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STRATEGIC DETERRENCE AND TAIWAN'S SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract

Since 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) routinely challenged U.S. leadership and strategy regarding Taiwan. The PRC took advantage of the U.S. focus on counterterrorism operations by challenging international norms and policy toward Taiwan. The proximity of PRC forces to Taiwan and the evolution of the PRC's philosophy on nuclear weapons present unique challenges to the U.S. and the entire Indo-Pacific region. To deter PRC aggression against Taiwan's sovereignty, the U.S. must prepare for great power competition with the PRC by investing in the nuclear triad and establish strong alliances across Asia. This paper explores how a robust nuclear force and an alliance like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can deter Chinese aggression.

Introduction

Since 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) routinely challenged U.S. leadership and strategy regarding Taiwan. The fleeing Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) party from mainland China locked the PRC and the U.S. into an adversarial relationship. The first Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1953 threatened to expand the conflict. President Eisenhower lifted the U.S. Taiwan Strait blockade as the Korean War ended, and the PRC quickly took advantage of the lack of U.S. warships in the strait. Chinese forces bombed KMT forces on Kinmen and Matsu islands, thus thrusting the U.S. into the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. In response, Eisenhower's cabinet developed diplomatic and military options. A part of the military plan called for nuclear bombardment of PRC airfields near Xiamen¹. Secretary of State John Dulles messaged to the PRC in public statements that the U.S. was ready to use nuclear weapons, as necessary.² Eisenhower resisted nuclear weapons as the first option but wanted options available in the event diplomacy failed. Diplomacy won the day when Eisenhower formally committed to defending Taiwan by entering the Mutual Defense Treaty. Congress passed a resolution granting Eisenhower the authority to use force in defense of Taiwan. These measures formed the backbone of the defense policy of Taiwan.

U.S.-PRC relations regarding Taiwan remain tense. The PRC's hawkish policies toward disputed territories in the East and South China Seas, Hong Kong, and Taiwan mean the U.S. could find itself in another crisis in the Taiwan Strait. The U.S. has not faced a great power crisis from a nuclear-capable adversary since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the PRC took advantage of the U.S. focus on counterterrorism operations in challenging international norms

¹ Kristensen, *Nukes in the Taiwan Crisis*

² Hartnett, *Avoiding "A Chain Reaction of Disaster": A Reappraisal of the Eisenhower White House's Handling of the 1954–1955 Quemoy Crisis*

through aggressive actions in Hong Kong.³ To deter PRC aggression against Taiwan's sovereignty, the U.S. must prepare for great power competition with the PRC by investing in the nuclear triad and establish strong alliances across Asia.

Return to Great Power Competition

The U.S. never lost sight of the threat the PRC poses to Asia and the world; however, the focus on counterterrorism meant that not enough resources went to deter PRC aggression in Asia.⁴ The PRC has moved to consolidate its influence and control across Asia by challenging Hong Kong's autonomy, island-building activities in the South China Sea, territorial disputes with Japan⁵, and public statements against Taiwan sovereignty.⁶ Chinese aggression against its neighbors and advancements in military technology caused a shift in Department of Defense (DoD) priorities.⁷ The return to great power competition means the U.S. must revisit its global strategy in ways not seen since the end of the Cold War. Competition with the PRC does not mean that the U.S. can employ the same grand strategy from the Cold War. The PRC has different strategic goals than that of the former Soviet Union; however, nuclear weapons must be a central tenet of U.S. strategy to deter PRC aggression against Taiwan.

PRC Forces and Nuclear Weapons Policy

The PRC's growing naval and air capabilities, coupled with their proximity to Taiwan, increase the likelihood of a successful assault on Taiwan's sovereignty. Chinese aircraft routinely

³ Richard, *Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence*

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Guilfoyle, *The rule of law and maritime security: understanding lawfare in the South China Sea*

⁶ Yip, *It's Time To Stop Pandering To Beijing Over Taiwan*

⁷ O'Rourke, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*

penetrate Taiwan's airspace in a show of force.⁸ Additionally, Chinese naval forces lurk approximately 80 nautical miles from Taiwan's maritime border.⁹ The PRC relies on its air forces and navy to deal with Taiwan, expand influence to the Indian Ocean, and challenge U.S. forces in the region.¹⁰ The current capabilities of the Chinese navy may not match its global ambition, but it certainly matches its ambition toward Taiwan.

