered, in addition to a quantitative-based assessment of the military balance. This paper intends to shed light on the political and institutional pitfalls associated with a possible Taiwan Strait conflict in an effort to help policymakers reinforce deterrence.

### **Diagnosis of the Situation: Disadvantages for the United States and Allies**

Since 1948, when the Kuomintang (KMT) Party defected to Taiwan after its defeat by the Chinese Communist Party during the civil war, the United States has provided virtual security guarantees to Taiwan, underpinned by its conventional maritime and air power superiority in the Western Pacific. This military superiority underwrites the U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity for Taiwan based on the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA). However, with China's rapid and broad military modernization, U.S. conventional superiority can no longer be taken for granted. As the National Defense Strategy Commission Report in 2018 pointed out, the United States may face "decisive military defeat" in the Taiwan Strait under some strategic conditions.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the military balance, which is increasingly favorable for China, there are two major disadvantages for the United States. The first one is geography. China enjoys immediate proximity to the Taiwan Strait, but the United States needs to struggle with the tyranny of distance. This asymmetry allows China to possess military superiority during the first phase of the conflict, which is discussed in the next section.

Second, the stakes are different for China and the United States. Once a Taiwan Strait conflict breaks out, that would be an existential situation for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), because if China loses the conflict, the CCP's legitimacy for domestic governance would be fundamentally undermined. In this sense, a Taiwan Strait conflict must be an "undefeatable war" for the CCP. If the CCP leadership realizes that defeat in the conflict may lead to the collapse of the CCP regime in China, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will escalate measures to defeat the United States and Taiwan at any cost.

On the other hand, the stakes for the United States are more ambiguous and abstract. If the United States is defeated in a Taiwan Strait conflict, it would be critical evidence that the United States is no longer a "superpower" or the world's "indispensable power." Its demise to "normal" power status would be accelerated and a China-led regional order would be formulated in Asia.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, for the United States, a Taiwan Strait conflict would be a conditional "undefeatable war." As long as the United States intends to maintain global leadership, it must not accept defeat but rather intensify its effort to win the war, even in the face of an unfavorable military balance. However, if U.S. grand strategy embraces more isolationist-oriented tendencies, the United States may avoid serious escalation of the conflict even if it faces military defeat in the Taiwan Strait. A defeat here would not be an existential threat to the United States. The U.S. Government will survive even if it faces a "decisive defeat"



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in a Taiwan Strait conflict, unlike the situation the CCP is likely to face, and *in the absence of an escalating conflict*, the United States will not face a direct threat to its homeland. Consequently, the U.S. interest in avoiding an escalating crisis is obvious, and such an imbalance of interests could undermine the credibility of deterrence, as Keith Payne pointed out about three decades ago.<sup>4</sup>

Such disadvantages for the United States make the traditional U.S. approach to Taiwan, characterized by strategic ambiguity and a largely rhetorically-based deterrence, problematic.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, China may perceive it can win the war for Taiwan. If a challenger perceives that they can win a war, deterrence is likely to fail. To prepare for such a pessimistic scenario, it is time to shift U.S. and allied thinking on deterrence in the Taiwan Strait from rhetorical and diplomatic signaling to an actual military posture and institutionalized preparation to defeat the challenger. To reinforce deterrence, such serious preparation is now vitally important.

Engaging and winning a war is a highly complex challenge. The planner needs to address strategic problems including political and institutional issues, which have been overlooked for a long time but actually can be serious pitfalls to conducting military operations in defense of Taiwan. The following sections analyze these issues.

### **Possible “De-coupling” Between the Present and the Future**

Unlike football games, the field of war is not fair and square. In military history, major powers in conflict rarely have symmetrical military structures. In the Cold War, the U.S.S.R enjoyed quantitative superiority in ground forces while the United States maintained qualitative superiority in air forces. In the Middle East, Arab states enjoyed strategic depth which does not exist for Israel. Such asymmetries exist between China and the United States, too. Both countries have asymmetrical nuclear and conventional forces along with geographical asymmetries. The asymmetries, including their implications for the timing of operations, can undermine the credibility of U.S. deterrence.

This asymmetry comes from the characteristic of a U.S. global military posture that is distributed all over the world. Simply comparing defense expenditures of the United States and China, one can easily conclude that the United States enjoys a significant military superiority, because American defense expenditures were three times larger than China’s in 2021.<sup>6</sup> However, this simple comparison of overall defense expenditures obscures other truths. China deploys almost all of its military forces on the mainland. On the other hand, the U.S. military presence is globally distributed all over the world. Therefore, in East Asia, the regional military balance in China’s favor is significantly different from the global military balance. This asymmetry is significant for the outcome of a potential conflict, and thus for the likely functioning of deterrence.



