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Taming the Hegemon: Chinese Thinking on Countering U.S. Military Intervention in Asia

by Joel Wuthnow

Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs
Institute for National Strategic Studies
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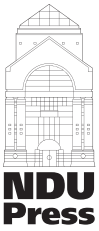

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Executive Summary

This report assesses recent Chinese thinking on countering U.S. intervention in Asia, specifically in a Taiwan contingency. Key findings include:

- People's Liberation Army (PLA) analysts assume U.S. forces will intervene in a Taiwan contingency, up to and including mainland strikes. This assumption, based on prudent military planning, has persisted for decades even as Chinese observers increasingly viewed U.S. power in a state of relative decline. It drives the PLA to advocate for careful preparation of counter-intervention options.

- States in China's position have historically relied on four options to counter third-party intervention in offensive campaigns: direct assault against intervening forces; deterrence actions against the third party's political leadership; a fait accompli against the main target before the intervener can mobilize; and creation of strategic buffers between the attacker and the intervener.

- PLA sources emphasize the options that require direct confrontation—direct assault and strategic deterrence of the United States—because they are the most decisive. The first relies on asymmetric warfare against key targets in the U.S. military system. The second leverages nuclear, conventional, and informational (space, cyber, and cognitive warfare) tools to pressure U.S. leaders to reject a recommendation to intervene. Both options are part of an effort to "deter and check" the "powerful enemy," which is a frequent euphemism for the United States.

- The PLA has a different attitude toward escalation in these two options. A direct assault emphasizes military expediency. PLA scholars focus on precision strikes but also high-casualty attacks if necessary for the campaign plan. Deterrence relies on brinkmanship. The two Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s are touted as examples of successful deterrence while managing risks.

- The PLA appears less interested in the two indirect options because they cannot guarantee success. A fait accompli would be difficult due to strategic warning and a U.S. ability to respond quickly. Beijing will try to create strategic buffers by pressuring U.S. allies and partners to deny access, but those efforts could fail—and the U.S. military has options to intervene that do not rely on host nation support.

- There is little deterrent value in shifting to a policy of strategic clarity regarding Taiwan's defense since the PLA already anticipates U.S. intervention. Chinese President Xi

Jinping appears to share that perspective. However, in the future, Chinese civilian leaders might hold more sanguine views on the likelihood of U.S. intervention than their military advisors, implying that messaging needs to be focused on both the PLA and the civilian leadership.

- PLA deterrent signaling in the strategic domains (nuclear, space, and cyber) could create crisis instability even if the intent is to avoid escalation. Discussions with PLA interlocutors, including both senior-level discussions and crisis simulations, could help manage those risks.

- Assuming Beijing has already made a strategic decision for war, the best U.S. response to Chinese deterrence is ambiguity and obfuscation. There are dangers in yielding to the deterrent threat, which would be tantamount to capitulation, or rejecting it out of hand, since Beijing would then pivot immediately to a direct assault. Entertaining but not committing to a favorable response from China's perspective can buy time for U.S. forces to begin dispersal into a wartime posture.

- Deterring and defeating a PLA direct assault requires improvements to make U.S. targets less vulnerable while also exploiting the PLA's own asymmetric disadvantages, especially its need to concentrate forces in the Taiwan Strait without guaranteed air and maritime supremacy. There are also opportunities to misdirect PLA resources into targets less essential for U.S. success.

- The PLA may currently discount a fait accompli option, but that could change. The U.S. military should build and demonstrate capabilities that can slow an invasion despite reduced warning. U.S. messaging can also highlight failures of previous fait accompli attempts, including Russian president Vladimir Putin's 2022 gambit to cloak the Ukraine invasion as an exercise and North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's failure in the Korean War.

- Contestation over U.S. access, basing, and overflight is part of the backdrop of strategic competition in Asia. Beijing will use all means at its disposal to block U.S. forces from using military facilities on allied territory and could have some success. U.S. planning for intervention should not assume that such access is guaranteed.

Introduction

China could use force to try to compel reunification with Taiwan in 2027, 2035, 2049, or anytime in between. Key to its decision calculus will be its assessments of whether the United States has the intention and capability to intervene. The military balance across the Taiwan Strait has already shifted decisively in China's favor.[1] Taiwan can buy time through defense reforms, but effective resistance to an invasion depends on U.S. intervention. This fact is well known to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has long considered mitigating U.S. intervention as a linchpin of its operational plans. The most dangerous scenario is one where the PLA concludes that the United States has become a "paper tiger" that lacks the resolve and military capabilities to intervene. Embracing this idea, they could advise Chinese leaders that war could proceed with minimal risks—a one-on-one match with a much inferior opponent.

Fortunately, this is not the judgment that PLA officers have reached. They continue to argue in internal writings that Chinese military planners must account for the possibility of U.S. intervention at a time and scale sufficient to influence the course of the war. Recognizing the U.S. military as an enduring threat has also focused their attention on developing credible countermeasures. This study finds that the PLA has focused its efforts on two primary options—deterring U.S. intervention by marshaling nuclear, conventional, and informational capabilities to threaten unacceptable consequences for U.S. political decisionmakers, and, failing that, conducting a direct assault against key links in the U.S. military system using precision strikes and other means. The first option is exercised through a brinkmanship policy but seeks to manage risks, while the second focuses on military expediency and carries high risks of escalation and a broader war between the two powers. The two options are not contradictory but rather part of a cohesive whole: seek to deter but prepare to defeat.

China's concepts for counter-intervention are broader than U.S. analyses often assume. Most of the attention in public discussions is on specific weapons and platforms that create anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) challenges for U.S. forces. The sections of the annual Department of Defense reports on Chinese military power that deal with counter-intervention usually focus on relevant capabilities such as anti-ship ballistic missiles and counter-space systems.[2] Other reports and analyses likewise emphasize PLA hardware.[3] Wargames are usually premised on assumptions of robust PLA capabilities and magazine depth, with red team players employing hardware in a way that U.S. subject matter experts believe is most efficacious.[4] Such approaches are limited not only because accurate appraisals of PLA hardware are difficult to conduct in open-source analysis, but also because they artificially narrow China's choices to a warfighting option.

Surprisingly, little work has been done to understand Chinese *thinking* on counter-intervention as opposed to documenting capabilities. In a 2014 essay, M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher Twomey could not find much evidence of Chinese consideration of A2/AD concepts in doctrinal writings, concluding that this is not a primary feature of Chinese military strategy.[5] In a rebuttal, Timothy Heath and Andrew Erickson argued that China is nonetheless developing A2/AD capabilities and engaging in plans for a "regional restructuring" to limit U.S. access by expanding China's own strategic influence.[6] Ryan Martinson relates the views of senior leaders supporting a deterrent and wartime role for the PLA Navy in counter-intervention.[7] Brandon Babin persuasively argues that China's recent nuclear buildup is intended to deter U.S. intervention in a conventional war in Asia.[8] While these articles all illuminate pieces of the puzzle, the most recent comprehensive survey of PLA discussions on this topic dates from Roger Cliff and colleagues' 2007 RAND report *Entering the Dragon's Lair*, which carefully catalogued the list of U.S. targets PLA analysts thought needed to be held at risk.[9] The intervening two decades have given the PLA ample time to update their thinking based on new capabilities and an analysis of which U.S. vulnerabilities should be exploited.

Gaining a more accurate picture of current PLA thinking about its options to counter U.S. intervention is of increasing urgency as the U.S. Department of Defense shifts its own strategy. Trump administration Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth describes China as the U.S. military's "pacing threat" and stresses the urgency of deterring China's possible use of force to achieve reunification, which would threaten Taiwan's survival and peace and stability in Asia.[10] A wider aperture on Chinese thinking can help U.S. policymakers anticipate the strategies that the PLA will employ to deter, delay, disrupt, or defeat U.S. participation in a war, and to develop ways to undermine those approaches in peacetime and wartime.

This report provides an updated view on PLA thinking on how to counter U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency.[11] It relies on professional PLA writings, primarily the internal journals *China Military Science* and *Military Arts* that are published by the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), which is the center of doctrinal development for the PLA. Articles in these journals are written not only by PLA scholars but also by senior operational figures from the theater commands and Central Military Commission departments, providing insights into influential viewpoints being circulated in the PLA. The report also leverages insights from other professional journals as well as teaching volumes produced by AMS and the PLA National Defense University (NDU), whose function is to train the senior commanders who would be responsible for implementing these options. This report avoids reliance on PLA newspapers,

which are intended for general consumption, and media commentary from PLA pundits whose primary purpose is to cater to nationalist whims or influence foreign perceptions.[12]

The report is organized into four main sections. The first establishes that the PLA continues to assume U.S. intervention as part of its military planning. Those judgments have remained unchanged despite (or perhaps because of) the rise of an alternative narrative in China's strategic community that the United States has entered a period of irreversible decline. This section also discusses the ways in which PLA authors think the United States could intervene and the general principles that they assert should guide China's response. The second section develops a typology of counter-intervention options. Based on historical examples of states in China's position, it argues that leaders have four basic choices: direct assault, deterrence, fait accompli, and strategic buffer. These options vary in terms of whether the intervener is targeted directly or indirectly, and whether the primary means of defeat is military or political.

The third section applies this typology to the PLA literature. It finds strong evidence that PLA analysts continue to discuss and update their thinking on the parameters of a direct assault on U.S. forces. The PLA has embraced the idea of an asymmetric operation targeting the weak links in the U.S. military system and is refreshing those ideas based on new technology. It also finds an increasing emphasis on the deterrent option. This would involve the use of strategic capabilities to hold broader U.S. interests at risk to deter a decision to intervene. PLA authors discuss conventional, nuclear, and informational tools relevant to this option and note that history provides evidence that deterrence can work. A focus of these discussions is on Mao Zedong's use of brinkmanship to deter U.S. participation in the two Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s. Other PLA sources describe Russian nuclear signaling in the Ukraine war as evidence of successful deterrence. On the other hand, there is less support for the fait accompli and strategic buffer options. This suggests that the PLA cannot rely on the assumption that it can achieve a quick victory before U.S. forces can respond, nor can it assume that depriving U.S. forces of access to regional bases will be possible or sufficient.

The final section considers the policy implications. This includes seven main points: 1) Washington should uphold the policy of strategic ambiguity since the PLA already assumes that U.S. intervention is likely—shifts in declared policy would provoke without deterring; 2) U.S. strategic messaging should focus on both Chinese civilian leaders and the PLA given that their views on U.S. intervention may differ in the future; 3) talks should be carried out with PLA interlocutors to reduce the risks of crisis instability that could result from aggressive deterrent signaling, especially in the strategic domains (nuclear, space, and cyber); 4) once Beijing has made a strategic decision for war, U.S. decisionmakers should respond ambiguously to PLA deterrent

threats to buy time for U.S. forces to disperse into a wartime posture and increase overall readiness; 5) U.S. defense strategy should focus on reducing the vulnerability of critical U.S. systems while targeting asymmetric PLA weaknesses, especially its need to mass forces in the Taiwan Strait; 6) any future PLA confidence in a fait accompli option should be undermined through messages that highlight U.S. capabilities to respond despite reduced warning time; and 7) competition for access, basing, and overflight will continue, but U.S. planning for intervention should not assume host nation support.

Prospects of U.S. Intervention

PLA analysts continue to base their discussions of how a war with Taiwan would unfold, and the requirements necessary to ensure operational success, on the assumption of a U.S. intent to actively participate in the conflict. This section begins with a discussion of PLA writings anticipating U.S. intervention and notes that this assumption remains even as a simultaneous narrative has developed since the late 2000s that U.S. power is in decline. It then reviews the ways in which PLA authors expect the United States to intervene, ranging from low levels of support, to blockade, to full-scale attacks on mainland China. Finally, it identifies a series of general principles that PLA writings suggest must be followed when developing counter-intervention options, including the need for a careful net assessment of forces, a strong internal defense, and policies that differentiate the main target from the intervening power.