Further, Chinese philosophy regarding nuclear weapons employment is not what it used to be. Historically, the PRC viewed its nuclear weapons program as a deterrent from a conventional conflict escalating to a nuclear conflict and eschewed a no-first-use policy.¹¹ Recently, a PRC official restated this sentiment; however, PRC actions betray their public statements.¹² PRC now regards its nuclear weapons program as essential to achieving its regional and strategic objectives. Chinese leaders want flexible but limited nuclear options to assert control in the Indo-Pacific region.¹³ The U.S.'s nuclear triad provides an offset against the PRC's geography and growing military power. A capable nuclear force and an understanding that the U.S. will employ nuclear weapons will negate any naval or geographic advantage.

Diplomacy and Alliances

Strong alliances and intense diplomatic engagement are other reasons the U.S. had success during the Cold War. President Kennedy successfully navigated the Cuban Missile Crisis because of clever public and private diplomacy.¹⁴ The U.S. could control public opinion on

⁸ Hallion, *The Chinese Air Force: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities*

⁹ Chen, *Chinese Navy ships lurk near Taiwan's waters*

¹⁰ Agnihotri, *Holistic Maritime Capacity Building: New "Route" to China's Rise*

¹¹ Johnson, *Chinese Evolving Approaches to Nuclear "War Fighting": An Emerging Intense US-China Security Dilemma and Threats to Crisis Stability in the Asia Pacific*

¹² Richard, *Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence*

¹³ Johnson, *Chinese Evolving Approaches to Nuclear "War Fighting": An Emerging Intense US-China Security Dilemma and Threats to Crisis Stability in the Asia Pacific*

¹⁴ Baker, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Operation Dragon Rouge*

Soviet actions in Cuba and challenge Nikita Krushchev's bluff in private. Throughout the remainder of the Cold War, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) played an essential role in limiting Soviet influence across the globe.¹⁵ NATO presented a significant problem for the Soviet Union because of the collective military might NATO members provided.

Additionally, NATO members shared common values and goals.¹⁶ Shared values and goals make coming to the aid of an ally much more manageable and can inspire action from others. The collective purpose and unified message from NATO enabled diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. NATO's credibility meant that the Russians had to engage diplomatically or risk a costly military campaign against a united adversary.¹⁷ Currently, Russia does not view NATO as credible as it once was¹⁸. Russian lawlessness in Ukraine and Crimea demonstrates what could happen in the absence of a strong alliance.

What will stop the PRC from taking similar action against Taiwan? At the moment, Japan, China, and Taiwan think that war might be inevitable.¹⁹ A regional conflict could upset not only the region but the rest of the world. To deter PRC aggression against Taiwan and preserve Taiwan's sovereignty, the U.S. must re-focus nuclear deterrence to meet the Chinese threat and create a unified alliance across Asia.

The Future of Nuclear Deterrence

The PRC is committed to modernizing and advancing its nuclear forces.²⁰ The U.S. must have the same commitment to its nuclear forces. Sustainment of current capabilities and

¹⁵ Heisbourg, *NATO 4.0: The Atlantic Alliance and the Rise of China*

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Engle, *A New Cold War? Cold Peace. Russia, Ukraine, and NATO.*

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Reynolds, *Japan's Aso Draws China Anger for Comments on Defending Taiwan*

²⁰ Schneider, *Minimum Deterrence and Russian and Chinese Threat Developments*

developing new capabilities create space for the U.S. to maneuver.²¹ The U.S. must have a sense of urgency to modernize the legs of the nuclear triad. The flexibility the nuclear triad offers is invaluable, and a re-investment into nuclear forces would send a clear message to the PRC. A significant investment in the sustainment of current capabilities, which is still second-to-none, will buy enough time to field modern weapon systems. Re-investment in nuclear capabilities extends beyond the current weapon systems.

A modern nuclear weapon system cannot reach its potential, nor can it effectively deter an adversary if the weapon system operator is not adequate. To meet current and future adversaries and build a flexible nuclear force, the U.S. must invest in the development of its nuclear operators.²² Adequately addressing PRC aggression requires nuclear professionals that think about deterrence in innovative ways, and that thinking must be incorporated at all levels of professional military education (PME).²³ Junior nuclear professionals, officers, and enlisted must have the opportunity to learn and understand the nuclear enterprise beyond their day-to-day job. Programs such as an inter-service exchange, continuing education, and temporary duty to visit agencies across the nuclear enterprise build deterrence-minded professionals. Also, professional development encourages critical thinking on how the U.S. can best employ current capabilities to deter Chinese aggression. Leaders and policymakers should consider how current nuclear forces can enhance deterrence. First, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) forces should conduct exercises in a simulated wartime scenario. The PRC maintains it does not have a "first-use" policy; however, its actions do not match the stated policy.²⁴ Chinese opinions and attitudes towards nuclear weapon employment are evolving, and the U.S. must prepare for a scenario in

