

# MANAGING THE RISKS OF US-CHINA WAR

## IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY OF INTEGRATED DETERRENCE

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### Executive Summary

Ongoing disagreement between China and Taiwan about the desirability of unification and intensified competition between the United States and China are pressurizing the three-way relationship. If the United States is to maintain a constructive role in preventing the outbreak of a cross-Strait war, it will need to implement a strategy to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan that is consistent with U.S. interests and capabilities, and that provides clarity around the existentially important matter of preventing nuclear escalation, in the event a conflict does occur. The inclusion in the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy of the concept of "integrated deterrence" is a sensible approach to doing so. It can be enhanced by: reaffirmation of the U.S. One-China policy; investment in conventional capabilities suited to the geography of the Western Pacific and resilient to China's military concept of systems warfare; clear signaling about the economic and political consequences of aggression against Taiwan; and decreasing U.S. domestic vulnerabilities to Chinese embargoes and cyber attacks.

### Introduction

China's economic and military rise is changing geopolitics globally. No region is either immune to or insulated from the push-and-pull between China's growing role in international politics and U.S. wariness about it. Nowhere, however, are these dynamics emerging as quickly or as dangerously as they are in East Asia itself, and in particular in the already delicate politics of the relationships among China, Taiwan, and the United States. The combination of China's desire to expand its influence, the U.S. desire to maintain its own, and Taiwan's history, international aspirations, and role in the global economy makes the island's status an especially contentious and combustible issue.

Ongoing disagreement between China and Taiwan about the desirability of unification and intensified competition between the United States and China are pressurizing the three-way relationship. If the United States is to maintain a constructive role in preventing the outbreak of a cross-Strait war, it will need to implement a strategy to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan that is consistent with U.S. interests and capabilities, and that provides

clarity around the existentially important matter of preventing nuclear escalation, in the event a conflict does occur. Some prevalent thinking in the United States today errs in believing either that U.S. conventional military supremacy in and around Taiwan can be realistically restored to what it once was, or that threats of nuclear escalation could be wisely employed by Washington in the event of a serious crisis.<sup>1</sup> The United States also remains too slow to improve its own resilience against possible Chinese economic, cyber, and/or military attack.

## The challenge

U.S. national security and defense strategy today has two primary objectives: managing the U.S.-China relationship in ways that defend and promote U.S. interests; and, where those interests come into conflict with those of China, addressing the challenges in ways that minimize the likelihood of catastrophic war. The United States needs to achieve these goals, moreover, without the benefit of the military supremacy it used to enjoy in the broader Indo-Pacific theater, especially in areas close to China. This is not to say that China will dominate the theater — only that the security landscape and deterrence strategies will likely be much more complicated than they were before.

Although indications at the time of writing are that the 2022 U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) National Defense Strategy (NDS) builds on the 2018 version's prioritization of China and its emphasis on deterrence, the codification of U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's preference for "integrated deterrence" signals an important shift. Specifically, the inclusion of integrated deterrence in the 2022 NDS indicates a broadening of DoD strategies to include the greater participation of allies and the use of tools of national power in all domains — land, sea, air, outer space, and cyber. So too does integrated deterrence hint at the DoD's interest in strategies that include diplomatic and economic statecraft, and even economic warfare, to dissuade other states from taking aggressive action.

The language around integrated deterrence, however, is still vague, and many of the Department's policies and practices do not seem outwardly consistent with it. Perhaps most importantly, the lack of full visibility into the NDS, and into the administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), means there is considerable uncertainty about the role of nuclear weapons in integrated deterrence. No single document can mandate or even fully delineate all the preparatory steps that such a strategy implies. But the purpose of the NDS is to provide sufficient statement of purpose and clarity of direction that the DoD can take budgetary action and execute the strategy's intent through force planning, posture, and doctrine. Significant work remains to be done to meet this standard and thereby solidify the U.S. strategy for deterring China from launching conventional war or itself considering nuclear escalation in an attempt to regain Taiwan.