Interference and Intervention

U.S. military "intervention" [干预] in a war would constitute an extreme form of what Chinese officials routinely criticize as U.S. "interference" [干涉] in cross-strait relations.[13] Beijing has been frustrated with U.S.-Taiwan political and military coordination since unofficial relations began in 1979. Those concerns grew after the strategic U.S.-China alignment ended with the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and U.S. administrations pursued stronger ties with an economically vibrant and democratizing Taiwan.[14] China's complaints focused on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, including the George H.W. Bush administration's sale of 150 F-16s in 1992, and a relaxation of U.S. restrictions on unofficial contacts, especially the Clinton administration's decision to allow then-Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui to give a pro-democracy speech at Cornell University in June 1995.[15] Even before Lee's visit, Jiang Zemin asserted that "certain foreign forces" have "meddled in the Taiwan issue," which "impedes the process of China's peaceful reunification, but also threatens peace, stability, and development in the Asia-Pacific region."[16]

Such concerns lingered under Hu Jintao and have intensified in the Xi era.[17] Xi has railed against foreign "interference" in cross-strait affairs on many occasions, implicitly referencing U.S. support for the island. At the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, Xi twice mentioned "opposing external interference" in his report. He explained that China's statement that it would never "give up the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures" was aimed not at ordinary Taiwan citizens, but at a "very small number of 'Taiwan independence' separatists" and at "external interference."[18] The same year, the party's propaganda department published a primer on "the Chinese Communist Party's national reunification" that detailed the challenges of "external interference" for rank-and-file cadres:

> *We firmly oppose external interference. The Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs, which concerns China's core interests and the national sentiments of the Chinese people. No external interference is allowed. We do not promise to give up the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures. We are targeting external interference and a very small number of "Taiwan independence" separatists and their separatist activities, not our compatriots in Taiwan. We must firmly oppose external forces stirring up trouble in the Taiwan Strait, prevent and resolve major risks, and actively stabilize the external environment related to Taiwan. In the face of increasing interference from external forces, we must strengthen planning for the reunification process, maintain strategic focus, take positive and proactive actions, and strive to promote the peaceful reunification of the motherland*.[19]

Chinese observers blame U.S. actions for enflaming the situation. Xiao Yang, director of the political research office at the Shanghai Institute for Taiwan Studies, identifies four negative trends in U.S. policy that have caused alarm. First is the "officialization" of U.S.-Taiwan exchanges, including a visit by then-U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in 2022. Second were U.S. efforts to better integrate Taiwan into global industrial supply chains, thereby weakening China's economic leverage over the island's leaders. Third was increasing "military-security interaction and cooperation" under both U.S. Republican and Democratic administrations, including growing arms sales and frequent U.S. naval transits through the Taiwan Strait. Fourth was U.S. support for a greater role for Taiwan in international organizations such as the World Health Assembly and the International Civil Aviation Organization.[20] In response, Xiao

calls for a greater focus on "blocking external forces from interfering in the Taiwan issue," including through updated legislation and reinvigorated propaganda campaigns.[21]

Complaints about U.S. "interference," however, did not translate into a consensus about the likelihood of U.S. "intervention" immediately after the Cold War. Washington has maintained a policy of "strategic ambiguity" about the conditions under which it would intervene since the U.S.-Taiwan mutual defense treaty was dissolved in January 1979, and some in China initially believed that the United States might not be willing to bear the costs of war for Taiwan.[22] However, debate about U.S. intentions narrowed as signs of U.S. support for Taiwan, and perceptions of hostile U.S. motives toward China, became more prominent in the 1990s. One perceived signal of aggressive U.S. intent was the Clinton administration's decision to deploy two aircraft carrier battle groups near the Taiwan Strait during the 1995–1996 crisis that erupted after Lee's visit to the United States.[23] A more decisive moment was the accidental North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombing of China's Belgrade embassy during the Kosovo air war in May 1999. For Chinese analysts, this not only reflected a worrisome trend of U.S. interventionism but also was regarded as evidence that the United States would use force to maintain its hegemonic status in Asia.[24]

The question of whether U.S. forces would intervene might have been answered in the "great peace and development debate" of 1999,[25] but it was not inevitable that this consensus would endure for more than two decades. Chinese analysts could have raised doubts about U.S. intentions to defend Taiwan as relative U.S. power began what they perceived as an irreversible decline. Indeed, an "American decline" narrative gained traction in China's strategic community during the late Hu and Xi eras.[26] Influential PLA authors shared this perspective. In a 2021 *China Military Science* article, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo, then-deputy chief of the joint staff department for intelligence, wrote that the "global financial crisis in 2008 was the peak of the U.S. hegemonic order, and it also marked the beginning of the decline of U.S. hegemony. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 was also an important point that marked the beginning of the collapse of the U.S. hegemonic order."[27] A declining hegemon might prefer not to expend its waning power in a war, even if it continued its peacetime "interference" in cross-strait affairs.

Yet this is not the conclusion that PLA analysts reached. Rather, there is continuity in the argument that the PLA must prepare for the intervention of a "powerful enemy" [强敌], which is a ubiquitous euphemism for the United States.[28] The 2001 *Science of Military Strategy*, written by AMS scholars, advised that commanders should "be prepared to deal with possible international intervention" both at the outset of and during a conflict to "prevent a reversal of the war situation."[29] It also cautioned that "even if the direct combat target [that is, Taiwan] is weaker

than us, the possibility of powerful enemy intervention and support cannot be ruled out."[30] These arguments continued after the "American decline" narrative began in the late 2000s. The 2009 volume *Science of Army Operations*, for instance, argued that "the biggest obstacle to our national reunification is the military intervention of a powerful enemy."[31] The 2013 revision to the *Science of Military Strategy* expanded on its previous warning a dozen years earlier not to be complacent about the risks of foreign intervention:

> *In the future, regardless how great the probability of a powerful enemy implementing large-scale military intervention or directly initiating a war against us, we cannot count on luck and must keep a foothold at the foundation of having ample war preparations and powerful military capabilities of our own, rather than at the assessment that the enemy will not come, intervene, or strike*.[32]

More recent PLA sources reaffirm these arguments. The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, written by scholars at PLA NDU, asserted that "there is always the risk of military intervention by external forces," and "once the conflict expands, the PLA could face a situation of 'one-to-two' or 'one-to-many,'" implying the possibility of a coalition forming against China that might include U.S. allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.[33] PLA articles on niche warfighting subjects also assume U.S. intervention. For example, a 2025 *Military Arts* article prefaces the need for quick responses by airborne troops with the prediction that "there is a high risk of powerful enemy intervention."[34] An article on army logistics argues that in the future, "the powerful enemy's intervention will be deeper, our breakthrough [capabilities] will be more difficult, and the combat consumption rates will be higher."[35] These conclusions suggest either a perception among PLA observers that U.S. decline is likely to make Washington even *more* aggressive as it seeks to retain its leading position in Asia, or that those who expect U.S. intervention believe that the pace and scope of the decline are not enough to contain the ability of the "powerful enemy" to leverage military capabilities against China.[36]

Modes of U.S. Intervention

In the view of PLA analysts, U.S. intervention could take several forms. In his *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, AMS scholar Senior Colonel Zhang Peigao divides intervention into three types. A "low" level of intervention would represent a continuation of peacetime "interference" activities into a crisis, such as forward presence of foreign military forces and close-in surveillance operations, which Zhang regards as a kind of "military deterrence."[37] A 2024 *China*

Military Science article similarly describes intelligence support to improve a partner's "battlefield situational awareness, combat planning, and command and control efficiency," which the authors argue requires the PLA to impose an information blockade at the outset of a war.[38] The same article also discusses provision of "energy and material support," such as oil, natural gas, and food, which are "important foundations for supporting the war and normal operations of society," and which should thus be cut off by the offensive side.[39]

A "medium" level of intervention could involve U.S. blockades and counter-blockades. For Zhang Peigao, this could include the declaration of no-fly zones and maritime blockades.[40] A 2000 *Modern Navy* article likewise states that the PLA "cannot rule out the possibility that the U.S. Navy will assist the Taiwan military in implementing counter-blockade operations," including the deployment of U.S. minesweepers to keep Taiwan's ports open.[41] In a more aggressive way, PLA Naval Research Institute professor Senior Captain Liang Fang anticipates that U.S. forces will also seek to close China's access to strategic passageways such as the Strait of Malacca in any regional conflict:

> *As soon as there is an incident involving the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, the U.S. Navy and Air Force* [strengths] *that are stationed in peripheral areas will be able to quickly reach the area where the incident* [occurred], *and this will greatly affect the actions of the People's Republic of China's troop strengths and control the resolution of the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea issue. Speaking overall, the United States treats containment of maritime strategic accesses as an important card for preventing China from completing its grand enterprise of unifying the motherland.*[42]

Liang's concern, in other words, is that the United States will attempt to shape Beijing's risk calculus for continuing the war by endangering its own access to strategic materials, such as oil, and potentially merchant traffic.[43]

The highest level of intervention would involve direct strikes against PLA combat forces, including those in mainland China.[44] Even before the 2010 publication of the influential Air-Sea Battle concept by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, which called for high-intensity strikes against the mainland,[45] PLA analysts anticipated such actions. The 2000 *Modern Navy* article referenced above predicted U.S. sea-launched Tomahawk missiles and air-strikes in "gradually escalating attacks on the mainland," whose targets could include "not only our landing troops, but also civilian and military facilities."[46] The 2006 *Science of Campaigns*, a

teaching volume produced by PLA NDU, noted that the "powerful enemy" has "stealth penetration, long-range attack, and precision strike capabilities" that could be used to conduct "uninterrupted airstrikes against us under various weather conditions."[47] The passage compares U.S. capabilities with the PLA's "relatively limited" ability to counter long-range strikes, placing them "in a grim situation of defeating the superior with the inferior."[48]

The 2010 Air-Sea Battle report confirmed what PLA authors already expected. Later PLA writings cited this concept as proof of their convictions and expanded on previous warnings about mainland strikes. In 2012, Zhang Peigao wrote that Air-Sea Battle is the "main combat style" of the "powerful enemy," who will "make full use of our electromagnetic radiation signals intercepted through long-range pre-reconnaissance" to "support their own targeted destruction of our command-and-control system."[49] Zhang observed that this was the same concept used by U.S. forces to "quickly paralyze the command system" of Iraqi forces in the Gulf War.[50] Similarly, a 2014 *China Military Science* article by Major General Zhang Ming, then-director of the General Staff Department's Strategic Planning Bureau, argued that the Obama administration's rebalance to Asia strategy included a military intention to implement the Air-Sea Battle concept by "promoting Asia-Pacific forward deployments." Summing up the options available to U.S. decisionmakers, he concluded, the "powerful enemy" will "help its allies gain comprehensive battlefield control and intervene directly or indirectly."[51]

General Principles for China's Response

The expectation of U.S. intervention leads PLA scholars to recommend careful planning in developing response options and capabilities. Zhang Peigao writes that the PLA should "carefully formulate countermeasures and make advanced preparations based on an accurate judgment of the situation."[52] Given that the "powerful enemy" might intervene through different means, Zhang suggests that plans should be "adaptable and flexible," determined by "on-site, real-time monitoring," and incorporate "necessary improvements" according to changes in the battlefield situation.[53] The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* adds that the development of relevant capabilities is useful not only in a contingency but also in strategic messaging. The "more ample our war preparations and the stronger our military capabilities," it argues, the "less likely the powerful enemy would dare to rashly initiate a war against us."[54]

PLA sources identify several principles for an effective response. First is that plans should be based on an ongoing net assessment of U.S. and PLA capabilities. Senior Colonel Chen Qiyin, then an official in the Southern Theater Command's joint staff department, argues that military theories (that is, doctrine) should analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the "powerful

enemy."[55] A 2024 *China Military Science* article recommends studying the "weak links in the powerful enemy's combat system" and identifying "checks and balances" that can exploit those vulnerabilities, while considering the "advanced concepts, methods, and technologies" of the adversary to improve PLA responses.[56] In the authors' words, "learn from the barbarians to defeat the barbarians."[57] Along these lines, Major General Chen Hui, then-deputy chief of staff of the Eastern Theater Command Air Force, argues that the frequent presence of enemy ships and aircraft in his theater, which often involve the "validation of new tactics and new attack methods of the powerful enemy," constitutes a "natural training ground for realistic [PLA] training."[58]

A second principle is that the PLA must adopt a strong internal defense. Based on uncertainty about the forms and locations of U.S. intervention, Zhang Peigao recommends the promulgation of "local defense plans for other directions" as well as defenses against enemy information attacks and precision strikes.[59] A 2009 volume, *Science of Army Operations Under Informatized Conditions*, warns that commanders should carry out anti–air raid and anti-sabotage preparations in both forward and rear areas. This includes defense of "assembly areas, important military installations, important cities, important lines of communication, traffic hubs, and important bridges."[60] Such preparations are necessary to "thwart the enemy's intervention and support the smooth implementation of the [island] landing joint operations."[61] This prescription is consistent with doctrinal requirements for the People's Armed Police—China's premier paramilitary service—to conduct "defensive operations" including protection of internal targets in wartime.[62]

Third is that planners should differentiate the main combat target (Taiwan) from the intervening force (the United States). Although the two might support each other, the PLA needs to determine the amount of resources in terms of manpower, munitions, and equipment to expend on the main target versus the third party. For Zhang Peigao, the former should be the primary focus of attacks, but the PLA must "leave enough room" to handle the latter, and coordination between the two should be conducted prior to and throughout the conflict.[63] A *China Military Science* article recognizes that severing the intervening force from the main target is an essential task, but "how to grasp the balance of direct combat against the enemy and responding to the intervention of external major powers" is a "major issue that needs to be solved in strategic guidance."[64] Moreover, as discussed below, some Chinese sources argue that it can be beneficial to formulate different approaches toward the two parties.[65]

In sum, the need to counter U.S. intervention remains a key factor informing PLA planning for major operations against Taiwan. The judgment that planners must consider not only the likelihood but also the mode of U.S. intervention and diligently prepare counters is a consistent theme in PLA writings since the late 1990s. The persistence of this theme suggests that the

military is not so overconfident that it can discount the possibility, but also not so underconfident to think that U.S. intervention would pose an insurmountable obstacle. On this basis, PLA analysts have discussed a variety of ways to frustrate U.S. intervention so that options against the main target can work as intended. This is the subject of the following sections.

