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**DETERRENCE AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

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Recent decades have seen a vast proliferation of writings on deterrence theory, some of it suggesting that deterrence theory was “weaker” (in both descriptive and normative terms) and less useful than had been thought. In addition, even in its more classic formulations, deterrence theory recognized various difficulties in applying it. The future Sino-U.S. context will illustrate many of the perceived weaknesses and criticisms; deterrence theory will be, in general, more difficult to apply than it was in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War context. A review of the deterrence literature suggests four areas of theoretical concerns that would be relevant to deterrence in a Sino-U.S. context.<sup>1</sup>

**COMMITMENT AND RATIONALITY**

Since deterrence primarily relies on the threat of future harm, the deterrer’s credibility is obviously a key factor in making deterrence work. If deterrers could inflict the threatened harm at absolutely no cost to themselves, the credibility of their threats could perhaps be taken for granted. It is, however, difficult to think of circumstances in which this would be the case. Hence, the problem of credibility becomes that of convincing the target that the deterrer is willing to bear the costs involved in inflicting the threatened harm. In short,

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<sup>1</sup>It is obviously impossible to review here all the relevant literature, and, in any case, this report does not aspire to a theoretical treatment of issues in deterrence theory. The points raised in this chapter are those that seem particularly relevant to Sino-U.S. relations. For the same reason, I have not made explicit the links between this discussion and particular critiques of deterrence theory.

deterriers must demonstrate their “commitment” to make good their threats in case deterrence fails (that is, if the one to be deterred takes the undesired action anyway).

### **Importance of the U.S. Stakes Involved**

Credibility may be determined by many factors; one of the most important is the importance to the deterrer of the stakes involved. In the Cold War cases of deterrence, the stakes involved were often large, and their importance was often relatively obvious. Thus, in deterring a Soviet attack on Western Europe, the United States did not face a major problem in conveying the sense that it regarded the stakes as very high: The loss of Western Europe would clearly have been a major blow. Not only did the Western European countries possess major economic, technological, and military capabilities, but the historical, cultural, and ideological ties were also strong. The magnitude of the negative impact of a Soviet conquest of Western Europe on the United States would have been incalculably large. Hence, the threat to use even nuclear weapons in the defense of Western Europe was generally regarded as credible.<sup>2</sup>

In the Sino-U.S. context, however, the importance of the stakes involved in many of the potential deterrence situations may not be so clear. Hence, the United States may find it more difficult to convey the sense that it regards the stakes as high enough to justify the high costs that inflicting threatened punishments might incur.

In the most important case, the United States would wish to deter Chinese use of force against Taiwan. However, this would not necessarily involve any change in its “one China” policy, which implies that the U.S. interest is only in the means by which Taiwan and China might be unified. So, according to this policy, the United States is willing to accept the strategic consequences of Taiwan’s incorporation into the PRC (e.g., that Taiwanese ports could become

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<sup>2</sup>Even in this case, there were many skeptics who doubted, to use the standard cliché, that the United States would risk Chicago to save Paris. Presumably, whatever credibility the threat had rested on the idea that the loss of Western Europe to the Soviet Union would so upset the (physical and ideological) balance of forces between the United States and the USSR that Chicago, and the rest of the United States, would, eventually, be threatened as well.

bases for the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy). Thus, the United States would have to convince China that, despite its apparent unconcern with the *strategic substance* of reunification, its interest in the *process* is substantial enough to lead the United States to incur large costs. The Chinese leadership might not find such a distinction credible; thus, it might believe either that the United States would not fight or that its willingness to fight indicated a shift in U.S. policy toward actual support for Taiwanese independence. In the latter case, the Chinese might be difficult to deter because of a belief that the result of their forbearance might well be not a continuation of the status quo but rather an invigorated Taiwanese push for independence.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the U.S. insistence that reunification be peaceful and voluntary may not provide an absolutely clear standard in some cases: How much Chinese "saber rattling" would call into question the voluntariness of the Taiwanese decisionmaking process? The United States may find it hard to draw a clear line separating "acceptable" Chinese pressure on Taiwan from what it would seek to deter by means of some sort of retaliation.

