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Deterrence, Assurance and China's Agency in its Taiwan Policy

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In their important new paper in *Foreign Affairs* "Taiwan and the True Source of Deterrence," Bonnie Glaser, Jessica Chen Weiss, and Tom Christensen have underlined the complexity of factors that will determine war or peace across the Taiwan Strait.¹ It is a matter of utmost importance, as a conflict there is very likely to pit the United States against China, with disastrous consequences not only for those directly involved but also for the global economy and world peace. The risk is increasing and it is becoming serious. The three distinguished scholars are right that deterrence by brute force alone cannot work; American policy makers need to probe deeper. They stress that true deterrence only works if conventional military deterrence is complemented by an effective assurance of key players, particularly the most disruptive one. Since China is the only player that will wage a war to change the status quo across the Taiwan Strait, it is first and foremost about reassuring China that deterrence against it is not part of a plan to make Taiwan an independent state, and the United States and Taiwan will not cross Beijing's redlines. They powerfully put forth the case that if Beijing does not need to worry about the consequences of not using force, it can more readily choose to accept deterrence and thus keep the peace.

The wisdom of not making Beijing feel that it has less to lose by going to war than not is self-evident. It is in line with the security dilemma concept and game theory. But will it, reinforced by military deterrence, suffice? Can they change Beijing's basic thinking about Taiwan, its vision for Taiwan, and its determination that it must make Taiwan part of China?

In other words, does the Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen take into sufficient account the agency of China under supreme leader Xi Jinping, who has a clear vision of where China should be not only in the region but globally? It is a vision that Xi requires the Chinese government to transform into a plan of action. From Beijing's perspective Taiwan cannot have a future outside of China. The use of assurance by the United States to reduce the risk of China attacking Taiwan can work if preventing Taipei from crossing Beijing's redlines is the only possible cause for war. It cannot if Beijing resorts to force to fulfil a national mission that must be achieved.

This article posits that more needs to be considered than conventional deterrence and assurance in light of the second cause for China to use force. Most of all, avoiding a war across the Taiwan Strait must recognize fully the agency of China, its ambition, and how the reality of its policy-making process shapes its approach towards Taiwan.

I start by examining how fixating on Beijing's "one China principle" distracts Western policy makers from what increasingly drives Xi's Taiwan policy. This is followed by an exposition of what Xi's ambitions for China and the world are, and how Taiwan fits into this vision. I then probe into the increasing geostrategic importance of Taiwan as Chinese power rises before discussing how Xi's substitution of collective leadership by his own strongman rule has made it necessary to go beyond conventional deterrence.

Pitfall of focusing on Beijing's "one China principle"

The Chinese government has since the 1970s been insisting to the world that its "one China principle" should be the basis for resolving the status of Taiwan, namely that Taiwan has always been and must always be a part of China. It implies that Taiwan's separation from China is an anomaly that must be rectified. But the substance of China's demand on others to respect the "one China principle" has changed in recent years, reflecting the agency of the Chinese leadership.

What has not changed since the 1950s is the insistence that the Chinese Communist Party has always taken the view that Taiwan is part of China and it is a "sacred" territory of China from time immemorial, which is historically inaccurate and untrue. In fact, the Party had previously advocated, from the 1920s to the 1940s, that Taiwan, like Korea, should be given independence when they were Japanese colonies.² The People's Republic of China (PRC) government did not refer to Taiwan as a "sacred" territory until the summer of 1954, after the Korean War had effectively ended and five years after the PRC was founded. It happened as Beijing worried that the United States was close to signing a mutual defense treaty with Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China (ROC) government in Taipei and sought to deter the United States from doing so.³ This Chinese attempt at deterrence failed. Mao launched the First Taiwan Strait Crisis to intimidate the United States from signing the treaty, but it too failed, with Washington and Taipei signing the treaty in December that year.

The "one China principle" came into usage much later, in 1972, as US President Richard Nixon and China's supreme leader Mao Zedong sought détente by reaching the Shanghai Communiqué. In it, China insists that "Taiwan is a province of China," which has become the core of the "one China principle." This has never been accepted by the United States, which merely "acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China," adding that "[t]he United States Government does not challenge that position." This is a formulation largely replicated as other Western democracies established diplomatic relations with the PRC. These governments, in parallel to the US government, have adopted their respective variants of a "one China policy" based on the above template.