A Typology of Options

Leaders in China's position have used a variety of ways to address the challenge of foreign intervention in wartime. Based on examples from the world wars, the Cold War, and the post–Cold War era, this section develops a typology of options. The typology consists of four options that vary along two dimensions (see table). These dimensions reflect the basic choices that leaders of an offensive campaign need to make. First is whether to directly target the intervening party or to use indirect methods including a fait accompli before the intervener can act or strategic buffers that restrict the intervener's freedom of action. Second is the means of defeat. Leaders can choose blunt military instruments to cripple adversary military systems or to conduct a rapid invasion. But they can also use a broader range of nuclear, conventional, and even non-military tools to shape target decisionmaking. This could involve signaling to the intervening state's leadership or to prospective host nations. This section explains the logic of each option and illustrates them with historical examples, both successful and unsuccessful.

Direct Assault

The first option is a direct military assault on the third party. This option applies when the intervening side has already begun to mobilize and deploy forces or when the attacker concludes that intervention is inevitable—that is, it cannot be deterred. The mechanism of defeat is

Table. Typology of Options

		Primary Mechanism of Defeat	
		Blunt Force	Political Signals
Targeting Intervention	Direct	**Direct assault**: Disrupt or defeat intervening side through military assault. May be preemptive or reactive and employ kinetic or nonkinetic weapons.	**Deterrence**: Threaten intervening leaders with unacceptable costs through conventional, strategic, or nonmilitary means.
	Indirect	**Fait accompli**: Conduct a rapid attack against the main target before intervener can mobilize and deploy forces. Requires strategic surprise through deception.	**Strategic buffer**: Threaten or co-opt potential host nations to deny intervener access, basing, or overflight, raising the difficulty of intervention.

to employ force to deny the opponent a credible intervention option, or to reduce the effectiveness of the intervention so that an attack on the main target can proceed within an acceptable level of risk. This is the most decisive option because, if successful, it eliminates the possibility of external obstruction. However, it is also the most escalatory option because it requires the use of force against the intervening third party. This could entail both vertical escalation as the intervener uses a higher degree of force to pursue its objectives or even expands its war aims to include elimination of the attacking regime, or horizontal escalation as the conflict expands to other regions or other states join the conflict. A war of limited duration against a neighbor over a specific territorial dispute could grow into a protracted war against a "powerful enemy," the risks of which would outweigh the reward sought in the initial campaign.

Seeking to manage the escalation risks, the attacker could control the timing and intensity of its operations. A preemptive strike might be more decisive, but the attacker could wait until the intervener has deployed forces, hoping that they might use force first. This would allow the attacker to claim that it is pursuing a "self-defensive counter-attack"[66] rather than a war of aggression and reduce international support for the defender. On the modern battlefield, the attacker could also control the intensity of its campaign by using non-kinetic tools such as cyber-attacks against adversary networks or reversible attacks on space systems, or by using precision weapons to strike targets while minimizing casualties. The attacker might also refrain from targeting intervening troops stationed in other countries (for example, U.S. forces in Japan) to reduce the likelihood of host nations becoming involved. However, steps to control escalation would come at the expense of military effectiveness; a "knockout punch" would be harder to achieve.

The most famous example of this option is Japan's attack on U.S. forces at Pearl Harbor in 1941. The strategic problem was Tokyo's judgment that Washington would intervene to oppose Japanese expansion into territory controlled by the British Empire or the Netherlands, especially Malaya and the Dutch East Indies.[67] Yet control of these territories was critical to Japan's imperial aspirations because of access to raw materials, such as oil, rubber, nickel, and tin. Abandoning those ambitions, however, was not an option because it would have required a fatal humiliation of the government.[68] A direct conflict was inevitable, but Japanese leaders understood that a protracted war against U.S. forces would be untenable because U.S. industrial capacity was seven times greater than Japan's. The only option was a surprise attack on the Pacific Fleet in Hawaii to buy Japan enough time to consolidate its position in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. That strike failed because U.S. aircraft carriers were not destroyed and, in the broader sense, the United States was emboldened to fight a long war.[69]

Another example is the Central Powers' campaign against Romania in World War I. When the war started, Romanian king Carol I considered joining the Central Powers but decided on neutrality. It was thus a surprise when his successor, the German-born Ferdinand I, signed an alliance with the Triple Entente in August 1916. Romania's intervention in the war needed to be crushed because of the threat of a new front that would have diverted troops from the main theater, and because it endangered Austro-Hungarian supply lines in Transylvania. The Central Powers agreed to a joint campaign to topple the Romanian regime that involved an assault on Bucharest by German, Bulgarian, and Turkish forces; by December, most of Romania had come under enemy control.[70] Although it was not a strategic surprise, the campaign succeeded because of a major imbalance between Romanian forces and the multinational coalition it faced.

Deterrence

A second option is deterrence. As with a direct assault, the main target is the intervener, but the mechanism of defeat is different. Rather than using blunt military tools, the attacker threatens unacceptable consequences against the putative intervener before it enters the war. Those consequences could include the possibility of a military defeat but could also involve broader damage to the intervener's territory, economy, or other interests so that decisionmakers conclude that the likely rewards of intervention are not worth the risks to those other interests. The tools selected for this option could include conventional forces as well as other instruments such as economic power, and, in the modern context, strategic capabilities such as nuclear weapons, cyber threats to civilian infrastructure, and threats to commercial space systems. Threats could be transmitted through rhetoric or through actions meant to increase their credibility.

The tradeoffs involved in this option are the inverse of direct assault. One risk is that the threats might not be persuasive enough to influence the target's calculus. If the threat fails, the intervener would have the full range of military forces left at its disposal. Moreover, the issuance of threats could deprive the attacker of its ability to surprise the main target (as well as any third parties supporting them) as it would have likely revealed its intentions to clearly communicate those threats. This could provide defenders time to increase their own readiness. The most significant risk is that more aggressive deterrent actions designed to make threats more persuasive, such as conducting cyber-attacks, could inadvertently cause a target to be more resolved to intervene than if the action had not occurred. Those actions could also prompt tit-for-tat retaliation that could destabilize the crisis situation, especially if they involve strategic signaling. The main reward is that deterrence could eliminate the possibility of intervention without the actual costs of a direct military clash or at least restrain the scope of the adversary's involvement to a

lower level.[71] Without the prospect of intervention, the main target would be isolated and could capitulate without the need for war, saving the attacker blood and treasure. An added benefit is that, if deterrence fails, the mobilization of some deterrent tools (for example, long-range precision strike or counter-space weapons) could be useful in direct assault. Mobilization of nuclear forces would also be a useful backstop against vertical escalation.[72]

The prospect of "winning without fighting" has led numerous aggressors to attempt to deter intervention. In World War I, Germany attempted to deter U.S. involvement by threatening unrestricted submarine warfare against trans-Atlantic shipping. The threats were initially rhetorical, with Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz exclaiming to a U.S. newspaper in 1915, "What would America say if Germany declares submarine war on all enemy merchant ships?"[73] The sinking of the British ship *Lusitania* in May 1915 pushed Washington closer to war because 128 victims were U.S. citizens, but isolationist sentiment in the United States prevailed. In February 1917, Germany increased its deterrent actions by sinking the U.S. freighter *Housatonic*, but controlled escalation by allowing passengers to board lifeboats, which likely delayed U.S. involvement by a month.[74] However, the loss of U.S. citizens in several sinkings in March galvanized U.S. support for war. In his speech to Congress requesting a declaration of war, President Woodrow Wilson stated: "American ships have been sunk, American lives have been taken, in ways [which] have stirred us very deeply."[75] By escalating to lethal attacks on U.S. shipping, Germany's deterrent campaign caused the outcome it most wanted to avoid.

A successful example of deterrence was Adolf Hitler's ploy to convince Britain and France not to interfere in the annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia in 1938. Hitler perceived that neither great power had the resolve to defend this territory, even though France had a formal alliance with the Czech government. To promote non-intervention, Hitler first informed the French that Germany was building "the most gigantic fortifications that ever existed" along the Franco-German border and then warned British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain that without annexation, Hitler "would be prepared to risk a world war."[76] This prompted Chamberlain to put more pressure on the Czech leadership to agree to annexation. Hitler's success, cemented in the September 1938 Munich Agreement, rested on warnings, but not lethal actions, against opponents who preferred appeasement over conflict. It was not until Hitler's invasion of Poland almost a year later that Britain and France changed their strategy.[77]

Another example of attempted deterrence was Vladimir Putin's use of nuclear signaling to deter NATO involvement in the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As Michael Kofman and colleagues noted before the war, Russian military doctrine distinguishes general conventional forces from "strategic deterrent forces," whose utility is to threaten unacceptable consequences on ad-

versary economic and military interests, including "deterring third parties from intervening."[78] Those "strategic deterrence forces" include not only nuclear but also non-nuclear capabilities that can deliver strategic effects.[79] Regular Russian bomber exercises carried out before the war were part of a strategy to maintain general deterrence.[80] At the outset of the war, Putin employed several deterrent actions, including holding bomber exercise Operation *Grom* that simulated nuclear strikes on several Scandinavian countries and sending ballistic missile submarines to sea equipped with the intercontinental-range Yars nuclear missile.[81] Putin matched these actions with intimidating rhetoric as the war commenced:

> *I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history. No matter how the events unfold, we are ready. All the necessary decisions in this regard have been taken. I hope that my words will be heard.*[82]

While Putin's threats might appear to have succeeded, they probably made no difference. Ukraine was not a NATO ally, and President Joseph Biden signaled two weeks before the war that he would not send U.S. forces into Ukraine.[83]

Fait Accompli

A third option is to defeat the main target before the third party can mobilize and deploy forces. An intervention is still possible but less likely if the attacker has already consolidated its position and especially if it has toppled the government. Achieving a fait accompli depends heavily on speed and deception. The attacker might mask its own war preparations under the cover of an exercise or send conflicting diplomatic signals to confuse its opponents, just as Japan continued negotiations with the United States until Pearl Harbor. The benefit of this approach is that it avoids direct military engagement with the intervener while also surprising the main target. The major risk is that the deception could be exposed, which would eliminate the element of surprise, allow defenders to increase their own readiness, and prompt greater international support. Moreover, if the main target is well prepared, they might weather the attack long enough for the intervention to take place even if the plan is not exposed beforehand.

In the Korean War, Kim Il Sung tried to achieve a fait accompli by overrunning South Korean defenses and overthrowing the government. To succeed, Kim needed support from Joseph Stalin, whose main concern was that U.S. forces would intervene from Japan and deal a crushing blow to the communists. In a January 1950 meeting in Moscow, Kim reassured Stalin that the offensive would conclude in three days, well before U.S. forces could arrive at a scale necessary to make a difference, and that a popular uprising of 200,000 communist sympathizers in the South would aid the invasion. Kim was also emboldened because he thought Washington would hesitate based on Secretary of State Dean Acheson's January 1950 speech that indicated that the Korean Peninsula was outside the U.S. "defensive perimeter" and that any "initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it."[84] Stalin ultimately approved the plan, although he remained wary of a direct U.S.-Soviet clash and limited overt Soviet participation throughout the war.[85] While North Korean troops achieved strategic surprise,[86] U.S. airstrikes slowed the initial invasion, and the tide of war turned with the Inchon landing in September 1950.[87]

The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 illustrates the role of deception in generating confusion and reducing warning among foreign analysts. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev decided to use force to suppress the political reforms that had begun in the "Prague Spring" in January. Brezhnev did not fear U.S. or NATO intervention, since Czechoslovakia was behind the Iron Curtain, but he intended to catch the international community off guard. Brezhnev began his buildup of forces in June under the pretext of a Warsaw Pact exercise in Czechoslovakia and Poland. At the same time, the Soviets moved a larger concentration of forces to the Czech border from Hungary and East Germany.[88] The troop movements caused debate in the West. Some analysts thought that the Soviets only intended to put pressure on Czechoslovakia and would not invade,[89] others believed that they were part of routine exercises, and still others correctly assessed Brezhnev's intent. Writing in *Studies in Intelligence* in 1970, a U.S. author drew lessons for the future:

> *The fact that any U.S. analysts were taken in by the Soviet announcements on "exercises" is cause for considerable concern that intelligence analysts also might fail to recognize a deception effort when it might be vital to U.S. security to detect it. Our experience in the invasion of Czechoslovakia has reinforced the opinion long held by warning analysts that the U.S., at both its intelligence and policy levels, is extremely vulnerable to deception.*[90]

Future analysts took this lesson to heart. When Vladimir Putin attempted similar tactics by announcing large "snap exercises" on the eve of the Ukraine invasion, his plans were exposed—depriving him of the casus belli he sought in the court of international opinion.[91]

Strategic Buffer

A final option is to limit the ability of a third party to intervene by creating strategic buffers between the attacking state and the intervener. As with a fait accompli, this option avoids direct confrontation with the intervener. The difference is that the mechanism of defeat rests more on political tools exercised against susceptible governments and not on the blunt military instruments required in a rapid invasion. In this respect, this option is more like the deterrence approach, which also leans on political tools. Yet these two options are somewhat different in the range of tactics that can be used to influence target decisionmaking. In deterrence, the attacker wields the threat of unacceptable costs to deter a government that would otherwise be tempted to intervene; in a strategic buffer option, the attacker could either use coercion or promise inducements to governments that might seek to avoid involvement in a war. Economic or diplomatic side payments could therefore be part of the equation.

