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Posing Problems without Catching Up

China's Rise and Challenges for U.S.
Security Policy

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Christensen

Since the early 1990s, American scholars and strategists have debated whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) will pose a security threat to the United States and its regional interests in East Asia in the next few decades. Although many have focused on intentions as well as capabilities, the most prevalent component of the debate is the assessment of China's overall future military power compared with that of the United States and other East Asian regional powers. So conferences have been held and papers written discussing whether China would become a "peer competitor" or "near peer competitor" of the United States in the military arena, or a "regional hegemon" towering over its cowed neighbors and threatening American interests in a region of increasing importance to the United States.¹

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1. The peer competitor debate was the focus of two major conferences in 1993–94: one at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, entitled "The China Threat?"; and the other at the Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, entitled "China: Strategic Partner or Peer Competitor?" For examples of concerns about China's rise to great power status, see Nicholas Kristof, "The Rise of China," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 6 (November/December 1993), pp. 59–74; and Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 149–168. Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro even predict that China will become a global rival of the United States in the next two decades. See Bernstein and Munro, "Coming Conflict with America," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 18–31; and Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). For predictions of China as a peer competitor in line with previous power transitions in history, see Peter T.R. Brookes, "Strategic Realism: The Future of U.S.-Sino Security Relations," *Strategic Review*, Summer 1999, pp. 53–56; Fareed Zakaria, "China: Appease or Contain? Speak Softly, Carry a Veiled Threat," *New York Times Magazine*, February 18, 1996, p. 36; and Stephen Götz Richter, "Repeating History: In Dealing with China, the United States Can Learn a Great Deal from

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The debate was hottest in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War era. In the early 1990s, the American economy was suffering and the American military downsizing, while China's economy was growing quickly following the brief post-Tiananmen slump. Moreover, in those years China began increasing its military spending significantly for the first time since 1978. As a result, concerns were expressed about America's ability to maintain its global military presence and supremacy, particularly in East Asia. However, despite a turnaround in the American economy, a slowdown in defense cuts, and the clear persistence of American alliances and internationalism, the question of whether China will become a peer competitor or near peer competitor of the United States in the next few decades still motivates the thinking of many American strategists today.²

The debate about China as a peer competitor revolves around simple realist notions of how international politics work: Power is what matters; and what matters in power is one's relative capabilities compared with those of others, especially other great powers. For the pessimists, the Chinese military of the twenty-first century is replacing the Soviet military of the pre-Gorbachev years and the Japanese economy of the 1970s as the next big purported threat to American global leadership. The optimists disagree, arguing that the United States is safe from the largely hyped "China threat." The same underlying logic of the peer competitor debate is often found in discussions of future security relations across the Taiwan Strait. These discussions frequently focus on the

British-German Relations in 1880," July 11, 2000, <http://www.theglobalist.com/nor/news>. For counterarguments emphasizing China's persistent weaknesses in comparison to the United States and other militaries, see Michael C. Gallagher, "China's Illusory Threat to the South China Sea," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 169-194; Paul Godwin, "The PLA Faces the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on Technology, Doctrine, Strategy, and Operations," in James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh, eds., *China's Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 39-63; Robert S. Ross and Andrew J. Nathan, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Robert S. Ross, "Beijing as a Conservative Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (March/April 1997), pp. 33-44; and Russell D. Howard, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army: "Short Arms and Slow Legs,"* Institute for National Security Studies Occasional Paper 28, Regional Security Series, U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado, September 1999.

2. See, for example, Thomas E. Ricks, "For Pentagon, Asia Moving to Forefront: Shift Has Implications for Strategy, Forces, Weapons," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2000, p. 1. Timothy Thomas, an analyst at the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office, argues that information warfare techniques might "enable China to catch up with the West in both strategic military and international status." See "Analyst Warns of China's Aggressive Approach to Info Warfare," *Inside the Pentagon*, November 30, 2000, p. 2. For a recent article that focuses critically on such thinking in Washington and argues that the People's Liberation Army will continue to "lag behind the U.S. military," see Bates Gill and Michael O'Hanlon, "China's Hollow Military," *National Interest*, Summer 1999, pp. 55-62.

overall balance of power across the strait and the prospect of mainland China closing the gap with the technologically more sophisticated military of Taiwan (or Republic of China [ROC]). An oft-discussed scenario in these discussions is the mainland's future ability or inability to conquer and occupy Taiwan in a traditional D-Day style invasion.³

There is little doubt that it is useful to determine whether China is catching up with the United States or other states in overall military power or whether the mainland will be able to invade and occupy Taiwan effectively and with ease. The world would be a fundamentally different place if the answer to either question were affirmative, just as it would if America's global lead were declining and multipolarity were just around the corner.⁴ But although realist analysis raises important questions, the answers to those questions often have only limited utility. In this article I discuss why such debates miss many of the important questions regarding a China with increasing, but still limited, military capabilities. My thesis is that with certain new equipment and certain strategies, China can pose major problems for American security interests, and especially for Taiwan, without the slightest pretense of catching up with the United States by an overall measure of national military power or technology. I firmly agree with those who are skeptical about China's prospects in significantly closing the gap with the United States. I believe, however, that certain Chinese military capabilities combined with the political geography of East Asia, the domestic politics of mainland China, and the perceptual biases of Chinese elites can pose significant challenges for American security strategy in the region—the basic elements of which are deterring attacks on allies and friends; maintaining East Asian bases for global power projection; and preventing spirals of tension among regional actors whose relations are plagued by both historical legacies of mistrust and contemporary sovereignty dis-

3. For a discussion that focuses on invasion scenarios, see Michael O'Hanlon, "Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 51–86. For a balance-of-forces analysis arguing that Taiwan will be safe from mainland attack long into the future, see James Nolt, "The China-Taiwan Military Balance," January 7, 2000, <http://www.taiwansecurity.org>. For a counterargument that, over the course of the next decade, the balance of power will shift gradually but decisively from Taiwan's favor to the PRC's favor, see David Shambaugh, "A Matter of Time: Taiwan's Eroding Military Advantage," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 119–133.

