

Statement before
the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
on “Deterring PRC Aggression Toward Taiwan”

The Precarious State of Cross-Strait Deterrence

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Commissioner Carte P. Goodwin and Commissioner James M. Talent, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the crucial topic of the political and strategic dynamics underpinning deterrence across the Taiwan Strait

Cross-strait deterrence is arguably weaker today than at any point since the Korean War. Impressive Chinese military modernization, U.S. failure to build robust coalitions to counter Chinese regional aggression, and Xi Jinping's personal ambition, all coalesce to create a situation in which Chinese leaders may see some aggregate benefit to using force. I support this assessment in my response to the Commission's specific questions below.

Under what circumstances would Chinese leaders initiate a conflict over Taiwan? What actions or developments could deter or precipitate a decision by Chinese leaders to initiate conflict? Are there any true "redlines" that would prompt this decision?

These questions allude to two different pathways to conflict. The first is the perceived need in Beijing to *respond* to a situation. The most realistic pathway to conflict used to be that Taipei or Washington crosses a redline that precipitates conflict. For example, if Taiwan were to declare independence, China would undoubtedly use force to reverse the decision, potentially even using the opportunity to push for 'reunification.' In case we needed reminding, the Chinese Ministry of Defense clearly stated on January 28, 2021, that "[Taiwan independence means war.](#)"¹

But the basic argument in my testimony is that the situation has changed. The greatest threat now is that Beijing will launch a military operation to force 'reunification,' irrespective of Washington's or Taipei's policies or actions. Specifically, I believe Xi Jinping will use force to compel Taiwan to unite with the mainland once he is confident in the Chinese military's ability to succeed in relevant joint operations, like an amphibious attack.

While military balances and outcomes of military operations are notoriously hard to assess and predict, China's military has made significant strides in its ability to conduct joint operations in recent years. China's massive military reform program, which Xi launched² shortly after coming to power in 2012, plans for China's military to be "fully modern" by 2027.³ Senior Col. Ren Guoqiang, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of National Defense, has claimed that "China has basically completed the national defense and military reform of the leadership and command systems, scale, structure and force composition, which promoted the joint operations of the Chinese military to a new stage."⁴ On November 7, 2020, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) revised its strategic guidelines, for only the fifth time in its history, to incorporate this new focus on joint operations.⁵ Chinese military writings are replete with examples of how to contribute to joint operations capability, such as ensuring a complementary logistics system.⁶

Because of these reforms and the modernization of Chinese equipment, platforms, and weapons, China may now be able to prevail in cross-strait contingencies even if the US intervenes in Taiwan's defense. China's improved anti-access/area denial capabilities and its strides in cyber and artificial intelligence also contribute to the weakening of cross-strait deterrence. In the words of Michèle Flournoy, "In the event that conflict starts, the United States can no longer expect to quickly achieve air, space, or maritime superiority."⁷ As Beijing hones its spoofing and jamming technologies, it may be able to interfere with US early warning systems and thereby keep US

forces in the dark. Worryingly, other analysts have concluded that Chinese interference with satellite signals is only likely to grow more frequent and sophisticated.⁸ China also possesses offensive weaponry, including ballistic and cruise missiles, which if deployed, could destroy US bases in Western Pacific in days.⁹ Finally, the US intelligence community warns that “China has the ability to launch cyber attacks that cause localized, temporary disruptive effects on critical infrastructure—such as disruption of a natural gas pipeline for days to weeks—in the United States.”¹⁰

Because of these aforementioned capabilities, many US experts are concerned with a fait accompli, a scenario in which China takes Taiwan before even the most resolved United States could act decisively. Recent war games jointly conducted by the Pentagon and RAND Corporation have shown that a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan would likely result in a US defeat, with China completing an all-out invasion in a matter of days.¹¹

In the end, Chinese perceptions of their likelihood of victory are more important than the reality in determining if they use force. It is not a good sign that Chinese sources express an increasing confidence that [the PLA is well prepared](#) for potential military confrontation with the United States over the Taiwan issue.¹² The multiple large-scale military exercises (at least nine) conducted simultaneously in the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, and the Bohai Gulf by the PLA in August 2020 are considered a credible demonstration of its ability to conduct complex, intense joint operations. While Chinese strategists acknowledge US military superiority generally, the conventional wisdom is that China’s [proximity to Taiwan, corresponding access to operational resources](#)¹³ and [resolute stance](#)¹⁴ makes the local balance of power [favorable to Beijing](#).¹⁵

The bottom line is that for the first time in Chinese history, Xi will believe that he has at his disposal a military capable of forcing unification. While many Western observers think China will be able to do so in the next five to eight years, Chinese military leaders have told me that they will be ready within a year. It is telling that, in Xi’s first order to China’s armed forces in 2021, he emphasized the importance of “full-time combat readiness” and said the PLA must be ready to “act at any second.”¹⁶