As with the other choices, there are tradeoffs in pursuing this option. The benefit is that this approach does not require direct confrontation with a major adversary, narrowing the scope of the war and reducing the likelihood of crisis instability involved in deterrence. It is simply a way to make intervention more difficult for an enemy whose plans depend on foreign access. One risk is that host nations could ignore the threats or inducements because allowing third-party intervention through their territory or airspace is a higher priority. This could be due to alliance commitments or to the judgment that a war against the main target would put their own sovereignty at risk. Another problem is that success might not eliminate the possibility of successful intervention if the opponent is able to bypass the buffer zone. For instance, the United States might avoid dependence on forward bases and ports by leveraging its undersea capabilities or through bombers launched from U.S. territory.

This option was central to Soviet strategy on reducing NATO presence in parts of its near abroad. Finnish neutrality is one example. In the 1949 Finland-Soviet treaty, Stalin provided assurances that he would not interfere in Finland's internal affairs if Helsinki promised not to allow foreign forces to use its territory as a "springboard" for aggression against the Soviet Union.[92] At the same time, Stalin pressured Finland to influence Sweden not to join NATO with the implicit threat that Sweden's accession would trigger Soviet military presence in Finland.[93] This gambit was successful not only because these countries preferred neutrality, but

also because U.S. officials similarly saw value in a Swedish buffer against the Soviet Union.[94] The Soviets were more concerned about Austria becoming involved in NATO planning and as a corridor for moving NATO forces between Germany and Italy. Their approach was to make the Soviet Union's postwar military withdrawal from Austria contingent on Austrian neutrality; this was accomplished in a 1955 treaty.[95] These negotiations achieved the Soviet goal of reducing NATO presence in border regions, though NATO could still pose threats from bombers and missiles in Western Europe and deployed nuclear weapons beginning in 1954.

In sum, prospective attackers have several options to reduce the risks of intervention. The two direct options target the intervener but vary in terms of an emphasis on the use of force once intervention is regarded as inevitable (direct assault) or threats to convince foreign decisionmakers not to mobilize in the first place (deterrence). The two indirect options avoid confrontation with the intervener but are different in whether they rely on a rapid assault on the main target (fait accompli) or on political steps to deprive the intervener of foreign access (strategic buffer). Each option has its own set of risks and rewards, and there are examples of leaders selecting each of them, albeit with varying levels of success. The next section applies this typology to PLA writings to assess the likelihood that Beijing would select any of these options, and to evaluate how they might be implemented.

Chinese Thinking on Counter-Intervention

A review of the PLA literature on counter-intervention suggests that the greatest emphasis for planners is on the two direct options. A direct assault is typically defined in terms of asymmetric operations that target the weak links in the U.S. operational system to delay or defeat intervention. The main concern here is with military expediency and not escalatory risks. At the same time, there is an equal emphasis on the deterrence option. Authors who discuss this option suggest that the PLA can use strategic capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, and information warfare forces, to undermine U.S. resolve to intervene. Here, there is much greater concern with the possibility of escalation and crisis stability. The two options are not contradictory but fit into a cohesive whole: deterrence should be attempted, but if it fails, the PLA must be ready to fight immediately. There is less attention on the two indirect options, since neither a fait accompli nor a strategic buffer can ensure that PLA plans will not be detected, and intervention will not be able to be conducted at a scale that would threaten the campaign.

Direct Assault

PLA sources, as one would expect, consistently argue for a capability to defeat foreign intervention through decisive action. For decades, these discussions have emphasized holding enemy systems at risk through asymmetric means, or what are sometimes called "assassin's mace" [杀手锏] weapons, rather than through a head-to-head confrontation.[96] The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* suggests paralyzing "the enemy's information systems and air dominance systems with sudden and intense firepower," trapping the opponent "in a passive position where he is hard put to respond."[97] The authors add that the "intervention of a powerful enemy or interference by a regional military alliance" during a conflict means that "sufficient combat reserves" will need to be on hand.[98] A 2009 volume similarly proposes "noncontact operations" [非接触作战]—which is a misnomer because it involves kinetic strikes on "enemy information systems" and other key targets but not large force-on-force engagements—using "elite strengths."[99] The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* also favors destroying the "key nodes and vital points of the enemy's combat systems" by "defeating the strong with the weak."[100]

Chinese writings discuss several key targets that are regarded as essential to U.S. intervention.[101] These are elements of what PLA theorists describe as a "system of systems" that must work together to achieve their intended effects. By compromising any specific system, including reconnaissance and early warning, information transmission, command and control, firepower, or comprehensive support, the enemy's overall system will become less effective.[102] Specific targets listed in the 2015 internal volume *Study on Asymmetric Operations* include U.S. naval and air bases, ammunition and fuel depots, aircraft carriers, and early warning aircraft.[103] A 2022 article in *Military Arts* likewise argues that "even the powerful enemy's system is not perfect," with weaknesses in satellite capabilities, early warning aircraft, aircraft carriers, fixed bases, and data links that should be targeted through kinetic or non-kinetic means.[104]

The means of attack, for these authors, are simply those that can most efficiently destroy adversary systems. The 2015 volume *Research on Port Landing Operations* notes that air force, naval, and conventional missile forces all have counter-intervention missions in a landing campaign. Missiles, in particular, should be used to strike the "center of gravity of the anti-landing party's combat system and strive to destroy or paralyze it," referring to both the intervener and the main target.[105] A *China Military Science* article published the same year advocated the development of "asymmetric high-tech means that can check and balance the powerful enemy," such as high-powered microwaves, anti-satellite laser technology, and kinetic interceptors, which

requires greater investments in "strategic frontier technology fields" including network and electromagnetic field, space and near-space, and uncrewed aerial vehicle technology.[106]

More recent PLA articles discuss new or upgraded capabilities relevant to achieving asymmetric advantages. A 2022 *China Military Science* article from AMS researcher Major General Fu Bingzhong, for instance, describes the cross-domain collaboration between "unmanned combat forces" in the air, land, sea, and space domains, which can target the information systems, networks, and command and control centers of the "powerful enemy" and implement precision strikes.[107] Continuing this theme, Major General Feng Zhongguo, deputy commandant of the PLA Army Command Academy, writes in the same journal that the PLA must "enrich the strategic means and methods of counterbalancing the powerful enemy," including through collaborative unmanned systems that can create "aerial swarms, ground wolf packs, and underwater fish schools," alongside traditional weapons such as long-range missiles, special forces, air and missile defenses, and network and electronic warfare tools.[108] Meanwhile, authors from the Dalian Naval Academy suggest that resisting the "powerful enemy" requires blue-water capabilities that can counter foreign naval operations close to China and hold at risk its "overseas strategic bases" and sea lines of communication outside the first island chain.[109]

PLA sources also associate counter-intervention with the larger modernization goal of "intelligentization" [智能化], based on the incorporation of artificial intelligence into PLA command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems.[110] In a 2023 *China Military Science* article, AMS scholar Senior Colonel Lan Yongming writes that "the need to cope with the powerful enemy" means that the PLA should construct an "intelligent" network information system that can "intelligently optimize the prioritization of strike targets and choose the best combat method."[111] In line with the principle that counter-intervention requires a strong defense, Lan also states that the upgraded system should be able to be quickly reconstituted in wartime conditions.[112] Notably, Lan's article preceded the 2024 reorganization of the former Strategic Support Force that resulted in a new Information Support Force, a core purpose of which is to upgrade PLA networks to become more "intelligent" and more resilient to adversary attacks.[113]

As discussed above, an attacker can attempt to limit escalation by controlling the timing and intensity of operations. Nevertheless, PLA writings emphasize military expediency—once war has begun, the PLA should operate on a timeline and with the tools that can most effectively defeat intervention. Regarding the timing of operations, Roger Cliff and colleagues note that a PLA lesson from the Gulf War was the need to seize the initiative, which could require preemptive strikes. PLA observers faulted Iraq for adopting a passive approach that the U.S.-

led coalition exploited during *Desert Storm*.[114] This theme continues in writings published decades after the Gulf War. For instance, the 2009 *Science of Joint Operations* states that "taking the initiative through decisive action," including preemptive strikes, is a principle of modern joint operations that should be mastered.[115] The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* argues that because "losing the advantages of the first opportunity, one's own combat system may be destroyed," the PLA should "seize the first opportunity and win the initiative in the war."[116]

Regarding the selection of tools, PLA sources focus on precision strikes consistent with the concept of "noncontact operations" but do not rule out the possibility that deadlier attacks might be necessary for the operation. The 2009 volume *Science of Army Operations Under Informatized Conditions* focuses on attacks on information systems, but "in situations where the strategy permits, [we should] even attack the enemy's strategic depth and inflict heavy losses to maintain initiative in war."[117] Likewise, a 2012 *China Military Science* article proposes "annihilating the enemy's living forces," which would "create a situation favorable for us."[118] As opposed to concluding that such actions would embolden adversary resolve, as Japan experienced after the Pearl Harbor attack, the authors assume that high-casualty attacks would "shake the enemy's entire war system and trigger anti-war sentiment in the enemy's country."[119] By contrast, none of the sources consulted for this study indicated a preference to rely solely on non-kinetic tools to control the risks of escalation.

Deterrence

The concept of "winning without fighting," in the Western interpretation of the *Art of War*, is an alluring possibility for aggressors.[120] This is no less true in PLA writings on counter-intervention. In his *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, Zhang Peigao argues that attacks should continue against the main target "until they give up resistance," while deterrence should be the "main focus" against third parties, so that they "do not dare to intervene rashly and [so that] the intensity of the military intervention of the powerful enemy can be reduced to the maximum extent."[121] PLA sources often discuss the logic and tools of this approach under the heading of "strategic deterrence" [战略威慑].[122] In his *Theory of Strategic Deterrence*, PLA NDU scholar Zhang Yan explains that:

> *As a special form of military strategy, strategic deterrence is, after all, not war, although it similarly can have a certain impact on politics, economics, and society. However, its destructiveness is much less than actual combat, and not only can it leave greater room for political and diplomatic struggle, but it can also reduce the*

> *excuses for outside forces to intervene. This is also the basic reason why as long as deterrence can achieve its goals, there will be no considerations about using the means of war.*[123]

The authors of the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* agree that deterrence is preferable to direct assault because of the possibility of limiting the scope of the conflict. Their argument rests on the premise that any actual intervention would "affect the course of the war and the long-term development of the country" and should thus be avoided.[124] In the chapter on "strategic deterrence," the authors explain that this requires reaching out to potential interveners through "diplomatic channels" to "issue warnings to the other party as appropriate" and prevent the expansion or "internationalization" of the conflict.[125] Rather than waiting until the opponent has already mobilized and deployed forces, the authors contend that the "best time to use deterrence" is when the other side is still weighing its options "but is not very sure yet and the final determination has not yet been made."[126] Deterrent actions at this stage of the conflict could "make it difficult for the other party to form a will to act . . . or if the will to act is formed, it will hesitate and not be able to put it into practice."[127]

Based on this logic, Xi Jinping instructed the PLA to "build a strong system of strategic deterrence forces" [打造强大战略威慑力量体系] at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.[128] Xi's statement followed similar guidance from Jiang Zemin to build a "strategic deterrence system" in 2002, but the connotation was somewhat different.[129] Whereas Jiang framed his discussion in terms of strategic nuclear modernization, Xi's statement was not limited to that field. Rather, as in the similar Russian concept of "strategic deterrence," he called for an improved set of strategic capabilities to counterbalance foreign opponents. In an analysis of Xi's concept, PLA National University of Defense Technology professor Ge Tengfei writes in a party journal that the intent is to "resolutely oppose interference by external hegemonic forces in national sovereignty and security issues."[130] The system does this by "clearly telling external intervening forces that no one should underestimate the Chinese peoples' strong determination, firm will, and strong ability to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity."[131] Achieving this objective requires not only a nuclear deterrent but also modernization in other "fields of emerging strategic capabilities and disruptive technologies such as cyberspace and space."[132]

Other PLA sources discuss several types of capabilities that can be used to achieve strategic deterrence in a crisis. First is nuclear signaling. The 2004 *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* describes the rungs of a signaling ladder through which nuclear forces can be used to intimidate third parties, including raising alert statuses, conducting snap exercises or launches, and

even blurring or lowering the threshold for nuclear use—suggesting that China might not wait until it has been attacked with nuclear weapons to launch a nuclear attack as its no-first-use doctrine requires.[133] A 2023 *China Military Science* article likewise argues that to "curb military intervention by countries outside the region in advance," it can be useful for the offensive side to "conduct large-scale strategic nuclear force exercises before the conflict begins."[134] Offering a service-specific prescription, Dalian Naval Academy authors write that a sea-based deterrent should be developed to showcase "reliable, credible, and effective nuclear deterrence" against the "powerful enemy within and outside the first island chain."[135]