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Once war begins, the military balance is determined by those in-theater forces deployed before the start of the conflict. During this time, China can mobilize and deploy all of its forces near Taiwan, while the United States must deal with China's military challenge only with its pre-deployed military forces in the Western Pacific. Therefore, China would have some degree of military advantage over the United States and its allies when it comes to in-theater military forces. When combined with the advantage of surprise attack by ballistic and cruise missiles, China would enjoy a favorable military balance during the first phase of the conflict, which may last several months.

To remedy this situation, the United States needs to mobilize its military forces from other parts of the world and to dispatch reinforcements to East Asia, like it did during Operation Desert Shield in 1990. This may require six months or more, but once mobilization has been completed, the United States will regain a favorable military posture in the Western Pacific and can launch counter-offensive operations. In short, the military balance will shift in accordance with the timeline. The longer the conflict continues, the more likely the United States will regain a regional military advantage, although China will enjoy superiority in the short term.

This temporal dimension of mobilization magnifies the risk of deterrence failure. If China recognizes that the United States has a strong resolve to fight a lengthy war requiring global mobilization, this temporal dimension does not necessarily matter for deterrence purposes. However, China may believe that the United States will not fight a lengthy war that carries the risks of escalation, and the tremendous cost of full mobilization and potentially extensive damage to the world economy. If so, China may conclude that the United States will accept defeat by the PLA's successful short and decisive military operations. If China's military planners and decision makers reach such a conclusion, U.S. deterrence may well collapse. Or, if China believes that it can disrupt American full mobilization through the use of influence operations, including fake news and sophisticated propaganda, or can block the American military's reinforcement by anti-access forces, then deterrence may also fail.

This asymmetry makes the "de-coupling" issue very complicated. In the vocabulary of alliance management, the "de-coupling" problem is about the credibility of the commitment of one ally to the other allies. But this temporal issue impacts another aspect of "de-coupling," namely, the link between the United States at the first phase of the war and the United States after the completion of mobilization and redeployment. If China recognizes that it can "de-couple" the current U.S. posture (early phase of conflict) from the future U.S. posture (after full-mobilization and reinforcement), deterrence in the Taiwan Strait may well fail.

Throughout history, opponents of the United States often assumed that the United States would avoid fighting a lengthy war, or even engage in war at all, e.g., Japan in 1941, North Korea in 1950, and Iraq in 1990. If the United States had sent strong signals at the right time to make its opponents understand that Washington would decisively engage in war to preserve





the status quo or would fight a prolonged conflict, even at tremendous cost in resources, these past challenges could have been deterred.

But in reality, in these three cases, U.S. actions that would have demonstrated American resolve were “too late.” To avoid such misfortunes in the future and sustain deterrence, the United States and its allies need to consciously demonstrate their strong resolve to deter and defeat any Taiwan Strait conflict even if it takes a long time, requires significant resources, and costs much in blood and treasure. This is a critically important pre-crisis signal to deter the actual conflict. On the other hand, rhetorical and operational signals that telegraph such a robust resolve will tend to be understood as “escalatory” by some parts of the Western intellectual community that embrace a “de-escalation first” mindset in the event of crisis. But such preferences will water down the deterrence clarity needed for China to recognize the robust U.S. resolve to defend Taiwan, even at the risk of a prolonged and costly conflict, and deterrence in the Taiwan Strait would easily be undermined. The temporal asymmetry in military forces and the fragility of deterrence that results must be mitigated to tailor the best approach for strengthening deterrence in peacetime.

### **Multi-Countries’ Politico-Military Coordination**

Should a Taiwan Strait conflict break out, there would be differences and similarities compared to multiple post-Cold War conflicts the United States and its allies experienced.

One difference is that the conflict would be fought with limited political objectives. Unlike the Afghanistan War and Iraq War, regime change in Beijing cannot be a realistic goal. The United States and its allies need to determine achievable political objectives and any military operation must support those objectives. This means that military operations in a possible Taiwan Strait conflict must not be conducted based simply on “military rationale.” Whether military planning and its execution appropriately reflect political objectives or not will play a critical role in determining how best to effectively employ military assets and achieve war termination.<sup>7</sup>

The similarity is that the coalition would be formed under U.S. leadership. Not just the United States and Taiwan, but Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and France might participate in the coalition.