The United States would confront a similar problem in trying to deter Chinese use of force in the South China Sea against the other claimants. By not taking a position on the overlapping claims, the United States is in effect saying that Chinese possession of the Paracel and Spratly islands is not incompatible with vital U.S. strategic interests. The U.S. problem, therefore, would be to convince China that our interest in the peacefulness of the determination of ownership of the islands is sufficient to run the risks inherent in the use of force.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Of course, this hard-headed realist view (i.e., the view that when a country, such as the United States, claims to be acting on the basis of principle, e.g., that reunification must be peaceful, it is really acting on the basis of its own interests) may simply lead the Chinese to doubt the sincerity of U.S. adherence to a "one China" policy in the first place. The frequent complaint that the United States has a "containment" policy toward China implies that the United States would oppose reunification of China and Taiwan under any circumstances, whether or not it was peaceful.

<sup>4</sup>The difficulty would be compounded by the absence of any U.S. response to past Chinese actions in the South China Sea, even when directed against the Philippines.

On the other hand, if the Chinese actions in the South China Sea appeared to create a serious threat to the freedom of navigation through the area, more-traditional and weighty U.S. interests would be involved. In that case, a U.S. reaction would be more credible. Of course, China would seek to avoid just such a situation by disclaiming any intent to interfere with navigation and perhaps even taking steps, such as the suppression of piracy, to protect it.

The U.S. ability to demonstrate the strength of its interest in deterring Chinese military pressure against regional states might depend not only on the nature of the pressure (how blatant, whether the military activity was confined to Chinese soil, etc.) but also on what it was intended to accomplish. Thus, Chinese pressure on Japan (or South Korea, or a unified Korea) to abandon its alliance with the United States would involve major U.S. interests, thereby making a strong U.S. response more credible. On the other hand, military pressure on Vietnam related to a peripheral issue (such as the disputed border between the two countries) would not seem to engage any important U.S. interest and would thus make a possible U.S. reaction less credible.

The long history of the U.S. alliance with South Korea, as well as its importance for the security of Japan, would presumably make it relatively easy for the United States to make credible its interest in deterring a Chinese invasion of Korea. However, if there were to be a postunification estrangement between Korea and the United States (due perhaps to a nationalist reaction against the continued basing of U.S. troops on the peninsula), China might regard the U.S. stake as considerably reduced. Nevertheless, as long as the U.S.-Japanese alliance remains, it should not be difficult for the United States to convey the strategic importance it attaches to Korea.

### **Manipulating the Level of “Commitment”**

Closely related to the question of defining and measuring the stakes of the parties in a potential conflict is the question of assessing the strength of a side’s “commitment” to having its way with respect to the issue. To a large extent, the strength of commitment reflects the importance of the stakes. However, the degree of commitment can be increased, either because of circumstances or as a result of delib-

erate manipulation, giving the side whose commitment is strengthened a relative bargaining advantage.<sup>5</sup>

To return to the Cold War example as an illustration, the U.S. stakes involved in the defense of Western Europe were inherently enormous. The same, however, could not be said of the defense of West Berlin, an isolated and indefensible outpost whose economy depended on generous West German subsidies. Nevertheless, it acquired symbolic value as an indication of the West's insistence on defending its rights under the four-power agreements reached at the end of World War II and because of the West Berliners' struggle to avoid communist rule; this symbolic value was deliberately magnified by such actions as President Kennedy's visit in the aftermath of the construction of the Berlin Wall.<sup>6</sup> As a result, a half-city that might perhaps have been abandoned without untoward consequences at the start of the Cold War had become an absolutely vital interest by the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

The PRC leadership's discussion of the Taiwan issue under the rubric of protecting territorial integrity has a similar effect of increasing the value of the stake; the definitive loss of a territory it has never ruled would thereby be transmuted into a humiliating defeat. In general, playing on nationalist sentiment may tie a government's hand in such a case: By emphasizing the importance of Taiwan, the Chinese leadership might make it impossible to ignore any moves toward independence even if it wanted to, for fear that the blow to its prestige would cause it to be toppled from power.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The idea is deliberately to raise the cost to oneself of giving in; at the extreme, one would wish to make it impossible for oneself to give in, provided, of course, that this fact could be convincingly conveyed to one's opponent. The ultimate tactic in this regard is Herman Kahn's famous advice for winning the game of "chicken": One convinces one's opponent to swerve first from the center of the road "by getting into the car dead drunk, wearing very dark glasses, and conspicuously throwing the steering wheel out of the window as soon as the car has gotten up to speed." (Kahn, 1962, p. 45.)