Russia's nuclear signaling during the war in Ukraine likely clarified PLA thinking on the utility of nuclear weapons in deterring intervention. Putin's tactics were consistent with those recommended in the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, which focused on creating a "psychological shock" rather than on nuclear employment. Russia's actions could therefore have reaffirmed existing PLA beliefs in these methods or functioned as a case study.[136] One group of National University of Defense Technology scholars assesses that Russia's use of hypersonic missiles in its strategic nuclear exercises "fully exerted" a "strategic deterrent effect."[137] An article from another scholar at the same institution suggested that Russia's signaling campaign was effective in convincing the United States to confine its involvement to the level of a proxy war (what Zhang Peigao would classify in the "low" intervention category).[138] Nevertheless, such discussions were likely downplayed because of Beijing's disavowal of Russian nuclear threats as it sought to balance support for Moscow with other diplomatic goals.[139]

Second are displays of conventional forces. Given China's large stockpiles of long-range missiles, it is unsurprising that several PLA sources discuss how these can be used in a deterrent campaign. The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* asserts that conventional missile launches can be staged not only to strike targets but also to "implement conventional deterrence against the enemy."[140] The *Theory of Strategic Deterrence* similarly suggests that "firing missiles carrying non-nuclear warheads towards relevant areas (or sea areas)" can achieve an intimidation effect.[141] Though not specifically cited, an example would be China's launching of ballistic missiles in waters near Taiwan during the 1995–1996 crisis to deter Taiwan independence. More recently, a 2023 *China Military Science* article highlights the ability of air-launched ballistic missiles and "other hypersonic weapons" to threaten "enemy ammunition depots and command posts" from standoff distances, which has a "significant deterrent effect."[142]

Conventional deterrence can also include a maritime component. Zhang Peigao, for instance, anticipates that the United States will mobilize naval forces to intimidate Beijing during a crisis and potentially to conduct blockade activities. After all, Washington deployed aircraft car-

riers in the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. In the future, he suggests that the PLA should "organize submarines to approach the enemy's large-scale ship formations secretly when necessary . . . so that the powerful enemy dares not intervene rashly."[143] Also writing from a naval perspective, Liang Fang contends that the PLA should build blue-water naval forces that can "react rapidly" to foreign naval blockades and therefore "force the enemy to abandon his intentions to threaten the security of China's maritime strategic accesses."[144] More generally, Lieutenant General Ren Haiquan, former AMS president, wrote in a 2013 article that "joint long-range warfare" capabilities are intended "*not* to strike the powerful enemy early and hard," but to "strive to deter war and check-and-balance the powerful enemy."[145]

Third is manipulation of the information environment. Most PLA discussions of "strategic deterrence" since the 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* include space and cyber weapons in the list of strategic capabilities.[146] Fiona Cunningham argues that these "information age" weapons allowed Beijing to strengthen deterrence amid an imbalance of nuclear forces.[147] Such information tools can be useful not only in threatening economic or social consequences—for instance, crippling critical infrastructure through cyberattacks—but also in shaping the information environment. A 2018 *China Military Science* article argues that a propaganda war through the media can be useful in "disintegrating the enemy's combat determination, destroying the people's will to resist," and "interfering with its determination to intervene."[148] The *Theory of Strategic Deterrence* suggests that "using media propaganda to issue statements and declarations, and issuing mobilization orders" can also undermine adversary resolve.[149] A 2022 article in *China Military Science* argues that such declarations should be paired with "strong national defense mobilization," which underscores China's "determination" to carry out a long war and therefore has relevance to "achieving the strategic goal of deterring the powerful enemy."[150]

The key question for leaders exercising a deterrent option is how much risk to take in implementing deterrent actions. The German example from World War I discussed above illustrates the risks in overly aggressive signals. It is certainly the case that Chinese concepts of "deterrence" [威慑] have a connotation of what Western deterrence theory regards as "compellence"—using aggressive means to convince an opponent to abandon an action that they are already pursuing.[151] Risky actions such as conventional missile strikes designed not to destroy an adversary's operational system, as in the direct assault option, but to threaten further consequences once an intervener has already begun to mobilize, would be consistent with this definition. Sinking an adversary ship as a deterrent action designed to cause a foreign government to cease participation in a counter-blockade could also fit the concept. Such actions would parallel the purported Russian

military doctrine to "escalate-to-deescalate," which could require crossing the threshold of lethal violence to establish credibility.[152]

However, Chinese analysts caution that in facing a "powerful enemy," deterrent actions should be tailored to limit the risks of escalation. This point is sometimes made through historical analogy. PLA discussions frequently recall how Mao allegedly caused U.S. forces to retreat in the two Taiwan Strait crises of the 1950s without prompting a direct U.S.-China conflict (see text box for detail).[153] In the first crisis, which lasted from 1954 to 1955, Mao employed a "brinkmanship" policy of shelling Kuomintang (KMT) ships and forces stationed on Dachen Island but without targeting U.S. ships from the Seventh Fleet, which in the view of PLA historians "caused the U.S. escort ships to retreat to the high seas without firing a single shot."[154] PLA sources also praise Mao for his decision not to interfere with the KMT's evacuation from Dachen at the end of the crisis, since doing so would have precipitated a conflict between the PLA and U.S. escort ships and aircraft in the area.[155]

PLA scholars also praise Mao's deterrent tactics during the second Taiwan Strait crisis from August to December 1958.[156] Mao's dilemma was shelling KMT forces on Jinmen and Mazu with the presence of U.S. embedded military advisors and ships in the surrounding waters. He authorized the bombardment under the condition that the PLA

Historical Memory Versus Reality in the 1950s Taiwan Strait Crises

While PLA analysts praise Mao for deterrent actions that limited U.S. involvement in the two crises, they do not concede that Mao failed in securing his broader political and strategic objectives. In the first crisis, Mao's intent was to deter Chiang Kai-Shek and President Dwight Eisenhower from signing a formal defense treaty. However, PLA shelling of Taiwan's offshore islands prompted not only the treaty but also the Congressional Formosa Declaration, which authorized the use of force to defend the offshore islands if Taiwan or the Pescadores were threatened. In 1958, Mao attempted to mobilize support for the Great Leap Forward and test U.S. resolve to defend the offshore islands. However, Mao was forced to suspend his punitive campaign after the Seventh Fleet assembled dozens of ships in the area. Mao then agreed to limit the shelling to alternate day attacks in predictable locations and rationalized his inability to seize the islands from the KMT. These performative attacks lasted for 20 years until the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979.*

* Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950–96, and Taiwan," *International Security* 26, no. 2 (2001), 108–11; Thomas J. Christensen, *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

not target U.S. forces and only after Marshal Peng Dehuai convinced him that U.S. forces would not become involved. Even if U.S. ships opened fire, he instructed that "you are not to fight back without orders."[157] Avoiding attacks on U.S. forces controlled escalation, but according to Chinese historians, the PLA's artillery attacks nonetheless deterred U.S. support for KMT attempts to resupply Jinmen since "unexpectedly, the American ships not only did not fire back, but abandoned [the KMT] ships and turned around to flee towards Taiwan."[158] Hence, "U.S. military intervention was eliminated to the maximum extent, thus achieving the expected strategic goal."[159] Mao later recalled the success of his brinkmanship campaign against Washington:

> *Last year, we learned of* [Secretary of State John Foster] *Dulles's "brink of war policy," and Dulles became our teacher. His "brink of war policy" was directed at us, and we also used the "brink of war policy" against them. The Kuomintang fought with us for decades, and we are still fighting the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang had no food to eat, and the United States gave them food. [Last year], U.S. warships were only three miles away from the islands within the range of our shells. They were on the brink of war, and so were we. We used the "brink of war" to counter the "brink of war," but they didn't dare to move forward and only went to the brink of war. We didn't attack them, and they didn't dare to move. They looked at us, and we looked at them, for more than two months.*[160]

These examples reinforce the conclusion in PLA writings that deterrence without escalation is not only possible but also historically precedented. On the modern battlefield, this strain of thinking suggests, the United States might once again refrain from fully supporting the defense of Taiwan in the face of successful brinkmanship.

A deterrence campaign that comes to the "brink of war" might fail, which would necessitate activation of the direct assault option. A key issue, which PLA analysts do not address, is that this decision to pivot would be made by the senior civilian leadership. They would have to conclude that deterrence has been ineffective and that the only remaining option to address U.S. intervention is to implement the direct assault. This decision would be made in high-stress conditions and likely with incomplete or contradictory information. It is at this moment that disagreements could form within the civilian leadership, or between senior civilians and their military advisors.[161] PLA sources might assume a flawless transition from deterrence to warfighting, but delays prompted by such disagreements could provide time for the defenders to improve their own readiness.

Fait Accompli

PLA writings do not clearly articulate a fait accompli option but emphasize speed and deception.[162] The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* argues that the attacker should maintain a "rapid operational tempo" so that "even if the enemy knows our operational intention, they are still unable to effectively respond."[163] It also states that "operational suddenness" is necessary if the PLA "fights with a high-tech and powerful enemy."[164] However, "suddenness" does not equate to confidence in a fait accompli since the authors assume that rapid movements would be part of a direct attack that would include "firepower damage and force-strength assault."[165] A clearer vision of a fait accompli comes in a 2025 *Military Arts* article on PLA Marine Corps modernization that encourages forces to "quickly control the target area" and make foreign forces "too late to intervene" [来不及介入].[166] But it is more likely that the authors were envisioning operations such as the seizure of a small reef in the South China Sea given the main focus of the Marines on those missions and not a larger campaign across the Taiwan Strait.[167]

These discussions also highlight the role of deception in seizing the initiative. PLA scholars have long been interested in the use of deception tactics to create advantages against stronger enemies. The 2001 volume *Military Deception Under High-Tech Conditions* considers examples of successful deception from historical operations, including German issuance of "false intelligence" during Operation *Barbarossa* in 1941, Japan's feigned diplomatic negotiations with the United States before Pearl Harbor, and the fake units established by the U.S. military to deceive German defenders prior to the Normandy landings.[168] Perhaps most relevant to a future Taiwan campaign are PLA lessons from Britain's successful operations to reassert control over the Falklands in April 1982.[169] PLA analysts note how the British foreign secretary made a statement understating the size and intent of the operation, as well as a feint led by two aircraft carriers that drew Argentine attention away from the actual landing zone.[170]

The PLA's interest in deception continues in more recent sources. The *Science of Campaigns* references "concealment, camouflage, and deception" alongside "information operations" such as "jamming, confusion, and deception against the enemy" and the use of "computer viruses to harass the enemy's command and control system."[171] A 2022 *China Military Science* article similarly argues that "winning by surprise" in the future requires use of "various stealth technologies" as well as "deceptive psychological warfare . . . so that new combat forces can attack the enemy at an unexpected time and place, and achieve combat surprise."[172] As with the *Science of Campaigns*, however, the authors do not presuppose that such tactics are used in a fait accompli. Instead, the utility of surprise is to facilitate "covert assaults on enemy key targets, seize

the initiative in battle, and ultimately achieve the purpose of the war."[173] This is consistent with the expectation of a direct assault on the intervener.

While speed and deception are interpreted as keys to success, there are two reasons why these factors do not translate into greater interest in a fait accompli option. The first is that PLA observers might doubt their ability to conceal preparations for a landing campaign or other use of force. Modern battlefields are more transparent than the historical examples PLA authors have studied, providing defenders with stronger means of detecting large movements of troops and equipment, and differentiating between exercises and mobilization. As former National Intelligence Officer for East Asia John Culver argues, any Chinese offensive would "almost certainly *not* be subtle, at least to the U.S. intelligence community and probably not to Taiwan and other Western observers."[174] Second is that even if warning times were reduced, the United States could rely on forward-based drones (that is, Hellscape), long-range bombers, and other capabilities to create risks for a PLA offensive. Hence, while seizing the initiative is a criterion for success, PLA observers likely conclude that a direct assault would still be necessary.