²¹ Richard, *Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence*

²² Payne, *Nuclear Deterrence in a New Age*

²³ Richard, *Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence*

²⁴ *Ibid*

which the PRC used nuclear weapons first.²⁵ ICBM operators should conduct wartime exercises to meet the demands of a wartime environment and build critical thinking skills to carry out the ICBM mission during adversity. Next, the U.S. should increase bomber patrols to the South and East China Seas. Moreover, policymakers should consider maintaining a consistent bomber presence in the region. Also, policymakers should consider reducing the submarine force in the Atlantic and repositioning part of the force in the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, the DoD should focus on integrated nuclear exercises with the PRC as the main adversary. Global nuclear exercise allows leaders to identify weaknesses and strengthen the nuclear force. A robust nuclear force assures our allies and underpins diplomatic efforts.

Building Strong Alliances

Just as the NATO alliance assisted in deterring Soviet aggression in Europe, a strong alliance in the Pacific will enhance U.S. Nuclear Deterrence. Nations across the globe want loyalty and reliability from their allies.²⁶ If the U.S. is disloyal to one ally, other allies will feel that they cannot rely on the U.S. in times of need. A perceived or actual disloyal act could have ripple effects that will not become evident until a more significant crisis erupts. If the U.S. abandons Taiwan, it could significantly damage the U.S.-Japan alliance and cause South Korea to align with the PRC.²⁷ The U.S. must build an alliance with nations across the Indo-Pacific region with shared values, common defense, and common goals at its base. Several nations that have a unified message and goals will deter PRC aggression against Taiwan. Recently, the PRC reduced air activity in Taiwan's air defense interdiction zone after the U.S. and Japan spoke on

²⁵ Johnson, *Chinese Evolving Approaches to Nuclear "War Fighting": An Emerging Intense US-China Security Dilemma and Threats to Crisis Stability in the Asia Pacific*

²⁶ Henry, *What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence*

²⁷ Ibid

the need for stability in the region and that Japan would defend Taiwan if necessary.²⁸ PRC aggression is not limited to Taiwan, and other nations in the region are interested in limiting the PRC.²⁹ The U.S. must extend its nuclear deterrence guarantees to Taiwan and others in the region as a building block toward a strong alliance.

The importance of extended deterrence and the nuclear umbrella has not faded as many expected at the end of the Cold War.³⁰ The PRC viewed nuclear weapons as an effective deterrent from a conventional war escalating into a nuclear war, but that view has evolved. The PRC now views nuclear weapons to achieve its strategic objectives.³¹ The U.S. must extend nuclear guarantees to other nations toward building a strong alliance in the region. Extended deterrence enabled the U.S. to build a strong alliance with NATO countries.³² Nuclear weapon assurances send a strong signal on the overall health of an alliance to adversaries far and wide.³³ A strong alliance buttressed by a powerful nuclear force and nuclear guarantees will deter the PRC and enable diplomatic lines of effort.

Conclusion

The threat of terrorism remains, but it is not as immediate as it once was. Two decades of counter-terror operations emboldened allies to challenge international norms and laws. The U.S. must re-focus its mindset to a great power competition. Policymakers can look to the Cold War for lessons on successfully navigating relations with a great power competitor. Nuclear deterrence and strong alliances prevented the Soviet Union from exerting its will across Europe. However, the U.S. must tailor its strategic plans to meet the Chinese adversary. A robust nuclear

²⁸ Nakamura, *China military flybys near Taiwan plunge after US-Japan Statement*

²⁹ Trachtenberg, *US Extended Deterrence*

³⁰ O'Neil, *Extended nuclear deterrence in East Asia: Redundant or Resurgent?*

³¹ Johnson, *Chinese Evolving Approaches to Nuclear "War Fighting": An Emerging Intense US-China Security Dilemma and Threats to Crisis Stability in the Asia Pacific*

³² Engle, *A New Cold War? Cold Peace. Russia, Ukraine, and NATO.*

³³ Roehrig, *Japan, South Korea, and the United State Nuclear Umbrella: Deterrence After the Cold War*

force with a significant investment in sustainment, modernization, and professional development of its operators will underpin building an alliance like NATO. Shared values, goals, and a sense of loyalty will sustain any alliance in the region. Further, it will enable other lines of effort to deter the PRC from violating Taiwan's sovereignty.

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