The parallel existence of Beijing's "one China principle" and others' one China policies started as a pragmatic way for China and others to agree to disagree. The Chinese leadership has used the "one China principle" to deter Taiwan

from asserting *de jure* independence and other countries from extending courtesies to Taipei that imply recognition of statehood. Its existence had not compelled Beijing to use force.

From Mao, through Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, no Chinese leader felt a need to do so. The most they ever said was that Beijing would not accept the status quo indefinitely, without providing a meaningful timeframe to change it. Arguably, this was because the "one China principle" has worked as a deterrence, notwithstanding the fact over the last few decades, as Taiwan transformed itself from a dictatorship into a vibrant democracy, Western governments have substantially enhanced their relations with Taiwan short of formally recognizing its statehood.

Even the leading Taiwanese political party that prefers independence, the Democratic Progressive Party, has found a formulation to fudge the issue. As President Tsai Ing-wen puts it, Taiwan does not need to declare independence as it is "an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan)."⁴ This is just about tolerable to Beijing.

Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen advocate the importance of assurance as the other side of deterrence, a prescription to stabilize and sustain the above formulation for peaceful co-existence. This is important and wise, as views have been put forth in Washington to replace "strategic ambiguity" by "strategic clarity" over Taiwan. But it does not address the changes that have unfolded in China since the 1970s, particularly as Xi Jinping reshapes China's priorities to fit in with his vision. Looking at the security and order across the Taiwan Strait primarily through the prism of Beijing's "one China principle" can lead to Western policy makers missing the bigger forces at work over the longer term. It is what Beijing would like them to do.

Putting the "one China principle" upfront, Beijing encourages others to think that its Taiwan policy is all about protecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity with a narrative with which nationalists everywhere can empathize.⁵ It makes China's demands appear limited, reasonable, and justified, particularly for those who do not know the Communist Party's historic stance on Taiwan and Xi's ambitions. This is in line with Xi's priority to "tell China's story well" or seize control over the narrative in matters important to the Communist Party. By forcing multinationals, international organizations, and public bodies with big exposure to China to change how they describe Taiwan or fall in line with the "one China principle," Xi is seeking to change how the world looks at Taiwan.⁶

It is about incrementally blurring the distinction between its "one China principle" and other governments' "one China policy," making the former the dominant narrative. It makes Beijing's increasingly strident demands on Taiwan and about Taiwan, as well as military intimidation against Taiwan, the new normal. Whether this is in the interest of countries and people who value freedom, democracy, and human rights is another matter. Assuring China that its "one China principle" will be fully respected while it is seeking to make it prevail over the scope for other governments to hold tight to their respective "one China policies" creates a moral hazard. Instead of making deterrence work more effectively, it will probably encourage Beijing to think it is succeeding and double down. It also

increases the risk for Beijing to miscalculate Western responses to its use of force against Taiwan when it decides the time is right. The United States and other western democracies should reaffirm their respective one China policies and support their business sector, media, civil society, and citizens to resist Chinese pressure to embrace the "one China principle."

The centrality of Xi's China dream of national rejuvenation

While Mao Zedong would have liked to make China great again, the reality of his era was that China was poor, underdeveloped, and lacked the capacity to become a superpower or seize Taiwan. After he ascertained that US support for the Chiang regime did not extend to help Chiang attack the Chinese mainland in the 1950s, Mao did not see an imperative to take Taiwan in his lifetime.⁷ From Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao, China developed rapidly but it did not have the comprehensive national strength to assert itself globally, which underpinned the necessity of Deng's "hide capabilities and bid for time" approach.

All these changed under Xi Jinping, who came to power after China enjoyed over three decades of rapid growth to become the world's second largest economy, leading manufacturing power, and biggest trading nation. It was only under Xi that China has built up naval and air capabilities required to launch an amphibian assault on Taiwan. He no longer sees a need to reassure the world that China's rise would be peaceful, as Hu did a decade earlier. Instead, Xi takes the view that China's moment has come, hence the articulation of his "China Dream" of national rejuvenation. As Olivia Cheung and I have explained in a new book, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, Xi has a breathtakingly ambitious vision of what fulfilling the "China Dream" means, and Taiwan is an integral part of it, with the end of 2049 as the date when this must be accomplished.⁸