## The policy and posture landscape: conventional deterrence

The United States' current political and conventional military approach to preserving stability and maximizing deterrence in the Western Pacific provides a solid foundation for the necessary shift to integrated deterrence. The longstanding policies that shape U.S. relations with Taiwan continue to provide policy-makers flexibility and latitude as they seek to maintain conditions that disincentivize China from using force and Taiwan from declaring independence.<sup>2</sup> U.S. force posture similarly is in good shape, numbering an impressive 100,000 uniformed personnel in the region at any given time, reasonably distributed across Japan, South Korea, Guam and elsewhere. So too are U.S. forces increasingly modernized, albeit not yet entirely tuned to the particular challenges posed by China's own capabilities, and in particular not yet adequately survivable in the event of an attack when deployed or based in the region.

The success of China's efforts to create a modern and capable military, however, means that the United States no longer can be confident that it is the odds-on favorite in any and every contest of hard power. The 2022 NDS's introduction of integrated deterrence suggests both that the DoD recognizes this fact, and that its response is a movement away from relying exclusively on military tools of influence in favor of incorporating political, diplomatic, information, and economic instruments as well.

If this interpretation of integrated deterrence is correct, however, it is in tension with what appears to be the department's continuation in practice of a strategy of deterrence by denial — a strategy centered on the idea that military warfighting superiority is necessary to deter China from acting forcibly against its neighbors, most especially Taiwan. This strategy is evident in the movement away from a force posture designed to simultaneously prosecute multiple, geographically distributed conflicts toward a focus on one high-end war, as well as in the department's pursuit of large, expensive, technology-laden warfighting platforms.

This disconnect between the concept of integrated deterrence and the strategy of deterrence by denial will need to be resolved, and it should be resolved in the direction of the former and not the latter. This is even putting aside whether one does, or does not, believe that maintaining Taiwan's status quo is a vital U.S. interest. Geography, modern technology, and China's military advances mean that even if deterring Beijing from conquering Taiwan by denial might in theory be desirable, it would be extremely hard to achieve.<sup>3</sup>

The catalyst for China's 21st-century modernization was the lesson it learned from the United States' effective use of precision and mobility capabilities in the 1991 Gulf War. Over the subsequent three decades, China became convinced that the demands of prosecuting any war with the United States would require a fundamental reconfiguration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), from being mass-based in strategy, doctrine, and force structure to being organized, trained, and equipped to conduct "systems confrontation."<sup>4</sup>

The motivating idea underlying systems confrontation is that seeking mass destruction of an adversary's military capabilities is no longer necessary or efficient. Brute force operations focused on destroying hardware are constrained by the demands of geography and the limitations of physics. They also discount the opportunities modern technologies afford to disable an adversary's systems through electronic warfare and cyberattacks. These capabilities make it possible to degrade an adversary's forces simultaneously from the outside-in and from the inside-out.

A movement toward systems confrontation does not imply that China will forgo kinetic attacks on warfighting platforms in favor of futuristic, entirely virtual and bloodless war. To the contrary, the PLA is continuing to invest in its air, sea, and launch assets while developing increasingly sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) satellites, communications systems, missile forces, and information technology architecture to deliver munitions rapidly and with precision.

Systems warfare thus makes the platforms and assets the United States has long relied on for force projection in East Asia — such as large bases, distant but minimally defended airfields, and aircraft carriers — vulnerable twice over. The United States military can and does seek to defend against outside-in kinetic attacks and increasingly against what it knows about China's inside-out capabilities, but the United States must expect that the PLA will succeed in degrading, disrupting, and destroying systems upon which U.S. and allied wartime operations will depend. This will make achieving a denial capability a more difficult and expensive proposition, both in terms of material investments and anticipated wartime losses — even if one assumes (and one should not) that the United States will be able to recognize the threshold between having and not having a denial capability in the first place.<sup>5</sup> The denial problem is most difficult for breaking a possible Chinese blockade of Taiwan; improving the odds that a PLA amphibious assault on the island can be stopped may be a realistic objective.

