

TAIWAN AND THE WAR OF WILLS

Benjamin Herscovitch

FOR DECADES, THE HARD deterrent effect of US military power combined with initially explicit but later ambiguous US security guarantees helped preserve Taiwan's *de facto* independence. Now, as the combat capabilities and military know-how of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) rapidly advance, a growing number of countries are contributing political, economic and military support to this long-standing US-led effort to deter moves by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to force Taiwan to come under its jurisdiction — an 'issue' Beijing considers an 'internal affair'.

Japan, Australia, and other US allies such as France and Canada are more actively building ties with Taipei, integrating Taiwan into the international diplomatic architecture and making naval transits of the Taiwan Strait. Such measures seek to increase the reputational, diplomatic and military risks for the PRC of armed aggression in the Taiwan Strait.

Perceptions of increasing assertiveness by Beijing internationally, the re-emergence of ideologically tinged great-power competition and the downward trajectory of many countries' bilateral relations with the PRC have fuelled stronger support for

Taiwan. But the growing commitment to deterrence has probably primarily been spurred by the uptick of the PRC's efforts to isolate and intimidate Taiwan. The PRC has successfully persuaded Solomon Islands and Kiribati to cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan and stepped up its efforts to exclude Taiwan from multilateral organisations and trade agreements, including the World Health Assembly and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact. On the military front, the PLA Air Force has been regularly crossing the Taiwan Strait's *de facto* median line since 2020, with flights into Taiwan's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) reaching unprecedented levels in 2021.

In response, the United States and its partners are pursuing a much tougher, tactically varied, and increasingly multinational deterrence effort. They have amplified diplomatic messaging about the strategic and political importance of Taiwan, despite Beijing decrying these moves as 'external interference'. In 2021, Canberra and Washington for the first time jointly labelled Taiwan a 'leading democracy and a critical partner' and committed themselves to 'strengthen

ties' with Taipei.¹ Politicians and former officials and lawmakers from the United States and many of its allies have initiated increasingly regular, high-level, and widely publicised meetings with Taiwanese counterparts and lobbied for the Taiwanese Government's participation in multilateral institutions. An expanding range of countries that are not formal US allies, such as India and New Zealand, are also contributing to quieter forms of deterrence by incrementally deepening their political and economic ties with the island.

But these deterrence policies are coming under increasing pressure. The PLA has continued to hone its combat readiness and maintain the pace of its military capability acquisitions. Speculation is mounting that Xi Jinping 习近平 is shortening the timeline for unification. Meanwhile, concern is growing in the United States and among its partners about the risks of military miscalculation or accident in or around the Taiwan Strait and the unimaginably destructive dangers associated with cycles of escalation.² Deterrence could inadvertently precipitate large-scale, high-intensity, and even nuclear war in the Western Pacific. War games and heated policy

discussions weigh the costs and benefits of responses to possible PRC aggression in the Taiwan Strait. The power and behaviour of the PLA are shaping both diplomatic and military responses and ethical calculations regarding the risks of aiding Taiwan.

As the power balance shifts in the PRC's favour over the coming years, debates about the dangers of deterrence are likely to become an even more prominent political issue. The PLA Navy has already surpassed the US Navy in numbers of battle-force ships and is acquiring additional high-end combat capabilities, including more aircraft-carriers, destroyers and ballistic missile, and nuclear-powered attack submarines.³ In 2020, the US Department of Defense assessed that

'China has already achieved parity with — or even exceeded — the United States in ... shipbuilding, land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems'.⁴ Combined with the huge geostrategic advantage the PRC enjoys — Taiwan is roughly 11,000 kilometres from the US West Coast but less than 200 kilometres from China — these PLA capability gains will further shift the cross-Strait military balance in the PRC's favour. Even if the PLA does not intend to initiate large-scale military conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the mere existence of its increasingly potent ability to start and win a war significantly increases the pressure on the deterrence strategies of the United States and its partners.



Concern is growing around the Taiwan Strait
Source: US Pacific Fleet, Flickr

For many liberal democracies, it is morally justified — even imperative — to deter the PRC from taking Taiwan by force. Beijing’s successful efforts to hobble Hong Kong’s autonomy bolster the moral case for acting to preserve the liberal-democratic rights and freedoms of nearly 24 million Taiwanese. An ongoing economic rationale for deterrence is Taiwan’s critical place in global semiconductor supply chains, while the island remains an invaluable piece of geostrategic real estate that would further enhance the PLA’s naval and air force power projection deep into the Pacific Ocean if it came under the PRC’s control.

But Beijing’s active struggle to shape global public opinion on Taiwan is also seeking to push policymakers and the public to abandon deterrence policies.⁵ To advance the narrative that Taiwan should be under the PRC’s control, Beijing uses to its advantage the long story of at least partial Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE) administration of Taiwan. Beijing and its proxies are seeking to muddy the case for supporting Taiwan with contested historical and political claims, presenting the cross-Strait status quo as a historical injustice that must be rectified. They emphasise that Japan

relinquished sovereignty over Taiwan, which Tokyo had held as a colony since 1895, to China at the end of World War II. The government of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 and the Kuomintang fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the communist victory on the mainland ended the Chinese Civil War. Chinese diplomats and state-controlled media outlets seek to use this complex historical record to discount Taiwanese and international voices that assert Taiwan’s contemporary rights to maintain its own distinct international identity and determine its own political future.

Despite these growing pressures, deterrence appears to be working. The PLA is so far content to fly into the southern reaches of Taiwan’s ADIZ, conduct amphibious assault exercises, and test-fire missiles into the South China Sea. But deterring the PLA from military conflict in the Taiwan Strait ultimately amounts to persuading the PRC to continue avoiding aggressive actions that it judges are in any case unnecessary, militarily inadvisable, and politically dangerous.⁶ Meanwhile, the PRC’s deep and abiding interests in Taiwan will endure. Taking Taiwan is a prerequisite for Beijing’s overarching goal of the ‘rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, and the PRC has a range of

immediate and longer-term priorities in Taiwan. Foremost among these is deterring Taiwan from declaring *de jure* independence, while also deterring the United States and its partners from any kind of military intervention. But even in scenarios short of military conflict, the PRC seeks to deter the policy of deterrence itself; it seeks to persuade the United States and its partners to stop supporting Taiwan. Beijing enjoys a structural advantage in this psychological battle. With every PLA Air Force flight across the *de facto* median line, febrile foreign and defence policy debates combined with the visual spectacle of fighter jets and bombers spur yet more anxiety about the potential horror of war with the PRC. As a result, policymakers and the general public may eventually make the fateful choice to leave Taiwan to face the PRC alone. Such an outcome would profoundly destabilise the cross-Strait status quo, with

predictably disastrous consequences for Taiwan and its liberal democracy.

None of this is it to say that debates about the possible dangers of deterrence should be conducted *sotto voce* to avoid panic. But the psychological contest over the Strait is likely to intensify in the years and decades ahead. For deterrence to succeed, there needs to be, beyond an enduring and credible threat of military action should any invasion or attack occur, sang-froid and moral fortitude — namely, a willingness to hold the line and provide ongoing support to Taiwan despite the dangers of further angering the PRC and being entangled in cross-Strait military contingencies. The future of the Taiwan Strait and many millions of lives on both sides could yet be determined not by military combat, but by a battle of wills waged through media imagery, popular political narratives, and public debate.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Contradiction*, edited by
Linda Jaivin and Esther Sunkyoung Klein with Sharon Strange,
published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2022.06A