Strategic Buffer

PLA sources also pay less attention to creating strategic buffers to limit adversary freedom of action. Most articles in the broader Chinese literature that address this option are from civilian scholars affiliated with the diplomatic apparatus. These writings seek to identify fissures between the United States and host nations to consider how those differences can be exploited to weaken a U.S.-led coalition. For instance, a 2024 article from a civilian scholar assesses that "transactional countries," including the Philippines, allow use of their bases "mainly for material interests," and are also prone to "domestic nationalist sentiments" that make the "risks of using military bases . . . relatively high."[175] Another article similarly notes that host countries can "impose restrictions on overflight rights" and "specific types of combat operations."[176] Access will be determined by "the degree of threat perceptions and interest overlap, the host country's domestic public's view of the conflict, and the perception of the possible retaliation of U.S. competitors."[177] Still another article describes Japan's support as ambivalent because China has defined Taiwan as a "core interest," and any interference could lead to "unpredictable and serious consequences" in Tokyo's relations with Beijing.[178]

These authors also argue that China should drive wedges between the United States and allies and partners whose territory it depends on for access, basing, and overflight. One article states that Beijing should "make plans to differentiate U.S. allies in emergencies such as crises and combat operations, and how to influence the stability of the political access of the

host countries of their bases to the U.S."[179] Another author encourages China to "take advantage of the asymmetrical relationships and conflict of interest between the United States and its allies."[180] This author concludes that states "sometimes prefer to ally with potential threats in geostrategic relationships rather than natural allies."[181] Such comments are consistent with a broader Chinese literature that probes contradictory interests in U.S. alliance relationships, and China's own use of economic statecraft, as means that can be used to weaken U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific.[182]

Of note, there is interest in the PLA literature on topics related to overseas basing that could have relevance to the strategic buffer option. A 2022 *China Military Science* article, for instance, discusses the legal principles under which states utilize foreign bases, which notes that if a tenant uses its overseas bases "privately or jointly" with the host nation to "carry out internationally unlawful acts that infringe on the rights and interests of a third country," the host nation carries responsibility.[183] This principle could justify deterrent threats against host nations not to allow U.S. forces access in a Taiwan contingency or direct retaliation. But this is not the author's main purpose. Instead, the article fits into a genre of articles that is driven by China's own interest in overseas bases; it does not explain what the PLA should do to counter U.S. basing.[184]

As with the fait accompli option, the lack of PLA attention to a strategic buffer approach indicates that this is not a preferred approach to countering U.S. intervention. One limitation is that, unlike Soviet policy at the beginning of the Cold War, Beijing cannot expect that several key countries near Taiwan will not host U.S. forces. China is already surrounded by countries who are longstanding U.S. allies that provide either permanent or rotational basing for U.S. forces and must assume that those forces could be employed in a conflict. In addition, even if some (or all) host nations refuse to provide access, basing, and overflight, the PLA would still be vulnerable to the U.S. naval and long-range air force capabilities that are central to concepts of force employment that descend from the Air-Sea Battle construct. Hence, while diplomats seek to exploit differences between Washington and its allies, the PLA cannot rely on this approach to promote the success of its future operations.

In sum, PLA thinking on counter-intervention emphasizes the two direct options: direct assault and deterrence. This is logical because these are the two most decisive options. Either Washington can be deterred from acting through powerful "strategic deterrence" forces, or, if deterrence is not on the table, the PLA can conduct "noncontact operations" to delay or defeat intervention once it is underway. Indeed, suggesting that both options must be pursued in tandem, an authoritative Central Military Commission study outline references both warfighting and deterrence against the "powerful enemy" in its guidance on force development:

> *To strengthen the construction of the weapons and equipment system, we must insist on key breakthroughs and work hard to fill the gaps in the system and make up for the shortcomings and weaknesses. In particular, we must work hard to deter and check* [威慑制衡] *the powerful enemy. Deterrence means having the ability to deter them so that they dare not take action; checks-and-balances mean that "I will not lose to you" in a local war, just like the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea* [that is, the Korean War].[185]

Neither the fait accompli nor the strategic buffer option can ensure that U.S. forces will not be able to respond in time and at a scale that will influence the course of the war. Efforts will continue improving the PLA's ability to use speed and deception to its advantage, and to convince host nations not to provide access in wartime, but the ultimate guarantee of success can only be provided through direct confrontation.

Implications and Conclusion

The PLA continues to anticipate that U.S. forces will intervene in a Taiwan contingency. This intervention could range from low-level activities such as providing intelligence support, to assisting in countering a Chinese blockade or imposing a distant blockade on Chinese shipping, to striking PLA targets on the mainland. PLA analysts have thus encouraged careful counter-intervention planning for decades. Historical cases suggest that there are four basic options available to Beijing: direct assault, deterrence, fait accompli, and strategic buffer. The PLA literature focuses mostly on the first two options, which involve direct confrontation with the United States but operate through different mechanisms: a direct assault involves an early and decisive "knockout punch," while deterrence attempts to persuade Washington not to intervene while limiting the risks of escalation. There is less evidence that the other two options are central to the PLA's thinking on countering U.S. intervention given their limitations.

The analysis suggests that the existing literature that focuses almost exclusively on PLA hardware is not wrong but offers too narrow of a view of the choices—and dilemmas—that Beijing must consider when building its campaign plan and implementing it in a crisis. Capabilities such as anti-ship ballistic missiles, hypersonic glide vehicles, and strategic bombers can be used to implement asymmetric operations, which is fully consistent with the tactics that Roger Cliff and colleagues anticipated in their 2007 report. But those tools can also compose the conventional leg of a "strategic deterrence" campaign, alongside nuclear and informational (cyber, space, and cognitive warfare) tools. Analysts and wargame designers should think of China's

options as part of a cohesive plan, like a boxer's "one-two punch," to deter, but failing that, to defeat. Red teams might consider the views on escalation that are built into these choices. In deterrence, the PLA might approach the threshold of violence but hold back. Yet in scenarios premised on a direct assault (the proverbial second punch), red teams would be well advised to suggest high-intensity and even preemptive moves to secure victory.

These findings imply several implications and recommendations for U.S. policy. First, a deeply ingrained PLA belief that Washington will intervene means that a change in declaratory policy will not have much deterrent effect vis-à-vis the PLA. Arguments that the United States should pursue "strategic clarity" to strengthen deterrence against China are weakened because the PLA already assumes and is preparing for U.S. intervention.[186] A change in policy could be treated in Beijing as a political provocation that it must respond to, which would increase risks to Taiwan without providing a material benefit for the island's security.[187] Similarly, occasional statements by U.S. presidents that Washington would certainly intervene have little deterrent effect, but these are less consequential because they can be framed as gaffes, which means that Beijing has less imperative to respond to underscore its resolve.[188]

Second, policymakers should not assume that PLA judgments on the likelihood of U.S. intervention will always be shared by civilian Chinese leaders. The PLA's assessment that Washington will intervene contributes more to deterrence than a view that the United States is a "paper tiger" that will never intervene, even if it means that they must develop counters. Xi Jinping appears to share this judgment, since authoritative Chinese Communist Party documents require the PLA to be able to "deter and check" the United States. However, there is another scenario in which either Xi or his successor reaches a different conclusion. By historical analogy, policymakers should remember that a reason for Hitler's willingness to invade Poland in September 1939 was his insistence that England and France lacked the willpower and capabilities to intervene. At a conference at his Berghof mountain retreat two weeks before the invasion, Hitler commented to his generals that England's situation in the world was "very precarious," while France lacked manpower and artillery. He concluded: "Our enemies are little worms. I saw them in Munich."[189] Hitler's generals remained privately skeptical, and some even pursued a failed coup against him, but the leader's judgment outweighed his military advisors.[190]

It is possible that Xi could embrace similarly unrealistic thinking despite the PLA's insistence that the U.S. threat must be taken seriously. Like Hitler, Xi has consolidated power such that his personal assessment on the risks and rewards of war outweighs all others.[191] Frequent purges make it unlikely that a senior general would strongly push back once Xi indicates his belief.[192] The lack of checks and balances in the Chinese system therefore makes it necessary to

better understand his perspectives on the likelihood and possible results of U.S. intervention. Xi could doubt intervention due to an embrace of the narrative of an "American decline," overestimation of the PLA's capabilities or resolve relative to the United States,[193] and the idea that he might have an opportunity to achieve victory to cement his legacy.[194] It is also possible that his successor could have views that are out of sync with the PLA. In these circumstances, the PLA might not be able to convince the top leader otherwise. While these are unlikely possibilities, U.S. leaders should continue to deliver deterrent messages to senior Chinese civilian leaders and not rely solely on exercises and demonstrations focused on the PLA itself.

Third, U.S. policy should emphasize crisis stability talks with China. Washington should anticipate that Beijing's initial approach in a crisis will be to implement "strategic deterrence." Indeed, some Chinese military activities such as aggressive maritime and air activities against U.S. and allied forces in Asia are already part of a general deterrent campaign. While PLA authors suggest a brinkmanship policy that limits the escalatory risks by nearing the threshold of lethal force without crossing it, there are still inherent risks. For instance, intimidation tactics used against U.S. air and naval forces in the region raise the probability of accidents, and crisis signaling in the nuclear, space, or cyber domains that could prompt unintentional escalation if the target misreads China's intentions. This could lead to a much larger war than China intends. Since Beijing has an interest in avoiding those results, it could agree to peacetime discussions on how to prevent and manage crises, especially in areas with potential strategic consequences such as in the nuclear arena. In recent years, such talks have already been pursued at a low level between the two defense establishments but could be upgraded to more senior levels.[195] Another option is crisis simulations held between governmental subject matter experts to clarify the risks and discuss possible off-ramps.

Fourth, the best U.S. response to Chinese deterrent threats during a crisis is to maintain ambiguity about its intentions for as long as possible. The assumption is that Beijing has already made a strategic decision to use force and will not back down due to international pressure. How to respond to Chinese messaging is thus a pivotal question. Yielding to the threats is tantamount to capitulation: Taiwan would be isolated and face a quick defeat. However, rejecting Chinese threats also carries with it a risk. In the logic of the "one-two punch," if the first punch is ineffective, the attacker will quickly pivot to the second punch. It is imperative that Beijing not conclude that its deterrent has failed because it will move quickly to a direct assault to seize the initiative. An ambiguous U.S. response would encourage Beijing to believe that "winning without fighting" is still possible, while providing a critical opportunity to coordinate with Taiwan and allies and partners. Wherever possible, the United States could also take advantage of

this window to increase its own readiness and reposition forces into a warfighting posture (for example, maximum dispersal of forces). However, those moves should be conducted as subtly as possible, since once Beijing discovers the ruse, it will pivot to the second punch.

Fifth, the most effective way to deter and defeat a direct PLA assault is to reduce the vulnerabilities of the key targets that the PLA believes it can threaten while exploiting asymmetries in the PLA's own operational systems. The United States, in other words, must also master "system destruction warfare." Reducing vulnerability implies efforts that are already underway in areas such as logistics resiliency, air base hardening, dispersal of forces to many locations in and outside the first island chain, avoiding overreliance on satellites (for example, by shifting to a greater emphasis on proliferated low Earth orbit constellations or other communications modes), and improving C4ISR redundancy.[196] Moreover, the PLA has its own asymmetric disadvantages that can be exploited, the most important of which is its need to concentrate troops and equipment in the confines of the Taiwan Strait where air and maritime superiority cannot be guaranteed.[197] Strengthening both close-in and long-range strike forces that can destroy invasion forces at their mustering locations, in transit, and on vulnerable beachheads is therefore essential. U.S. strategy can also leverage other PLA asymmetries, such as rigid command and control practices that slow down decisionmaking.[198] Some capabilities designed to achieve these effects can be revealed in peacetime to promote deterrence, while most should be reserved for wartime use to create dilemmas that the PLA would have difficulty countering.

There are also possibilities to misdirect PLA investments and force allocations into targets that are less critical to U.S. operational success.[199] For instance, PLA authors continue to describe aircraft carriers as a key target in the generation of combat sorties in a regional contingency. In a crisis, Washington could choose to keep aircraft carriers and other large surface combatants at standoff distances and project power through harder-to-detect submarines, long-range bombers, and dispersed close-in forces operating from austere locations. However, if the PLA continues to assess that aircraft carriers are a key link in the U.S. operational chain, then it will invest resources to build counters and dedicate targeting and strike assets to hold them at risk—which would reduce its ability to focus on more essential U.S. capabilities. Demonstrations or exercises that highlight misleading capabilities could be useful for this effect.

Sixth, lack of PLA interest in a fait accompli is not a reason for complacency. Limited attention to the option in the PLA literature probably reflects a judgment that completing a rapid invasion of Taiwan before U.S. forces can arrive would be too difficult to implement. This assessment could change if the PLA gains confidence in its ability to move quickly and mask its invasion forces under a plausible cover such as an exercise. Dissuading this thinking relies on

demonstrating U.S. capabilities that can be activated despite reduced warning to slow an initial invasion, buying time for other forces to flow into the theater. It can also be emphasized in messaging that aggressors have often faced difficulties in conducting such operations—China can be reminded not only of Putin's failure to mask his invasion as an exercise in February 2022, but also of Kim Il Sung's conviction that South Korea would be overrun in three days. Kim's folly proved that Stalin's trust was misplaced, triggered U.S. intervention, and drew China into the conflict, with a disastrous result for all involved.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should regard contestation for access, basing, and overflight as part of the backdrop of strategic competition in Asia and not as a core feature of China's approach to counter-intervention. There is little question that Beijing will use all tools at its disposal, including economic statecraft and military tactics, to persuade Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Australia not to allow U.S. forces access. Some (or all) of those efforts may be successful even if Washington attempts to convince its allies otherwise.[200] It is therefore advisable to continue to diversify basing and access arrangements and to develop long-range capabilities that do not depend on access to foreign territory. But this is not the main battlefield on which the PLA intends to compete. Recognizing that U.S. allies might still grant access, and that some U.S. forces can operate from U.S. territory or through the global commons, the PLA has focused on deterrent and direct assault options—these are the options that demand the greatest attention when considering how best to employ U.S. forces in a contested environment.