The nature of cyberspace, moreover, means that it takes no greater effort to achieve effects from far away than it does from up close. Indeed, China has demonstrated its ability to disrupt domestic U.S. networks – both commercial and public as well as open and defended.<sup>6</sup> The 2021 Annual Threat Assessment issued by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence states that China is capable of conducting effective cyber espionage operations, sophisticated information operations, and offensive cyberattacks, which “at a minimum, can cause localized, temporary disruptions to critical infrastructure within the United States.”<sup>7</sup> More specifically, there is evidence that China can impose costs on the U.S. population broadly and can conduct very discriminating and targeted attacks on government agencies, public infrastructure, private companies, and individuals.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, U.S. government officials are concerned that China would conduct such attacks if the United States were to become involved in any armed contingency over Taiwan.<sup>9</sup>

## The policy and posture landscape: nuclear deterrence

The United States has spent the last three decades planning for and fighting conventional wars of choice against adversaries lacking nuclear weapons. It now faces in China the challenge of designing a conventional defense strategy under the nuclear shadow cast by a peer competitor. For this reason alone, a war with China over Taiwan will almost inevitably raise risks of both inadvertent and deliberate nuclear escalation, to a degree that the United States has not directly experienced since the Cold War. Yet the relationship between integrated deterrence, as spelled out in the NDS, and nuclear deterrence, as discussed in the accompanying Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), is not entirely clear.

China has had nuclear weapons since 1964, but recent qualitative improvements in its forces as well as the apparent pace of its quantitative expansion

are pushing it toward a position of deep nuclear stalemate with the United States. If the two countries are not already there, they will be soon. Nuclear stalemate, also often called mutual vulnerability or mutually assured destruction, is a situation in which two countries’ nuclear forces are each able to inflict devastating retaliation against the other’s cities, no matter who strikes first. This is what people mean when they say that no one can win a nuclear war.

Credible nuclear threats on behalf of allies and partners, or extended deterrence, will be hard to achieve in a world where China’s nuclear weapons pose an increasingly robust threat to the U.S. homeland. This means that it will become especially difficult for the United States to rely on its nuclear weapons to defend allies against conventional attacks, as it has done for many years. The world got a taste of this last summer with China’s test of a nuclear-capable hypersonic glide vehicle mounted atop a fractional orbital bombardment system. The deployment of that system, along with other Chinese capabilities designed to evade missile defenses, is a reminder to the United States that if a conventional conflict escalates, the U.S. homeland will be vulnerable to Chinese nuclear weapons. Indeed, even today China could simply exhaust U.S. missile defense capabilities with a sufficiently large saturation attack.

In fact, China may believe that its more robust nuclear arsenal endows it with greater freedom to engage in aggression as its conventional capabilities also continue to grow, knowing that the United States’ long-standing nuclear trump card is likely off the table. In other words, Beijing could believe that conventional war is less risky, and more promising, since the United States would have a harder time using its nuclear supremacy to force China into some form of capitulation. Something akin to nuclear parity would make it even harder than it is today for either side to believe it could wield nuclear threats in a convincing way. Paradoxically, the “strategic stability” sought in the NPR could actually facilitate instability at the conventional level, which the NDS is most concerned with addressing. This would be a return to the “stability-instability paradox” that strategists wrote about in the U.S.-Soviet context during the Cold War.<sup>10</sup>

The United States could respond to this situation by pursuing outright nuclear superiority, as some have advocated.<sup>11</sup> But besides being at odds with the Biden administration’s pursuit of strategic stability, the approach might not actually be feasible for the United States at present. It would require breaking out of strategic arms control agreements with Russia – going against a priority mentioned in the NPR – and investing significantly more in nuclear weapons than the trillion plus dollars already committed to modernizing the existing force. And even if these obstacles were overcome, the United States probably could not produce plutonium pits fast enough to compete with China (not to mention Russia). Even more generally, an all-out nuclear arms race against the world’s top manufacturing power seems likely to be an exercise in futility. All of this is to say that the condition of mutual vulnerability with China seems likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

## U.S. policy objectives and recommendations

The information available about the concept of integrated deterrence in the 2022 NDS suggests it is in essence a sensible approach. The following are recommendations for advancing its implementation:

- **The United States should continue to support Taiwan, and the non-war status quo in the cross-Strait relationship, without stating an unconditional intent to defend Taiwan in the event of Chinese aggression.** Some strategists have argued that Washington should express an intent to intervene if China chooses to use force against Taiwan, no matter the circumstances. Putting aside diplomatic and political considerations, military analysis alone does not support this stance. Arguments in favor of clarifying the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan against China seem to presume that if the United States puts its mind and resources to the task, it could confidently defend Taiwan once it decided to do so

as a matter of policy. That logic ignores military reality. In fact, the outcome of any U.S.-China fight over Taiwan is and will remain very difficult to forecast; victory for the United States and its allies cannot be presumed.