In other words, I would worry less about US policy precipitating a conflict and more about putting in place the military means necessary to stop China from using force against Taiwan. As long as the United States continues to talk about, but does not make, significant changes to improve its force posture in the region, China can afford to wait until later in Xi’s tenure to make its move. This would give its military more time to conduct realistic joint exercises and perhaps even engage in real combat operations to test out their capabilities, before moving against Taiwan. I do not think Beijing will not be pushed by smaller slights such as US visits or arms sales to make a move before it is ready. China has economic and diplomatic means through which to punish Taiwan, and limited military action, such as punitive missile attacks on military facilities, could be used for signaling purposes. So until Beijing is ready to take Taiwan by force, its leadership will carefully calibrate responses to US or Taiwan actions so as not to escalate to war.

What preconditions does China consider necessary for success in a military campaign against Taiwan? Do Chinese leaders believe they need to successfully land troops on Taiwan, and if so, to what extent does that deter them from initiating a military campaign? Following the outbreak of armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait, how could China escalate its use of force against Taiwan's military or against intervening U.S. forces? Under what circumstances would China consider attacking the U.S. homeland, and how would it do that?

China has many military options with using force against Taiwan. According to an [authoritative Chinese text](#),¹⁷ there are four main campaigns for which China is preparing: (1) Joint Firepower Strike Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合火力突击作战), (2) Joint Blockade Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合封锁作战), (3) Joint Attack Operations against Taiwan (大型岛屿联合进攻作战), and (4) Joint Anti-Air Raid Operations (联合反空袭作战).¹⁸ According to experts, the first scenario would consist of the PLA employing missile and air strikes to disarm Taiwanese targets.¹⁹ The second scenario would consist of the PLA employing tactics ranging from cyberattacks to naval surface raids to cut Taiwan off from the outside world. The third scenario would presumably follow the successful completion of the first two scenarios and would involve an amphibious assault on the island. The last scenario is specifically designed to counter American forces deployed in the nearby region.

To reiterate a previous point, if Chinese leaders think that they cannot forcibly 'reunify' with Taiwan, in other words that the United States can physically stop them, they will not initiate a conflict. Deterrence by denial in this case is more effective than deterrence by punishment. I also believe China would be greatly deterred if its leaders thought use of force would spark US allies into forming a real, long-term countervailing coalition against them. But at this stage, neither of these scenarios are realistic options.

So, right now, how China escalates force is most dependent on its expectations about US involvement, but not in the way traditionally thought. It is not the fact that the prospect of US intervention deters Beijing.

If China does not expect US intervention, and US direct military support for Taiwan is not forthcoming, Chinese leaders are likely to employ a graduated coercive military approach. Chinese leaders could start with a joint missile campaign, hitting military and government targets before expanding to civilian ones. An economic blockade is another. Even if Chinese forces initiated a broader attack on Taiwan's military, in particular naval and air forces, the goal may still be to inflict enough damage to force capitulation so that an amphibious attack is not necessary to achieve 'reunification.' If China's leaders assess that Taiwan's capitulation will not be forthcoming with any amount of cost imposition, then they will shift to a joint island landing campaign (登岛战役) to take Taiwan by force. As mentioned, China is also preparing for joint anti-air raid operations involving offensive operations against American units near the mainland and in the Western Pacific.

But this scenario is predicated on the expectation and reality of US failure to intervene. If Beijing thinks the US will intervene on Taiwan's behalf, then time becomes crucial. Chinese military

strategists believe that if you let the United States fight the way it is used to, which includes time to mobilize and amass firepower in theater, then victory is unlikely.

Thus, if Chinese leaders believe the US is likely to intervene, they are more likely to move quickly to the highest level of violence that the scenario requires to force Taiwan's capitulation to Beijing's demands before the US can intervene. If China's objective in the scenario is unification (versus punishing Taiwan or compelling a reversion to the status quo) and it expects US intervention, then it could even preemptively hit US basing in the region to cripple Washington's ability to respond.

In other words, US deterrence and defense are working at cross purposes. The more credible our resolve to fight, the more likely Chinese leaders are to escalate rapidly and hit US forces in the region in their opening salvo – thus making a US victory less likely. But if there is a possibility that the United States will stay out, Chinese strategists would avoid such a move, as it would inevitably bring the United States into the war. In this scenario, as China focuses on compelling Taiwan's capitulation at lower levels of violence, the United States would have time to mount an adequate defense.