In sum, the PLA fully expects the United States to intervene in a Taiwan conflict and has been thinking through its options for 30 years. Deterrence requires that the PLA, and China's leaders, continue to worry about the possibility and effectiveness of U.S. intervention, and that they lose hope in the most plausible counters. This requires steps not only to defeat PLA hardware but also to shape perceptions that, if left unchecked, could promote the same optimism in a quick victory that tempted their predecessors into foolish decisions.

Notes

[1] On the balance of forces, see *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024: Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2024), 164–66, https://media.defense.gov/2024/dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/military-and-security-developments-involving-the-peoples-republic-of-china-2024.pdf.

[2] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, 84.

[3] *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019), 65, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/China_Military_Power.pdf; *2024 Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2024), 553–54, https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2024-annual-report-congress; J. Michael Dahm, *China C4ISR and Counter-Intervention*, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on China's Evolving Counter Intervention Capabilities and Implications for the U.S. and Indo-Pacific Allies and Partners, March 21, 2024, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/J.Michael_Dahm_Testimony.pdf; Thomas H. Shugart, *Deterring the Powerful Enemy: China's Counter-Intervention Capability in a Regional Conflict*, Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on China's Capabilities and Concepts for "Counter-Intervention," March 21, 2024, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2024-03/Thomas_Shugart_Testimony.pdf; Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Anti-access/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (2016), 7–48, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00249; Nicholas D. Anderson and Daryl G. Press, "Access Denied? The Sino-American Contest for Military Primacy in Asia," *International Security* 50, no. 1 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.7; Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Evolving Anti-Access Approach: 'Where's the Nearest (U.S.) Carrier?'" *China Brief* 10, no. 18 (2010), 5–8, https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-evolving-anti-access-approach-wheres-the-nearest-u-s-carrier/.

[4] See, for example, Mark F. Cancian et al., *The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2023), https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan; Chris Dougherty, *Buying Time: Logistics for a New American Way of War* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2023), https://www.cnas.org/press/press-release/buying-time-logistics-for-a-new-american-way-of-war.

[5] M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey, "Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-intervention," *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014), 171–87, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.1002164. See also Christopher P. Twomey, "What's in a Name? Building Anti-Access/Area Denial Capabilities Without Anti-Access/Area Denial Doctrine," in *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, ed. Roy Kamphausen et al. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 153.

[6] Timothy Heath and Andrew S. Erickson, "Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?" *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2015), 143–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1099029.

[7] Ryan D. Martinson, "Counter-Intervention in Chinese Naval Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44, no. 2 (2021), 265–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1740092.

[8] Brandon J. Babin, "Xi Jinping's Strangelove: The Need for a Deterrence-Based Offset Strategy," in *Modernizing Deterrence: How China Coerces, Compels, and Deters*, ed. Roy D. Kamphausen (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2023), 67–99, https://www.nbr.org/publication/xi-jinpings-strangelove-the-need-for-a-deterrence-based-offset-strategy/.

[9] Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG524.html.

[10] "Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore (as Delivered)," Department of Defense, May 31, 2025, https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/article/4202494/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in/.

[11] For a brief overview, see Joel Wuthnow, "How China Could Counter U.S. Intervention in War Over Taiwan," *War on the Rocks*, May 27, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/05/how-china-could-counter-u-s-intervention-in-war-over-taiwan/.

[12] Andrew Chubb, "Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA's 'Hawkish Faction' (Part One)," *China Brief* 13, no. 15 (2013), https://jamestown.org/program/propaganda-not-policy-explaining-the-plas-hawkish-faction-part-one/.

[13] Most PLA sources use 干预 to describe external military intervention by an adversary in wartime; some also use 介入 (which is the basis of the Chinese translation of the U.S. doctrinal phrase "antiaccess," as 反介入). 干涉 usually refers to broader interference or meddling in another country's internal affairs, though confusingly干预 is sometimes also used in this context. The preference for 干预 or 介入is at odds with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) dictionary, which does not have an entry for these terms or for the U.S. phrase *antiaccess/area-denial* (A2/AD). Instead, it defines *military intervention* [军事干涉 or 武装干涉] as "the act of a country or international organization using armed force to forcibly intervene in the internal affairs of a country." See *PLA Military Terminology* [中国人民解放军军语] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2011), 7.

[14] Alan D. Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy Toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Washington, DC: Henry L. Stimson Center, 2003), 105–93, https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Complete%20Rein%20In%203rd%20Ed.pdf.

[15] On Taiwan leader visits, see Susan V. Lawrence, *Taiwan Presidents' U.S. Transit Visits*, IF12371 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 3, 2025), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12371.

[16] Jiang Zemin, "Continue to Promote the 'Reunification' of the Motherland," Xinhua, January 30, 1995, trans. CSIS, https://interpret.csis.org/translations/continue-to-promote-the-reunification-of-the-motherland/.

[17] Rhetoric under Hu was similar. The 2010 defense white paper, for instance, stated that the United States, "in defiance of the three Sino-U.S. joint communiques, continues to sell weapons to Taiwan, severely impeding Sino-U.S. relations and impairing the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations." See *China's National Defense in 2020*, Xinhua, June 23, 2010, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/Publications/WhitePapers/4887922.html.

[18] "Full Text of the 20th Party Congress Report" [二十大报告全文], Xinhua, October 25, 2022, https://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/zggcddescqgdbdh/sybgqw.htm.

[19] Liu Junchuan, ed., *The Chinese Communist Party's National Reunification* [中国共产党祖国统一] (Beijing: Jiuzhou Press, 2022), 342.

[20] Xiao Yang, "In the New Era, We Will Continue to Improve the Institutional System to Oppose External Interference" [新时代持续完善反对外部势力干涉的制度体系], *Cross-Taiwan Strait Studies* [台海研究], no. 1 (2023), 73–4.

[21] Xiao, "In the New Era, We Will Continue to Improve the Institutional System to Oppose External Interference."

[22] Strategic ambiguity is a result of the Taiwan Relations Act not specifying whether the United States would militarily intervene, despite its pledges to provide arms of a "defensive character." Every U.S. administration since 1979 has reaffirmed support for the act.

[23] Kristen Gunness and Phillip C. Saunders, *Averting Escalation and Avoiding War: Lessons from the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis*, China Strategic Perspectives 17 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/3253814/averting-escalation-and-avoiding-war-lessons-from-the-19951996-taiwan-strait-cr/; Robert S. Ross, "The 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (2000), 87–123, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2626754.

[24] David M. Finkelstein*, China Reconsiders Its National Security: "The Great Peace and Development Debate of 1999"* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2000), 30–1, https://www.cna.org/reports/2000/PeaceAndDevelopment.pdf; M. Taylor Fravel*, Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 224.

[25] Finkelstein, *China Reconsiders Its National Security.*

[26] See, for example, Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Replace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 161–76; Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views of U.S. Decline," *China Leadership Monitor* 69 (Fall 2021), 1–21, https://www.prcleader.org/post/chinese-views-of-u-s-decline; Jude Blanchette and Seth G. Jones, "Beijing's New Narrative of U.S. Decline," CSIS Interpret: China Project, July 2021, https://opensource.csis.org/features/beijing-narrative-us-decline/.

[27] Qi Jianguo, "Understanding and Thinking About Great Changes Unseen in a Century" [对百年未有之大变局的认识与思考], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 3 (2021), 91.

[28] To be sure, PLA usage of 强敌 is not limited to the United States after the Cold War. This is a generic term that refers to any strong opponent and differentiates them from weaker opponents, or 弱敌; Japan, for instance, was a 强敌 during World War II. Identification of the specific 强敌is usually through context.

[29] Academy of Military Sciences Strategic Research Department, *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2001), 416.

[30] *Science of Military Strategy*, 455. Brackets inserted.

[31] Cui Yafeng, ed., *Science of Army Operations* [陆军作战学] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2009), 104.

[32] Academy of Military Sciences Military Strategy Studies Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2013), 124 (101 in the original).

[33] Xiao Tianliang, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), 45.

[34] Yu Qingjiang, "Implementing Chairman Xi's Important Instructions and Striving to Build a Strong, Modern Airborne Corps" [贯彻习主席重要指示努力建设一支强大的现代化空降兵部队], *Military Arts* [军事学术], no. 1 (2025), 1.

[35] Dai Mingxiang and Yin Yanmei, "Accelerate the Transformation and Improvement of the Quality and Efficiency of the Army's Logistics Readiness" [加快提高陆军后勤备战转型质效], *Military Arts* [军事学术], no. 1 (2025), 49.

[36] Chinese sources are conflicted on this point. See Swaine, "Chinese Views of U.S. Decline," 17–8.

[37] Zhang Peigao, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command* [联合战役指挥教程] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2012), 213–4. Similarly, a 2000 *Modern Navy* article blasted U.S. arms sales and other displays of support as forms of "military deterrence" to "intimidate our army and attempt to prevent the realization of the great cause of reunification of the motherland." See Sun Lihua and Tao Guang, "A Predictive Analysis of Patterns of U.S. Intervention in the Taiwan Issue" [美国干预台湾问题样式预测分析], *Modern Navy* [当代海军], no. 4 (2000).

[38] Xu Hengbing and Xu Di, "On New-Quality Productivity and New-Quality Combat Effectiveness" [论新质生产力和新质战斗力], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 6 (2024), 62.

[39] Xu and Xu, "On New-Quality Productivity and New-Quality Combat Effectiveness."

[40] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 213–4.

[41] Sun and Tao, "A Predictive Analysis of Patterns of U.S. Intervention in the Taiwan Issue."

[42] Liang Fiang, *On Maritime Strategic Access* [海上战略通道论], trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Beijing: Current Affairs Press, 2011), 278.

[43] Liang's analysis predicted a strategy of "offshore control" proposed in 2012 by U.S. scholar T.X. Hammes, which would target China's overseas trade rather than conducting mainland strikes. See T.X. Hammes, *Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict*, INSS Strategic Forum 278 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2012), https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-278.pdf.

[44] For a discussion, see John Speed Myers, *Mainland Strikes and U.S. Military Strategy Towards China* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSD430.html.

[45] Jan van Tol et al., *AirSea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010), https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/airsea-battle-concept.

[46] Sun and Tao, "A Predictive Analysis of Patterns of U.S. Intervention in the Taiwan Issue."

[47] Zhang Yuliang, ed., *Science of Campaigns* [战役学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2006), 332.

[48] Zhang, ed., *Science of Campaigns*.

[49] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 214–5.

[50] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*.

[51] Zhang Ming, "Reflections on Several Strategic Issues in the New Situation" [对新形势下几个战略问题的思考], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 2 (2014), 19.

[52] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 217–8.

[53] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*.

[54] *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 100.

[55] Chen Qiyin, "Advancing the Modernization of Military Theories in the New Era" [推进新时代军事理论现代化], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 6 (2018), 107. The PLA does not have a specific word for *doctrine* in the Western sense, but the same idea is relevant in *military theories* [军事理论].

[56] Cheng Jinming et al., "Vigorously Promote Warfare Innovation for the New Era" [大力推进新时代战法创新], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 3 (2024), 127–8.

[57] Cheng, Li, and Du, "Vigorously Promote Warfare Innovation for the New Era."

[58] Chen Hui, "Focus on Balancing Powerful Enemies and Opponents, Adapt to the Transformation and Development of the Air Force, and Continuously Improve the Actual Combat Training Level of the Troops" [聚焦制衡强敌对手顺应空军转型发展持续提升部队实战化训练水平], *Military Arts* [军事学术], no. 1 (2022), 12.

[59] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 212–3, 217–8.

[60] Chai Yuqiu and Xu Guocheng, *Science of Army Operations Under Informatized Conditions* [信息化条件下陆军作战学] (Beijing: Military Sciences Press, 2009), 358. Notably, the "antiair raid" campaign would be integrated in either a joint blockade campaign or a joint island landing campaign. See Michael Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing: PLA Campaigns for a Cross-Strait Conflict," in *Crossing the Strait: China's Military Prepares for War With Taiwan*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2022), 132, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/crossing-the-strait/crossing-the-strait.pdf.

[61] Casey, "Firepower Strike, Blockade, Landing," in Wuthnow et al., ed. *Crossing the Strait*.

[62] Joel Wuthnow, *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform*, China Strategic Perspectives 14 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2019), 22, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/82/China%20SP%2014%20Final%20for%20Web.pdf.

[63] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 215–6.

[64] Xu and Xu, "On New-Quality Productivity and New-Quality Combat Effectiveness," 62.

[65] Specifically, the idea is that the main target should bear the brunt of the assault while deterrence can be attempted to sideline the intervener. See discussion below for details.

[66] A "self-defensive counter-attack" [自卫还击作战] is how Beijing described its 1979 war with Vietnam, claiming that Hanoi had initiated the conflict by attacking Cambodia 2 months earlier. Presumably, in a future war with Taiwan, Beijing will frame its actions as defensive regardless of how the war begins, but it might gain higher foreign legitimacy if the intervener fires the first shot.

[67] Bruce M. Russett, "Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory," *Journal of Peace Research* 4, no. 2 (1967), 94–9, https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336700400201.

[68] Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 354.