Combining this similarity and difference, a possible Taiwan Strait conflict would pose highly complex politico-military issues for the United States and its allies. Major participants in the coalition will need to align their contributions to the war effort with national political objectives and to seriously consider how to end the war. Again, regime change for the People’s Republic of China is not realistic, even in a scenario where China starts the war. For regime change, the coalition needs to occupy the capital and most of China’s territory, as the United States did in



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Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, but such occupation is simply impossible against China. Or, another possible war aim would be to restore the *status quo ante*, like in the 1991 Gulf War. However, in light of the expected huge civilian casualty toll and devastation in Taiwan, and the anticipated military damage to the coalition, such a minimum war aim may not be supported by the coalition partners' publics, as they may seek some degree of punishment against the initiator of the conflict.

Thus, the possible range of war aims of the participants would be set somewhere between regime change and preservation of the *status quo ante*. One major issue would be the status of Taiwan after the conflict. Even if the coalition succeeded in defending Taiwan, would these countries maintain the current "one-China" policy? Can or will the United States continue the "one-China" policy after suffering a huge amount of personnel and materiel losses as a result of the conflict? What about Taiwan? Or the other participants in the coalition? Will they agree to fight to preserve the autonomy of a political entity that is not recognized as an independent state or to seek an end to the conflict without restoring its autonomy?

Or just as the 1991 Gulf War, which was fought to ensure the Iraqi military's retreat from Kuwait and restore the *status quo ante*, some countries may consider the *status quo ante* as the war aim, but others may set the abandonment of a "one China" policy as their war aim, intending to punish the CCP if they initiate the war. At the same time, however, as long as the coalition embraces an abandonment of the "one-China" policy, China will be unlikely to terminate the war and may instead be willing to escalate it. To make China accept a change in the "one-China" policy, coalition forces would have to inflict huge costs and damage on the aggressor, which would require close coordination between war aims and military operations.

One other possible war aim of coalition participants, particularly those that have conflicting territorial claims with China, would be to include resolution of those regional issues in any agreement to end the conflict. For example, if Japan joins the coalition, enforcing China's change of position on some issues in the East China Sea, including the Senkaku Islands may be a part of its war aim. If the Philippines participates in the coalition, the status of Scarborough shoal and other issues, such as China's acceptance of the Law of the Sea tribunal's Permanent Court of Arbitration verdict about the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, would be set as their war aim.

Of course, there is no guarantee that the war aims of all coalition participants would converge. As noted, some may seek to maintain the simple *status quo ante*, and some may seek other objectives to punish Beijing, like revising the "one-China" policy. How to coordinate the war aims of the participants and how to terminate the war would not be easy. But without this coordination it would not be possible for the political leadership to give the proper political direction for military operations. Therefore, some high-level communications channel among political leaders would be indispensable, which does not exist now.



## **Military Command and Control without a Standing Combined Headquarters**

Multilateral coordination is not just a challenge for the political leadership. Military leadership also has a similar problem. During the early days of the Cold War, the United States established two combined headquarters that included the military forces of allies: NATO in Europe and the Combined Forces Command (CFC) on the Korean Peninsula. Both were established in different contexts, as NATO headquarters was established after the conclusion of the Washington Treaty while the prototype of the CFC was established to fight an actual war, the Korean War, before concluding a formal security arrangement with the Republic of Korea. (In military jargon, “combined” means a multinational military arrangement and “joint” implies a multi-service arrangement in one country’s military). NATO headquarters and the CFC played significant deterrent roles against the Warsaw Pact and North Korea, respectively. But not all U.S. alliances have such standing combined headquarters. The U.S.-Japan alliance does not have one, and needless to say, the United States does not have a combined headquarters with Taiwan (even when the U.S.-Republic of China Mutual Defense Treaty existed, a combined headquarters was not established). Considering the potentially huge magnitude of a Taiwan Strait conflict, if war should break out, the lack of a standing combined headquarters could be a source of serious disruption and misalignment in command and control. Unlike NATO and the CFC, the United States and Taiwan do not collaborate formally at the staff level, do not prepare coordinated contingency plans (CONPLANS) and operational plans (OPLANs), and do not conduct exercises to test plans and train staff.

Since Taiwan is located inside of INDO-PACOM’s area of responsibility (AOR), U.S. military operations would be commanded and controlled from its headquarters located in Hawaii. But the primary defender in the conflict, Taiwan, and the possible provider of staging bases with some defensive missions, Japan, do not assign permanent staff to INDO-PACOM now. Other likely participants in the coalition, the United Kingdom and France, also do not. This means that the degree of peacetime preparation in anticipation of a Taiwan Strait conflict is much more nascent than that of NATO and the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance. Of course, Taiwan and the United States may prepare for conflict, but those efforts occur more in a unilateral context than preparations in Europe and on the Korean Peninsula.