The goal of the "China Dream," guided by Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, is to foster one China, one people, one ideology, one party, and one leader domestically. Beyond China, it is to remake the existing liberal international order into one that resembles the old Chinese *tianxia* or all under heaven paradigm.⁹ In Xi's conceptualization when China was strong and united it was the most developed, advanced, rich, powerful, and magnificent civilization to which other countries looked up for inspiration, wisdom, and above all leadership and guidance. Thus, *tianxia* would deliver *pax Sinica*, as China would lead the world with benevolence based on the superiority of its system. The creation of a modern version of it would deliver the "China Dream" in full.¹⁰ This is to be achieved by the "democratization" of the international order, with China enlisting the support of the Global South to change it into one that looks after the interests not of the numerically small elitist West but of the numerically much bigger, disadvantaged Global South with China as its leader. This is what Xi meant by his advocacy of "the common destiny of the humankind."¹¹ Xi goes about it by enticing the world to embrace his three global Initiatives, on development, security, and civilization, reinforced by his Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build infrastructure mostly in the Global South.

To succeed, Xi needs to win over and consolidate support from the Global South and to prove the bankruptcy of the US-dominated liberal international order. Backing from the Global South is essential for Xi to claim that the changes he seeks to make amount to “democratizing” the international order.

To secure the central place for China in the new world order, Beijing will have to demonstrate the effectiveness of Chinese might and the unreliability of the United States as an ally and defender of the existing international order. Taking Taiwan would deliver both, as China would have to either intimidate Taiwan to accept Beijing's terms for a “peaceful” unification or use force. This would mean preferably deterring the United States from coming to the aid of Taiwan or, failing that, inflicting sufficient damage to US forces sent to help Taiwan's defense to force the United States to end its intervention. However, if achieved, a Chinese takeover of Taiwan would bankrupt American credibility, as neither Japan nor Korea could count on their mutual defense treaties with the United States any longer. All ten member states of ASEAN would have to accept Chinese paramountcy. It would upend the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific and with it the international order. It is an obvious way for China to demonstrate the effectiveness of its power and fickleness of the United States as an ally and would take Xi close to fulfilling the ultimate goal of the “China Dream.”

The importance of Taiwan to the ultimate fulfillment of the “China Dream” means that Xi is committed to “reunification” by 2049, treating US and Taiwanese deterrence as obstacles to be overcome.¹² When a modern great power is led by a strongman whose vision is the mission of the nation, and the justification for him to break conventions and stay in power for life, such a power does not necessarily respond to the logic of the security dilemma, at least not in a straightforward way. However sensible it may seem for the United States to combine deterrence with assurance over Taiwan, its effectiveness ultimately depends on the agency of China or its supreme leader. The United States cannot pre-empt a war over Taiwan unless it can find a way to address Xi's grand vision of which Taiwan is a part.

The geo-strategic importance of Taiwan to China

Much as the “China Dream” confirms the importance of Taiwan in Xi's vision for China globally, one should not assume once Xi is out of the picture, the Chinese Communist Party will automatically abandon its ambition over Taiwan. The reality is that while Xi's vision has made the agency of Beijing a critical factor, the importance of Taiwan to China increased even before Xi became the top leader in 2012. This is a process that is still unfolding. Xi's eventual passing, should it happen before the due date for fulfilling the “China Dream,” will not on its own lead the Party to give up its designs for Taiwan. The foremost factor driving this is the rising geostrategic importance of Taiwan to China as an emerging superpower.

The reality about geography is that it is immutable, though this does not apply to how the geostrategic importance of a territory to a country is evaluated. In general terms, a power without the logistical, technological, military, and

managerial capacity to use the geographic location of a territory to its advantage does not value its geostrategic significance. This can and often does change once the necessary capacity has been acquired. This applies to China's changing perception of Taiwan's geostrategic importance.¹³

From the time when the Manchu Empire ceded Taiwan to Japan in 1895 to the end of the 1970s, the government in control of China was a land power without a maritime strategy and meaningful naval capacity and thus did not see Taiwan as of geostrategic significance. Beijing only started to accord strategic importance to Taiwan, an island nearly 100 miles off the coast of China, in the 1950s as Chiang Kai-shek transformed it into his last bastion and held on to China's UN seats. It posed a challenge to the legitimacy of the PRC until Beijing managed to eject the ROC from the UN in 1971. But Taiwan's strategic value to Mao was not based on its geography. Mao's guiding strategic concept was "the people's war," by which China would allow a foreign invader to march into China's interior before annihilating it there. Preventing an attack on China's eastern seaboard was not a similar strategic imperative.