On escalation dynamics, Chinese leaders have some off-ramps if they want to avoid escalation. I do not think they necessarily have to achieve complete unification to present a military campaign as a success. Xi will likely be cautious about what he publicly promises to give himself flexibility. As long as the United States does not push for Taiwan's independence as part of the war termination agreement, Beijing can accept half measures. One option, for example, is to seize some Taiwan controlled islands that China also claims such as Matsu,²⁰ Pratas,²¹ Itu Aba (of the Spratlys),²² and Quemoy/Kinmen.²³ In certain scenarios, just using force to punish Taiwan may be sufficient.

But the United States does not usually accept a return to the status quo antebellum after blood has been spilled. If China uses force against Taiwan, US leaders may want a war termination settlement that sufficiently punishes Beijing for this action—likely by demanding concessions on Taiwan's political status that Beijing will not make. In this scenario, Beijing will turn to its tendency for disproportionate escalation to bring about an end to the war on its terms.²⁴ China will start by increasing the costs on US military forces in the region; if that does not work, they will consider civilian targets in the United States. However, due to range limitations (China has limited conventional options²⁵ for hitting the US homeland), this is more likely through nontraditional means like cyber or counterspace attacks. This is one of the few scenarios in which the leadership may consider using nuclear weapons, though I do not believe they would use nuclear weapons first.²⁶

Does Beijing believe that long-term political, economic, and military trends in cross-strait relations are favorable or detrimental to its objective of unification with Taiwan? How urgent a priority is unification with Taiwan when compared to Beijing's other national interests? Does Beijing perceive a "window of opportunity" during which it must act to assure unification? Do Chinese leaders really want unification, or would they be content to maintain the status quo and prevent de jure independence?

There are objective reasons for Chinese leaders to be pessimistic about the trends toward peaceful unification (the idea that economic integration between Taiwan and the mainland will prevent conflict or even convince Taipei that unification is in its best interest).²⁷

On the most basic level, it is not working. Recent [polls](#) show the people of Taiwan are less interested in unification and prefer either the status quo or independence.²⁸ A survey in May by Academia Sinica, a research institute, found that only 23 percent of Taiwan residents regarded China as a “friend of Taiwan,” compared with 38 percent a year earlier.²⁹ The younger generation, born after Taiwan transitioned to democracy, has known nothing but the freedoms it currently enjoys and is more reluctant than the older generation is to give them up for what Beijing has to offer. China sees the recent reelection of Tsai Ing-Wen as a sign of troubling trends on the “rogue” island. China’s 2005 Anti-Secession Law³⁰ mandates an armed ‘reunification’ if peaceful ‘reunification’ is not possible, and Chinese leaders are concluding that it is not.

Moreover, maintenance of the status quo is no longer desirable for Chinese leaders. Xi has publicly called for concrete movement toward ‘reunification,’ an explicit demand that stakes his legitimacy on progress in that direction. By doing so, he moved the goalpost from preventing Taiwan independence, which means living with the 40-yearlong status quo, to an actual change in the nature of the cross-strait relationship, which is substantially less achievable without the use of force. Xi Jinping has stated³¹ multiple times his position that his program of national rejuvenation cannot be complete without ‘reunification.’³² His ambition to “resolve the Taiwan issue” during his tenure is common knowledge among the Chinese people. Xi has also expressed in various ways that he is more willing than his predecessor, Hu Jintao, to use force.³³ Additionally, in a major speech, Xi articulated that “the long-existing political discrepancy is the root cause of cross-Straits instability, it cannot go on generation to generation.”³⁴

Xi also seems to be ruling over an increasingly impatient Chinese population. A recent *Global Times* poll revealed that around 70 percent of mainlanders support war to unify Taiwan, and 37 percent of them think it best if war occurs in three to five years.³⁵ (The next most popular answer is one to two years, with only approximately 10 percent saying unification can wait for more than 10 years.) Furthermore, 64 percent of mainlanders anticipate a full-scale war to unify Taiwan, and 72 percent of them think China would definitely win. Luo Yuan, a major general in the Chinese military, recently said that China’s leaders “can only follow the will of all Chinese nationals [and] realize reunification by force,”³⁶ should Taiwan refuse to cede to Beijing’s leadership.

The Trump administration’s moves to strengthen US-Taiwan relations did create a sense in China that time was of the essence. Over the past four years, the administration approved more than \$17 billion worth of arms sales to Taiwan.³⁷ In March 2020, Trump signed into law the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, requiring the State Department to report to Congress on measures taken to improve diplomatic ties to Taiwan.³⁸ August and September saw visits from the highest-ranking US government officials to visit Taiwan since 1979.³⁹ Shortly before Biden took office, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo relaxed restrictions on meetings between US and Taiwanese officials.⁴⁰ These actions have contributed to Beijing’s calculations that it needed to be more proactive in pushing for Taiwan

unification. As one recent op-ed making the rounds put it, “resolution of the Taiwan issue cannot be rushed, nor can it be delayed for long.”⁴¹