Establishment of a standing combined headquarters could fix this problem. In reality, however, that is impossible under current policy. Under the “one-China” policy, no major country maintains formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and a formal military alliance cannot be concluded and therefore a standing combined headquarters cannot be established. This is a drawback of the “strategic ambiguity” policy regarding Taiwan. However, if Taiwan and the United States seek to establish a formal military alliance and a standing combined headquarters, those actions themselves may trigger a war, because China will never accept such a formal military relationship between Taiwan and the United States, and they will use every means to prevent it.



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In short, under current policy, a Taiwan Strait conflict is destined to be an “unprepared war,” regardless of widespread and deep concern over China. If a Taiwan Strait conflict occurs, a U.S.-led coalition will be formed, but that coalition must operate on a highly *ad hoc* basis without meaningful peacetime preparation. This is a paradox. To improve the situation, a standing combined headquarters should be established in advance of any conflict by potential key participants. Without adequate military preparation before war occurs, including the formation of a standing combined headquarters, the actual deterrent effect on China would be limited. However, given Taiwan’s unique political and diplomatic status, such preparation itself could trigger deterrence failure and spark a conflict.

If a Taiwan Strait conflict occurs, the scale and intensity of the military operation would be historic. However, the military operation would be conducted with insufficient peacetime preparation and the lack of a permanent institutional setting. In addition to coordinating the war aims of the participant countries, military command and control procedures for some countries, which may have national caveats, would be highly challenging. Even between Taiwan and the United States, a military operation would be executed with less preparation compared to NATO and the CFC. Coordination with other countries will be more difficult, as the turmoil and misalignment in command and control at the time of the conflict will be unavoidable and potentially exacerbated by the “fog of war.”

### Conclusion

Concerns about peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait are significantly growing in the world, along with China’s rapid and broad military modernization and recent assertive and provocative behavior against Taiwan. However, there are multiple serious challenges if the United States is to reinforce deterrence. Like a “hedgehog,” China can concentrate all of its military assets against Taiwan to achieve a superior military balance in theater. Like a “fox,” the United States needs to take care of its global strategic interests and would require a certain amount of time to restore a favorable military balance in the region.<sup>8</sup> This temporal asymmetry in the military balance could cause China to underestimate U.S. resolve to defend Taiwan and thereby undermine the credibility of deterrence.

Should deterrence fail and a Taiwan Strait conflict break out, the United States and its allies would face some significant pitfalls, in addition to the actual military balance. Even though a Taiwan Strait conflict has the potential of escalating to the nuclear level, war aims must be limited, because regime change in China is simply impossible. U.S. decision makers and other key participants in the coalition, including Taiwan, need to formulate realistic and achievable war aims, and these war aims need to be coordinated for effective military operations, which will not be easy. The United States and its coalition partners would need to conduct military





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operations without the benefit of coordinated peacetime preparation overseen by the establishment of a standing combined headquarters. This will be a challenging task.

Today, deterrence in the Taiwan Strait is under grave challenge. But to restore adequate deterrence and prepare to “defeat” the adversary is an extremely difficult job. Unfortunately, under current policy, institutional “unpreparedness” cannot be avoided, but for deterrence purposes, the politico-military questions about war aims can and should be considered now to prepare for the most effective employment of military forces and the potential for war termination on favorable terms. More serious thinking and active debate on this issue should be kicked off in an international context. Sustaining deterrence now requires this as a start.

<sup>1</sup> About recent concerns, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2021), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in, Eric Edelman, Gary Roughead, et al., *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, November 2018, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, 2021), esp. pp.110-146.

<sup>4</sup> Keith B. Payne, *Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), esp. pp.17-35.

<sup>5</sup> Keith B. Payne, “The Taiwan Question: How to Think about Deterrence Now,” *Information Series*, No. 509 (November 15, 2021), available at [https://nipp.org/information\\_series/keith-b-payne-the-taiwan-question-how-to-think-about-deterrence-now-no-509-november-15-2021/](https://nipp.org/information_series/keith-b-payne-the-taiwan-question-how-to-think-about-deterrence-now-no-509-november-15-2021/).

<sup>6</sup> Institute for International Strategic Studies, *Military Balance 2021* (February 2021).

<sup>7</sup> About wartime oversight over military operations by political leadership, see Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (The Free Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> About “hedgehog” and “fox,” see John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin Books, 2018).

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