This changed in the 1980s, as rapid modernization made the security of its eastern seaboard critically important to China. This led Beijing to adopt a maritime strategy, pivoted on developing and securing two island chains. The acquisition of the First Island Chain, of which Taiwan sits in the middle, became a strategic goal. Doing so protects China's seaboard and enables Chinese forces to project power into the Second Island Chain. The securing of the latter, reaching the US maritime bastion of Guam, would enable China to divide the Pacific Ocean into two. Xi practically informed President Barak Obama of this in Sunnyland in 2013 when he declared the Pacific Ocean was big enough for two.¹⁴ Taiwan's geostrategic importance for China has thus reached a level never seen before.



Source: Absalon L16, at <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/286823070007480909/visual-search/?x=16&y=16&w=532&h=653&cropSource=6>

The successful build-up of a powerful navy and air force has given China, in armament terms, the capabilities to seize and secure the First Island Chain. But the gravity and complexity of a major amphibian assault, potentially opposed by US forces, means that China would need to do much more. It needs to build up and train a substantially more powerful force able to win against the most formidable military of the digital age. It would also need to build up an effective strategic deterrence against the United States, so it may pre-empt the United States from interfering, its preferred outcome. Whichever way one looks at it, the geostrategic imperative for China to take Taiwan increases as Chinese might rises. Leaving the “sacred” territory of Taiwan outside its jurisdiction does not sit well with its aspiration to full superpower status. It also goes against the nationalism the Party has been nurturing since the 1980s. This would have applied even without Xi integrating Taiwan into his “China Dream.” Xi having done so makes it even more pertinent. A rising superpower acquiring the capabilities to meet its ultimate strategic goal moves to fulfil it when its leadership decides it can do so successfully and at an acceptable level of risk or costs. Xi’s calculus of risks and costs will therefore be a basic driver of his government.

What effective deterrence requires

Deterrence works when the power to be deterred believes it is on balance in its interest to not go to war. Incentive is usually as important as the calculation of relative strength. The Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen approach takes this into account, recognizing what is more effective than crude deterrence by brute force. But their approach still does not address the most basic problem inherent in deterring China. It is that the Chinese policy-making process no longer has scope for senior military commanders to act on US deterrence reinforced by the prospect of tenacious Taiwanese resistance.¹⁵

When Xi Jinping replaced accountability of all Politburo Standing Committee members to the Central Committee by requiring all other members of the Standing Committee to report to him personally in 2018, he replaced collective leadership by strongman rule and changed the policy making process in a basic way. Previously, under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, policy debates were allowed, even encouraged, in confidential internal meetings. In contrast, Xi has made himself the supreme leader whom anyone contradicts at one's peril. He has replaced incentives for senior leaders to counsel him against his judgement by disincentives. In the realm of national security policy, he has created an environment in which no general or admiral can suggest China act on American deterrence without risking immediate punishment if Xi has already articulated a preference to use force against Taiwan.

For deterrence to work, it will have to be something that Xi himself can see, understand, and accept. Any deterrence that requires his advisers to explain to him runs a high risk of not being recognized, let alone acted on. This hurdle notwithstanding and despite Xi's determination to fulfil the "China Dream," it is still possible to get through to Xi. His first instinct is to hold on to power, as he believes he is the only leader who can deliver the "China Dream," which explains in part why he has made no provision for succession. In practical policy terms if Xi can realize that his hold on power is at risk, he will act. He did so swiftly and ruthlessly when the anti-Zero-Covid protests of late November 2022 started to include demonstrators holding up blank papers. This happened just a few weeks after Xi reaffirmed the Zero-Covid policy at the historic Twentieth Party Congress. He stayed the course when the anti-Zero-Covid protests started. But he leaped into action when some protestors incorporated elements of a "blank paper protest," which he deemed a challenge to his authority.¹⁶ Xi forcefully suppressed the protests and reversed the Zero-Covid policy so he could remove the underlying driver behind the protests. For a leader who has repeatedly declared the Communist Party leads everything everywhere,¹⁷ a sudden reversal of a flagship policy, which caused hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of death quickly contradicts what he has preached. But it is in line with the new decision-making process in place. When Xi sees a threat to his hold to power, he acts decisively, without needing his advisers to alert him.