[69] Even the destruction of U.S. aircraft carriers in Pearl Harbor probably would not have changed the outcome of the war. Of the three U.S. carriers that participated in the pivotal battle of Midway in June 1942, only one (USS *Enterprise*) had been homeported in Pearl Harbor the previous December. Moreover, even if all carriers had been destroyed, the fundamental imbalance in U.S. vs. Japanese war capacity would have remained. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto doubted that a war could be won in the short term and warned about Japanese defeat over the longer-term months before the surprise attack. See Jeffrey Record, *Japan's Decision for War in 1941: Some Enduring Lessons* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2009), 3–4, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1632&context=monographs.

[70] Glenn E. Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefront in World War I* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

[71] From a Chinese perspective, as discussed below, an example would be the confinement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's role in Ukraine to the level of a "proxy war" involving training and logistics support, but not a direct "boots on the ground" role.

[72] Thanks to Chris Andrews for suggesting this point.

[73] Lawrence Sondhaus, *German Submarine Warfare in World War I: The Onset of Total War at Sea* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 24.

[74] Sondhaus, *German Submarine Warfare in World War I*, 112.

[75] Sondhaus, *German Submarine Warfare in World War I*, 115.

[76] Daniel Sobelman, "Re-conceptualizing Triangular Coercion in International Relations," *Cooperation and Conflict* 58, no. 3 (2023), 365–7, https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367221098494.

[77] Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6–121.

[78] Michael Kofman et al., *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2020), 10, https://www.cna.org/reports/2020/04/DRM-2019-U-022455-1Rev.pdf.

[79] Kofman et al., *Russian Strategy for Escalation Management*.

[80] Samuel Charap et al., *Understanding Russian Coercive Signaling* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2022), 67–8, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA198-9.html.

[81] Stephen Blank, "Nuclear Weapons in Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Naval War College Review* 75, no. 4 (2022), 68, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss4/6/.

[82] "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

[83] "Biden Warns Americans in Ukraine to Leave, Says Sending Troops to Evacuate Would Be 'World War,'" NBC News, February 10, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/biden-warns-americans-leave-ukraine-russia-troops-world-war-rcna15781.

[84] By contrast, Dean Acheson clarified that Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines were within the "defensive perimeter." See Dean Acheson, "Speech on the Far East," National Press Club, January 12, 1950, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/1950-01-12.pdf.

[85] Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 4 (1993), 433, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23613018.

[86] P.K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950," *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 5 (2001), 57–65, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA529658.pdf.

[87] Kenneth Moll, "The Guns of July 1950," *Air and Space Forces*, September 1, 2005, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0905korea/.

[88] Cynthia M. Grabo, "Soviet Deception in the Czechoslovak Crisis," *Studies in Intelligence* 14, no. 1 (1970, declassified 1993), 12–3, https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/Soviet-Deception-Czechoslovak-Crisis.pdf. See also Cynthia M. Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning* (Washington, DC: Joint Military Intelligence College, 2002), https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA476752.

[89] Leo J. Reddy, "NATO Before and After the Czechoslovak Crisis," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 2, no. 2 (1969), 69, https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2685&context=vjtl.

[90] Grabo, "Soviet Deception in the Czechoslovak Crisis," 17.

[91] Joshua C. Huminski, "Russia, Ukraine, and the Future Use of Strategic Intelligence," *PRISM* 10, no. 3 (2023), 9–25, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3511951/russia-ukraine-and-the-future-use-of-strategic-intelligence/.

[92] The treaty specifically referenced German troops; Joseph Stalin was apparently more concerned about avoiding a repeat of Operation *Barbarossa* than U.S. or NATO aspirations in the late 1940s. See Jussi Hanhimäki, "'Containment' in a Borderland: The United States and Finland, 1948–49," *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 3 (1994), 360, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1994.tb00218.x.

[93] John Lukacs, "Finland Vindicated," *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 4 (1992), 50–63, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20045309.

[94] Douglas Brommesson et al., "Sweden's Policy of Neutrality," in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, ed. Caroline de la Porte et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 291.

[95] Wolfgang Mueller, "The USSR and Permanent Neutrality in the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (2016), 157, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925643.

[96] Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (2001), 5–40, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3092132; Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2000), 292–7.

[97] Zhang, *Science of Campaigns*, 97.

[98] Zhang, *Science of Campaigns*.

[99] Chai and Xu, *Science of Army Operations Under Informatized Conditions*, 349. The PLA's encyclopedia notes that "non-contact operations" were "widely used in the Kosovo War, the Afghanistan War, and the Iraq War." Its main characteristics include use of "integrated reconnaissance intelligence information systems" to provide targeting; use of "long-range precision-guided weapons to destroy the enemy's main targets"; use of hard and soft kill methods to "destroy the enemy's command

information systems"; and protecting one's own targets. See *China Military Encyclopedia* [中国军事百科全书] (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2007).

[100] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 293.

[101] For an extensive discussion, see Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair*, 51–77.

[102] Yu Liming, *Study on Asymmetric Operations* [非对称作战研究] (Beijing: NDU Press, 2015), 185. For a discussion, see Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1708.html; and Mark Cozad et al., *Gaining Victory in Systems Warfare: China's Perspective on the U.S.-China Military Balance* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2023), 61–90, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1535-1.html.

[103] Yu, *Study on Asymmetric Operations*, 185.

[104] Peng Daorong, "A Different Perspective on Systems Warfare" [换个视角看体系战], *Military Arts* [军事学术], no. 1 (2022).

[105] Xu Lisheng and Wang Zhaoyong, eds., *Research on Port Landing Operations* [港口登录作战研究], trans. China Aerospace Studies Institute (Beijing: NDU Press, 2015), 88.

[106] Zhu Qichao et al., "Innovation of Military Strategy in the Perspective of Scientific and Technological Revolution" [科技革命视野中的军事战略创新], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 3 (2015), 76.

[107] Fu Bingzhong, "Research on the Concept of Space-Ground Integrated Unmanned Combat" [天地一体无人战概念研究], *Military Arts* [军事学术], no. 1 (2022), 41.

[108] Feng Zhongguo, "Characteristics and Trends of World Army Development" [世界陆军发展的特点及趋势], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 2 (2022), 84.

[109] Yu Lingling et al., "Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces" [毛泽东海军建设运用思想探要], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 6 (2023), 52.

[110] For an overview, see J. Michael Dahm and Elsa B. Kania, "The Advent of Intelligent Power: The Evolution of China's Outlook on Military Informationization and Intelligentization," in *The PLA in a New Era: Individuals, Ideas, and Influence*, ed. Joel Wuthnow et al. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, forthcoming).

[111] Lan Yongming, "Consideration on Focusing on the New Characteristics of Future Battlefield Coordination to Promote the Modernization of Force Structure" [着眼未来战场对抗新特点推进兵力结构现代化的思考], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 1 (2023), 117.

[112] Lan, "Consideration on Focusing on the New Characteristics of Future Battlefield Coordination to Promote the Modernization of Force Structure."

[113] Joel Wuthnow, "A New Step in China's Military Reform," *Joint Force Quarterly* 117 (2nd Quarter 2025), 4–13, https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/joint-force-quarterly/vol117/iss2/3/; J. Michael Dahm, "A Disturbance in the Force: The Reorganization of People's Liberation Army Command and Elimination of China's Strategic Support Force," *China Brief* 24, no. 9 (2024), https://jamestown.org/program/a-disturbance-in-the-force-the-reorganization-of-peoples-liberation-army-command-and-elimination-of-chinas-strategic-support-force/.

[114] Cliff et al., *Inside the Dragon's Lair*, 31–4.

[115] Dang Chongmin and Zhang Yu, "Science of Joint Operations" [联合作战学] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2009), 87.

[116] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 279.

[117] Chai and Xu, *Science of Army Operations Under Informatized Conditions*, 349.

[118] Liu Changlong and Huang Peirong, "Continue to Promote Improvements in Our Ability to 'Fight Based on Existing Equipment'" ["持续推进" 立足现有装备打仗能力提升], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 4 (2012), 126–7.

[119] Liu and Huang, "Continue to Promote Improvements in Our Ability to 'Fight Based on Existing Equipment.'"

[120] See John F. Sullivan, "Sun Tzu's Fighting Words," *The Strategy Bridge*, June 15, 2020, https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2020/6/15/sun-tzus-fighting-words. Sullivan argues that the correct interpretation of this passage in the *Art of War* would focus on routing an enemy before it is fully organized, which implies use of force rather than convincing an enemy not to fight in the first place.

[121] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 215–6.

[122] For a discussion, see Dean Cheng, "Chinese Views on Deterrence," *Joint Force Quarterly* 60 (1st Quarter 2011), 92–4, https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-60/jfq-60_92-94_Cheng.pdf. See also Lonnie Henley, "War Control: Chinese Concepts of Escalation Management," in *Shaping China's Security Environment*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2006), 86–7, http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep11961.8.

[123] Zhang Yan, *Theory of Strategic Deterrence* [战略威慑论] (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2018), 145.

[124] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 256.

[125] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 123.

[126] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 138.

[127] *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 139.

[128] "Full Text of the 20th Party Congress Report."

[129] Joel Wuthnow, "Shield, Sword, or Symbol: Analyzing Xi Jinping's 'Strategic Deterrence,'" Brookings, March 7, 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/shield-sword-or-symbol-analyzing-xi-jinpings-strategic-deterrence/.

[130] Ge Tengfei, "Build a Strong System of National Strategic Deterrence Forces" [打造强大的国家战略威慑力量体系], *People's Tribune* [人民论坛], no. 21 (2022): 39. The publication is a subsidiary of *People's Daily*, which makes this assessment more authoritative.

[131] Ge, "Build a Strong System of National Strategic Deterrence Forces."

[132] Ge, "Build a Strong System of National Strategic Deterrence Forces."

[133] Michael S. Chase and Arthur Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence"* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 36–44, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1366.html.

[134] Zhu Siyu et al., "New Technologies Generate Innovations in Operational Methods and New Methods of Warfare Bring About Technological Integration: A Study of the Application of New Technologies and New Operational Methods in Recent Armed Conflicts and Its Implications" [新技术催生战法创新新战法带动技术融合: 近期武装冲突中新技术新战法应用研究与启示], *China Military*

Science [中国军事科学], no. 1 (2023), 64.

[135] Yu et al., "Mao Zedong Thought on Building and Employing Naval Forces," 52.

[136] Joel Wuthnow, *Rightsizing Chinese Military Lessons From Ukraine*, China Strategic Forum 68 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, September 2022), 5, https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-311.pdf.

[137] Jin Ning and Ma Jianguang, "The Strategic Deterrence and Influence of the United States and Russia in the Context of Great Power Competition" [大国博弈背景下的美俄战略威慑与影响], *Russian and Eastern European Studies* [俄罗斯东欧中亚研究], no. 3 (2022), 42–62.

[138] Yang Guanghai, "U.S. Proxy War in Ukraine: Motives, Measures, and Implications" [美国在乌克兰的代理人战争: 动因, 举措与启示], *Peace and Development* [和平与发展], no. 1 (2023), 24–42.

[139] On PLA thinking on the broader nuclear dimensions of the conflict, see Maryanne Kivlehan-Wise and Tsun-Kai Tsai, "PRC Lessons Learned From Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for a Taiwan Conflict," in *The PLA in a Complex Security Environment: Preparing for High Winds and Choppy Waters*, ed. Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2024), 121–2, https://www.nbr.org/publication/prc-lessons-learned-from-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-implications-for-a-taiwan-conflict/.

[140] Zhang, *Science of Campaigns*, 629.

[141] Zhang, *Theory of Strategic Deterrence*, 93.

[142] Zhu et al., "New Technologies Generate Innovations in Operational Methods and New Methods of Warfare Bring About Technological Integration," 64.

[143] Zhang, *Lectures on Joint Campaign Command*, 216–7.

[144] Liang, *On Maritime Strategic Access*, 302.

[145] Ren Haiquan, "Strengthening National Defense and the Armed Forces Building at the New Stage in the New Period" [加强新时期新阶段国防和军队建设], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 3 (2013), 10. Emphasis added.

[146] Cheng, "Chinese Views of Deterrence."

[147] Fiona S. Cunningham, *Under the Nuclear Shadow: China's Information-Age Weapons in International Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025).

[148] Wang Yunlei et al., "Issues on Army Deterrence and Operations Under Multi-Dimensional Conditions" [陆军全域慑战若干问题], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 2 (2018), 27. This can also include social media manipulation. See Scott W. Harold et al., *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4373z3.html.

[149] Zhang, *Theory of Strategic Deterrence*, 26.

[150] Yu Sen et al., "Base on Integrated National Strategic Systems and Capabilities to Enhance National Defense Mobilization Capabilities" [依托一体化目家战略体系和能力提升国防动员能力], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], no. 3 (2022), 72.

[151] Cheng, "Chinese Views on Deterrence"; Chase and Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence,"* 4–5.

[152] Katarzyna Zysk, "Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy," *RUSI Journal* 163, no. 2 (2018), https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/escalation-and-nuclear-weapons-russias-military-strategy. For an opposing view, see Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "The Myth of Russia's Lowered Nuclear Threshold," *War on the Rocks*, September 22, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/the-myth-of-russias-lowered-nuclear-threshold/.

[153] *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 119.

[154] Sun and Tao, "A Predictive Analysis of Patterns of U.S. Intervention in the Taiwan Issue," 18.

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