<sup>6</sup>Kennedy's speech during that visit is best known for the phrase, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," which (although usually remembered out of context) engaged his personal prestige in a most indelible manner.

<sup>7</sup>In the past century, popular nationalist pressures have often weakened those in power, when they appeared to be unable to defend China's interests sufficiently vigorously.

On the other hand, PRC leadership has been willing to shelve the Taiwan issue, seemingly indefinitely, for example, in the course of the rapprochement with the United States in 1971–1972.<sup>8</sup> Thus, should it decide that it is necessary to achieve reunification within a specific time (perhaps because it came to think that time was not on its side and that the overall trend was toward Taiwanese *de jure* independence), it might have some difficulty establishing that it no longer possessed its earlier patience with respect to this issue.

Domestic political considerations could also raise the importance of the Taiwan issue to an American administration. In both cases, the differences between American and Chinese political systems might make it hard to gauge exactly how much domestic pressure the other side's leadership was under.

### Defining the “Status Quo”

It is generally believed that the side defending the status quo has a certain advantage.<sup>9</sup> With respect to the issue of credibility, this can be easily understood: It seems plausible to believe that giving up something one possesses will do more damage to one's prestige than failing to attain something to which one aspires. Thus, other things being equal, the “status quo” power may have an edge with respect to credibility.

However, with respect to the potentially most serious source of Sino-U.S. conflict, i.e., Taiwan, the status quo is complex and may be understood differently by the two sides. Taiwan is currently independent *de facto* but enjoys only limited sovereignty *de jure*. It has normal diplomatic relations with only a handful of states, none of

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<sup>8</sup>Kissinger (1979), p. 1062, quotes Mao as saying: “We can do without them [Taiwan] for the time being; and let it come after 100 years.”

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, the discussion of deterrence and compellence in Schelling (1966), pp. 71–73. Jervis (1979), pp. 297–299, discusses in detail the question of whether the defender of the status quo necessarily has an advantage with respect to credibility; he concludes that the defender probably does have an advantage, but that the issue is more complicated than is often thought. In particular, he notes the burden the “aggressor” would have to bear in trying to make credible the claim that a status quo with which he has in fact lived for years is now so intolerable to him that he is willing to run large risks to change it. This, in essence, would be China's problem if it sought to impose a deadline for the unification of Taiwan with the mainland.

them the world's major powers. It has only limited representation in international bodies, and then often under humiliating conditions (such as being unable to call itself by its official name). Most importantly, its main international supporter, the United States, has stated that its arms sales to it will be limited.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the two sides may emphasize different aspects of the current situation, the United States focusing primarily on Taiwan's *de facto* independence, and China focusing on the nearly universal recognition of the "one China" principle and on Beijing's right to represent that China. If a future Chinese threat to Taiwan arose out of some action by the latter that sought to give a degree of legal or diplomatic expression to its *de facto* independence,<sup>11</sup> each side (China and the United States) could see itself as essentially defending the status quo and could believe that its deterrent threats gained credibility from that circumstance.

### "SALAMI TACTICS"

Deterrence typically seeks to clarify the actions by the adversary that are to be deterred, i.e., to specify the actions to which the deterrer will respond by inflicting some form of punishment on the aggressor.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, this clarity may be relatively easy to obtain.

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<sup>10</sup>"United States–China Joint Communiqué on United States Arms Sales to Taiwan," August 17, 1982, as reprinted in Harding (1992), pp. 383–385. A statement by President Ronald Reagan, issued simultaneously with the communiqué, asserted that

We attach great significance to the Chinese statement . . . regarding China's "fundamental" policy [to strive for a peaceful solution to the Taiwan question], and it is clear from our statements that our future actions will be conducted with this peaceful policy fully in mind. (Harding, 1992, p. 386.)

<sup>11</sup>Such as President Lee Teng-hui's statement in July 1999 that future discussions between China and Taiwan should be on a "special state-to-state" basis.