Thus, the most effective way to deter Xi over Taiwan is one that not only builds up military deterrence but also puts economic deterrence front and center. Xi may not understand the finer points in economic policies, but he knows that an economic collapse will unleash forces that could put his hold on power at risk. He is aware that China's economy is still vulnerable to external pressure, as reflected in his introduction of the "dual circulation policy." It is a policy designed to sustain China's economy via its internal circulation, in case the external circulation is cut off.¹⁸

What is needed is an American capacity to show credibly it can utterly devastate China's economy and thus unleash powerful forces within China or the Communist Party that can threaten his leadership. Xi knows that deferring the timetable for completing his "China Dream" and taking Taiwan has costs but the prospect of losing power presents an immediate threat.

For such an American threat to be credible, strong economic integration among the economies of China, the United States, and the other major democracies must remain. The Biden Administration has shown a recognition of the value of economic deterrence, but it has yet to demonstrate the credibility and diplomacy required to make it work. The United States can deter China if it can persuade the EU, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Korea, and Australia to act in concert to threaten crippling sanctions should China attack Taiwan. There is a built-in assurance in such a deterrence, as any such act would also impose severe self-harm on those imposing sanctions. Beijing cannot fail to see that the United States would not resort to such an option lightly. The critical issue is whether any US administration, given the impact of the Trump presidency, can credibly persuade China that it can actually pull together a coalition of the grudging. If Washington cannot, there will not be deterrence. Building up a capacity for economic deterrence can and should be reinforced by assurance. The United States should make it clear its objective over Taiwan is to keep the peace, not to promote Taiwan's statehood.¹⁹ Nor is it part of a plan to sabotage Xi's China Dream. It should send a clear signal that as long as China does not use force against Taiwan the threat of economic devastation is purely hypothetical, but if it does, it cannot achieve anything more than a pyrrhic victory. The message is: Xi can keep his "China Dream" alive, albeit with its fulfilment deferred, if he does not invade, but if he did, economic Armageddon awaits China and the world.

Conclusion

There are two main scenarios in which China will resort to war over Taiwan: (1) should Taipei formally assert *de jure* independence, changing its name from the ROC to Taiwan or Republic of Taiwan; and (2) without a perceived provocation, China seizing Taiwan as part of its long-term effort to fulfil the "China Dream." Effective deterrence against them has different requirements.

The case Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen have made works well in the first scenario, as it is one in which Beijing will be reacting, with force being used not at a time of its choosing. Given the political investment the Chinese Communist Party has made in its "one China principle," the legitimacy of its rule, and Xi's leadership, Beijing has to respond decisively and with strength. This almost certainly means the use of force even if the top leadership does not feel the Chinese military is fully ready for war. What Beijing can control is the scale and modality of force to be applied. The inherent risk is an unintended escalation even if the scale of force used in the first instance is limited. The risk that the government in Taipei will recklessly trigger a war with Beijing, which Taiwan cannot win, is low but not negligible. Glaser, Weiss, and Christensen see this risk rising as many in the US advocate a shift from strategic ambiguity to clarity on the issue of US support for Taiwan, and their analysis suggests how this risk can be reduced.

It is wise and welcome advice to Washington as an unintended escalation ending with a direct military confrontation between the United States and China is a real risk and its consequences potentially catastrophic.

But their advice applies less in the other scenario, which is about China attempting to take Taiwan as part of its long-term effort to fulfil the “China Dream.” This scenario is driven primarily by the agency of the Chinese state, particularly of its supreme leader, whose mission is to make his vision come true. There is no doubt that realism applies in China’s decision-making process with regard to foreign and external security policies, however distorted by domestic politics it may be.²⁰ But Xi is different from his more managerial predecessors of the post-Mao era. He is a messianic figure believing that he has a historic mission. The vision he has articulated has a specific date when it must be fulfilled. To make his “China Dream” come true beyond the Chinese mainland he must incorporate Taiwan and, in the process, demonstrate the bankruptcy of the American-led liberal international order. This is an essential step for China to replace the liberal international order.

An effective way to persuade Xi not to push for the full and complete realization of his “China Dream” must hit the right button for him. Xi’s messianic approach implies that he himself and his continued hold on power are pivotal to delivering the “China Dream.” The closing up of space for open discussion in closed-door policy meetings underlines the importance that any attempt at deterrence must be clear enough for Xi to see, understand, and have an incentive to act on. This makes conventional military deterrence, with or without assurance, insufficient. Hence, the suggestion that a credible threat that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan will trigger a full-scale rupture in its economic ties with the majority of its most important trading partners should be used as the basis of deterrence. But for this to be effective, the United States must be credible to Xi, and leave Xi scope to avoid war.

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