While Chinese commentators note that the Biden administration favors a more cautious approach to cross-strait relations, Beijing is certain that the US will continue to ‘use the Taiwan card’ to [contain China’s rise](#).⁴² The reelection of Tsai Ing-Wen also fueled the sentiment that [Taiwan was pulling away from Beijing](#),⁴³ requiring an intensification of the “[anti-separatism fight](#).”⁴⁴ These developments have not created a “closing window of opportunity” logic per se, but they serve as constant reminders of the failure of the Communist Party to resolve their most pressing national issue. Because of these reasons, Wu Qian, director and spokesman of the Information Bureau of Ministry of National Defense, argues China is highly [vigilant](#)⁴⁵ on the cross-strait situation and is [well-prepared for possible military actions](#).⁴⁶

The commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What are your recommendations for congressional action related to the topic of your testimony?

US policy needs to focus on shaping Chinese perceptions of their ability to successfully absorb Taiwan through military means. This proposition implies several things for US strategy.

Changes Need to Be Made to US Military Capabilities, Not US Policy. Ending the US policy of strategic ambiguity as some have argued would do little to improve cross-strait deterrence.⁴⁷ The pivotal issue is not US resolve. Chinese leaders will be assuming US intervention when making their calculus. The main question will be whether Xi and other top leaders think the PLA can prevail despite US intervention. The US needs to develop the force posture and operational plans to deny China its objective, and credibly reveal these new capabilities. In the meantime, any extreme US policy changes, to include stationing US troops in Taiwan or helping Taiwan acquire nuclear weapons, would most certainly cross Beijing’s redlines and compel a military response before needed improvements in US military posture are implemented.⁴⁸

Changes in US Capabilities Should Focus on Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR); Resiliency; and Augmenting Firepower in the Strait. If the United States does not get adequate warning of an impending Chinese amphibious attack on Taiwan, the US military is unlikely to be able to stop a Chinese fait accompli. Because of this, Adm. Philip Davidson has recently advocated for securing about \$1 billion to build an over-the-horizon radar in Palau and the Homeland Defense Radar–Hawaii, which could track ballistic missiles, and about \$2 billion for “a constellation of space-based radars with rapid revisit rates,” to improve US regional force posture.⁴⁹ Draft legislation calling for \$378.6 million to “enhance indications and warning, sensor packages, the development of future intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms, and interoperable processing, exploitation, and dissemination architectures for the United States Info-Pacific Command” is a crucial step to address current shortfalls.⁵⁰ US Indo-Pacific Command should be given top priority for overhead national assets to ensure constant monitoring of Chinese airfields and ports of embarkation as well.

On resiliency, the US military has been undergoing reviews of the resiliency issue for almost a decade. I believe a hybrid approach of large, concentrated bases in key allied countries with

small, dispersed bases scattered across informal partners⁵¹—some within the first island chain and others outside it—is the best path to pursue. In addition to enhancing resiliency, such a force posture would also greatly enhance deterrence because China is more sensitive to threats of horizontal escalation (that other countries would get involved) than vertical escalation (higher levels of force).

Lastly, firepower. If it launches an attack on Taiwan, its leadership has considered all the costs. It has considered the possibility of US intervention. The only thing that prevents China from absorbing Taiwan is brute force. The United States needs to pre-position networks of missile launchers and armed drones near Taiwan.⁵² As Bridge Colby has previously argued, more long-range munitions, especially anti-ship weapons, positioned in places such as Guam, Japan, and the Philippines (and ideally smaller island states in the second island chain) “would help make the US ready to blunt the initial waves of the Chinese amphibious fleet and air-assault elements.”⁵³ If Chinese leaders know that their forces cannot physically make it across the strait, short of a declaration of independence, they will not consider trying.

Improving Taiwan Capabilities Is Important to Buy US Time, but Nothing Else. Taiwan will never be able to defend itself alone against mainland China, even with all the asymmetric capability in the world. Policymakers should encourage Taiwan to reform its strategy to embrace asymmetric approaches and encourage Taiwan to invest in cheap, expendable, mass-produced weapons systems.⁵⁴ But the main objective is to add a defense layer in case the United States does not get enough early warning to amass forces before China launches its invasion. These approaches are not an alternative to the US defense of Taiwan.

Ask Congressional Research Service to Conduct a Study of US War Termination Behavior. The focus of this testimony is on the political and strategic factors influencing Chinese decision-making. While avoiding conflict is an important objective, ensuring that any war that does break out is as short and limited in violence as possible (and the US wins) is equally important. The US has a historical tendency toward mission creep and maximalist demands that undercut these goals. If a war breaks out over Taiwan, the United States needs to be prepared to return to the status quo antebellum, even if militarily victorious. If the US demands Taiwan independence after a military victory, we will be stuck fighting China for decades or Beijing will escalate to levels of violence we are unwilling to match or absorb.

Notes

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