<sup>12</sup>It is sometimes argued that ambiguity about which actions are to be deterred is a better deterrent than clarity. It is hard to understand how this can be the case; why should a potential aggressor give more weight to an ambiguous threat of retaliation than to a clear one? This is not to argue, however, that ambiguity might not make sense as a *policy* under certain conditions. For example, ambiguity about the set of actions against which one would retaliate might lead an aggressor to desist from an action against which, however undesirable one believes it to be, one would in fact *not* be willing to retaliate. Thus, one gains a deterrent effect without having to make a clear threat that, in the event, one would be reluctant or unwilling to carry out. Similarly, ambiguity may enable one to exert a deterrent effect in circumstances in which

Thus, in the case of a well-demarcated territorial boundary, one could assert that *any* movement of the aggressor's military forces across it would provoke a retaliatory action.

In other cases, however, it may be harder to make clear and credible deterrent threats that cover all possible adversary actions that one wishes to prevent. One study of the successes and failures of U.S. deterrence attempts concluded that

*Nations interested in changing the status quo normally have more than one option for doing so. . . .* The defender's strategy must be made relevant to the *range* of alternative options possibly available to the initiator. A deterrence policy which discourages an opponent from employing some options but not others is incomplete and may not prevent a failure of deterrence. An opponent who is bent upon altering a given status quo may design around the viable aspects of the deterrence strategy that confronts him. That is, he may seek to formulate an option for challenging the status quo that takes advantage of loopholes, weaknesses, or uncertainties that he perceives in the deterrence strategy of the defending power. (George and Smoke, 1974, pp. 520–521; emphasis in the original.)

Such a strategy has been dubbed *salami tactics*: Rather than making a grab for the entire salami, the aggressor takes a series of thin slices, calibrated so that none of them is sufficiently big to trigger a response by the defender. But, eventually, the aggressor winds up with the entire salami.

Similarly, the aggressor may limit himself to actions whose effects he regards as controllable, i.e., he always leaves himself a way out if his action should trigger a strong response. The study referred to above concluded that

In almost every historical case [of deterrence failure] examined, we found evidence that the initiator tried to satisfy himself before acting that the risks of the particular option he chose could be calculated and, perhaps even more importantly, *controlled by him* so as to give his choice of action the character of a rationally calculated, acceptable risk. (George and Smoke, 1974, p. 527; emphasis added.)

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one finds it disadvantageous or impossible, because of public opinion (or the opinion of one's allies), to make a clear threat. This was roughly the situation in which President Eisenhower found himself in 1954–1955 and 1958 with respect to a possible Chinese invasion of the offshore islands of Jinmen (Quemoy) or Mazu (Matsu).

As the historical record recounted in the previous chapter illustrates, China has been adept at calculating and controlling risks in this fashion. Thus, for example, for eight months in 1954–1955, the Chinese shelled the Taiwanese-held offshore islands of Jinmen and Mazu and used military force to take the Yijiangshan Islands (located along the Chinese coast several hundred miles north of Taiwan) from Taiwan, without suffering any military retaliation from the United States, despite the clear disparity in military strength in favor of the latter. Regardless of how one views the political-military outcome of the crisis, the PRC's ability to act provocatively but nevertheless remain beneath the U.S. threshold of military response is striking.

### PERCEPTIONS OF THE BALANCE OF FORCES

To deter an adversary, one must possess not only credibility but military capability as well; the will to inflict punishment is obviously irrelevant if the ability to do so is absent. With respect to nuclear deterrence during the latter part of the Cold War, each side's military capability to inflict tremendous damage on the other was relatively well understood. In particular, the existence of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, along with the absence of effective ballistic missile defense, made it seem relatively easy to calculate the damage one country could do to the other if it wished to.<sup>13</sup>

Despite arms control–driven reductions, the United States retains enough strategic nuclear strength that its ability to do unacceptable damage to China cannot be questioned. The Chinese nuclear threat to the United States, while much smaller, is likely to grow in the future; even now, it is able to hold a substantial part of the U.S. population at risk. However, for the reasons noted above, either side's willingness to use nuclear weapons, given that it could not entirely escape nuclear retaliation, may well be in doubt in most cases.

From time to time, depending on the issue at stake, one side or the other may try to convey the sense that it would be willing to use nuclear weapons in support of its objectives. For example, prior to the 1996 Chinese missile exercises aimed at intimidating Taiwan, a

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<sup>13</sup>Earlier in the Cold War, Soviet secrecy and deception efforts combined with U.S. intelligence gaps made it difficult at times for the United States to assess Soviet strategic nuclear power.