- **The United States should make conventional military investments and posture decisions that signal to China that the military costs of aggression against Taiwan will be high.** The United States can deploy conventional capabilities that make China’s calculus about any potential aggression even more uncertain, more painful to select, and more likely to force Beijing into suboptimal strategies. It makes sense, for example, for the United States to have the ability to use uncrewed systems that do not require runways or aircraft carriers to launch sensors and anti-ship missiles into the Taiwan Strait. The geography of the Western Pacific and China’s capabilities mean that U.S. operational concepts similarly should prize dispersal, mobility, and localized decision-making. Investments in portable and expendable assets should follow from these functional imperatives.
- **The United States should make clear that the United States and its allies would begin to decouple economically from China were it to use force on a large scale against Taiwan.** This should include signaling a willingness to squeeze China’s access to energy, microchips, and finance. Even if decoupling takes time, progresses in fits and starts, and never becomes truly comprehensive, it could still largely deny China access to global markets as well as to many global supply chains that propel China’s economy. Despite the gradual growth of its internal consumer base, Beijing could not ignore the prospect of such a response. On this matter, a policy of “strategic clarity” (instead of the current policy of “strategic ambiguity”) does in fact make sense for the United States.
- **The United States should mitigate its own vulnerability to possible Chinese embargoes of key goods without which its infrastructure, citizenry, or military forces could not survive.**

Through agencies and offices such as the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, the United States Trade Representative, the Department of Commerce, and the industrial base office in the Department of Defense, the United States — and its allies — must continue to inventory their dependencies on China and mitigate those dependencies in key sectors. A short list would include rare earth minerals, medicines, electrical equipment, some optical equipment, and other strategic commodities where China provides 50 percent or more of the global supply. The United States is rightly seeking to increase the production of advanced semiconductors on its own soil, or at least on friendly (and physically accessible) foreign soil. These efforts must expand.

- **The United States should work to harden domestic infrastructure in anticipation of persistent, sophisticated asymmetric attacks.** The extent to which China is capable of threatening U.S. military command and control systems and U.S. domestic telecommunications systems (as well as transport, electricity, and other infrastructure) creates vulnerability on a scale that the United States has not experienced since the end of the Cold War. Integrated deterrence will therefore need to address this reality. Despite some improvements to homeland defense since the 9/11 attacks, most preparations have focused on what terrorist actors might do with explosives, not on what a state actor might do with more sophisticated and asymmetric methods of attack. While they cannot be eliminated, domestic soft spots can be hardened, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense would do well to make the case that this is necessary.

- **The United States must understand, and the Department of Defense must be able to communicate, how an integrated deterrence strategy will help avoid nuclear escalation dilemmas and dangers.** A key challenge for integrated deterrence is finding nonnuclear ways to deter Chinese conventional aggression. The NDS's emphasis on the use of military and nonmilitary tools together is an important part of the answer. In designing its strategies to deter unwanted Chinese aggression, it will be crucial to consider the potentially escalatory implications of its military elements — conducting direct attacks on the Chinese mainland, for example, or sinking Chinese ships crossing the strait when their intent is still not entirely clear. Even if China had started the war, Beijing likely would perceive such U.S. moves as crossing clear escalation thresholds, and it might brandish, test, or even use nuclear weapons in response. Indeed, China is developing theater nuclear capabilities that seem tailor-made for this sort of limited use. America's deterrent policy must not center on its presumed ability to use nuclear threats or employ nuclear weapons to end a conflict on favorable terms.

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## Acknowledgements

Lori Merritt edited this paper and Rachel Slattery provided layout.

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