Chinese official told a quasi-official American visitor, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Charles Freeman, that China felt it could use force against Taiwan with impunity because American leaders “care more about Los Angeles than they do about Taiwan.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, during a future crisis over Taiwan, the United States might seek to convince China that the issue was important enough to the United States that the use of nuclear weapons could not be ruled out.<sup>15</sup> In general, however, these types of threats are likely to appear disproportionate to the interests at stake: Thus, the relevant question for deterrence may relate to the sides’ conventional forces.

Assessments of relative conventional military capabilities, such as would be relevant to judge one side’s ability to carry out threatened military actions, are more difficult; the actual use of military forces always carries with it the possibility of unforeseen occurrences. Although overall U.S. military power vastly exceeds that of China, both now and, in all likelihood, during the first decades of the 21st century, the U.S. ability to conduct specific operations at acceptable cost to itself may be difficult to assess. In addition, in the case of a future Sino-U.S. deterrent relationship, the usual difficulties are increased by a number of factors, both military and political.

Militarily, it might be difficult to predict the result of a future Sino-U.S. clash using new weapon systems that have not been used in combat. The Chinese might believe that, despite overall U.S. superiority, a surprise attack by large numbers of short-range ballistic missiles might be able to inflict serious damage on U.S. power-projection capabilities, thereby producing a serious psychological shock that would hamper or even preclude further U.S. action. Even if this were a miscalculation on their part, the result could be that, contrary to U.S. expectations, the Chinese would not be deterred by the presence of a powerful U.S. force in their vicinity, any more than the Japanese were deterred by the forward deployment of the U.S. Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor.

This suggests that U.S. force deployments should also be evaluated on the basis of how they would affect Chinese perceptions (as well as

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<sup>14</sup>The Chinese official’s comment appears in Tyler (1996).

<sup>15</sup>This would probably be possible only if Sino-U.S. relations had already deteriorated to something approaching Cold War–style hostility.

in strictly military terms). For example, a more robust deterrent posture might include, in addition to deployments into the immediate theater, forces deployed forward from the United States but at a greater distance from China, to reduce the risk of a massive surprise attack on them.

Politically, the deterrent value of the overall U.S. military superiority might be diminished by a Chinese belief that various political constraints will inhibit the ability of the United States to use it. Given their strategic nuclear capability, the Chinese may believe that the United States would not conduct even conventional attacks against strategic targets in China in retaliation for Chinese actions that do not threaten vital U.S. interests. More generally, the Chinese may believe that U.S. sensitivity to casualties will limit U.S. military actions. Hence, the Chinese perception of usable U.S. military strength may be very different from what the United States might believe.

#### **“STRATEGIC CULTURE”**

Deterrence rests, not so much on the deterrer’s will and ability to use military force, as on its adversary’s perceptions of them. These perceptions are determined not only by the objective realities as a neutral, dispassionate observer might determine them but also by a whole host of cultural factors. If the party to be deterred does not perceive the deterrer’s will and ability to act in the intended manner, deterrence may unexpectedly (from the deterrer’s point of view) fail.

In general, deterrence theory suggests that military capabilities should be made visible to the adversary, who can then calculate the damage they can do to him and can make his decisions accordingly. In the ideal case, the calculations are made correctly, and then one or the other party, realizing that the military situation is unfavorable, avoids taking steps that would lead to armed conflict.

For example, the United States often believes that the forward deployment of its forces (for example, the movement of aircraft carrier battle groups to waters adjacent to the country to be deterred) sends a strong signal of its ability and willingness to use force in a given situation and thus expects it to have a strong deterrent effect. However, such an action could easily be misinterpreted by a country, such as China, whose strategic tradition emphasizes the importance

of surprise attacks. From such a perspective, the deliberate parading of forces might seem more like an alternative to their use; after all, if the adversary had intended to attack, it would have been more discreet about its preparations to do so.

Similarly, the United States might see the absence of visible preparations for the use of force as a sign that its adversary lacks the will or the capability; instead, it might reflect the adversary's desire to achieve surprise when it did in fact attack. Similarly, both the United States (in Korea in 1950) and India (in 1962) misinterpreted a tactical Chinese "pause" (i.e., cessation of armed combat following an initial Chinese attack) as a sign that the Chinese were unwilling or unable to fight a major engagement.