4. For examples of the realist literature on the desirability and durability of American unipolarity, see William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41; Christopher Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51; and Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 49–88.

putes.⁵ This holds particularly true in the case of maintaining peace in the Taiwan Strait, an issue on which I focus below.

China does not appear poised to become a peer competitor of the United States. If it were to do so, China's economic growth and increasing technological sophistication must allow China to close the gap with the American military, create power projection capabilities that would threaten the American position in East Asia, and replace the former Soviet Union as a global security threat. Given the great leaps in economic and military power that this would entail, it seems incredible to many, including this author, that China might achieve such an outcome anytime in the next few decades. Of course, it is possible that China might accelerate its progress greatly by enjoying the "advantage of backwardness" in a quickly changing world of high technology: That is, by being more innovative than the United States by necessity, China might then skip levels of technological development in the ongoing revolution in military affairs (RMA) and quickly close the gap with a United States that is perceived as too self-confident and too bureaucratically hidebound to maintain a healthy lead against such a newcomer. Those who reject this scenario point to the low starting point for China's military modernization; China's own impressive institutional and bureaucratic obstacles to innovation; and its continuing reliance on outsiders to develop new defense technologies that, themselves, are of late-Cold War vintage. In fact, the common argument among this group is not only that China is not likely to close the gap quickly between itself and the United States, but that the American technological lead will likely expand in the next few decades. As Robert Ross puts it persuasively, it appears so far that if there is going to be a revolution in military affairs in East Asia, "it will be a largely American revolution."⁶

Such conclusions should not be cause for excessive optimism, however. Chinese strategists seem to recognize the reality of China's persistent relative

5. For an explication of American strategic goals, see Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, 1998.

6. Robert S. Ross "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 101-102, at p. 102. For a concerned view about what a nontransparent China might be doing in the fields of military high technology, see Wendy Frieman, "The Understated Revolution in Chinese Science and Technology," in Lilley and Shambaugh, *China's Military Faces the Future*, pp. 247-267. For a less rosy assessment of trends in China's technological capabilities compared with those of the United States and others, see Bernard D. Cole and Paul H.B. Godwin, "Advanced Military Technology and the PLA: Priorities and Capabilities for the Twenty-first Century," paper presented at the 1998 American Enterprise Institute Conference on the People's Liberation Army, Wye Plantation, Aspen, Maryland; and Bates Gill and Lonnie Henley, *China and the Revolution in Military Affairs* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 1996).

weakness, but they do not therefore throw up their hands in defeat, considering great power conflict unthinkable. No matter how much Beijing might wish it could develop capabilities that could match or defeat American military power, China's strategy for the next twenty to thirty years appears more realistic: to develop the capabilities to dominate most regional actors, to become a regional peer competitor or near peer competitor of the other great powers in the region (including Russia, Japan, and perhaps a future unified Korea), and to develop politically useful capabilities to punish American forces if they were to intervene in a conflict of great interest to China. As leading military officers argue in one recent internally circulated Chinese military education book (which is analyzed in detail below): "Our weaponry has improved greatly in comparison to the past, but in comparison to the militaries of the advanced countries [*fada guojia*], there will still be a large gap not only now but long into the future. Therefore we not only must accelerate our development of advanced weapons, thus shrinking the gap to the fullest extent possible, but also [we must] use our current weapons to defeat enemies. . . . [We must] explore the art of the inferior defeating the superior under high-tech conditions."⁷ In the near term, China seems devoted to developing new coercive options to exert more control over Taiwan's diplomatic policies, and to threaten or carry out punishment of any third parties that might intervene militarily on Taiwan's behalf, including both the United States and Japan.⁸

7. Lieut. Gen. Wang Houqing and Maj. Gen. Zhang Xingye, chief eds., *Zhanyi Xue* [Military campaign studies] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, May 2000) (military circulation only), p. 28. For a similar argument, see Sr. Cols. Huang Xing and Zuo Quandian, "Holding the Initiative in Our Hands in Conducting Operations, Giving Full Play to Our Advantages to Defeat Our Enemy—A Study of the Core Idea of the Operational Doctrine of the People's Liberation Army," in *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* [Chinese military science], November 20, 1996, pp. 49–56, in Foreign Broadcast and Information Service—China (hereinafter FBIS—China), June 19, 1997; and Li Yinian, Chen Ligong, and Li Chunli, "Gao Jishu Tiajian Xia Jubu Zhanzheng Ruhe Dacheng 'Yi Lie Sheng You'" [How to attain victory of the weak over the strong in local wars under high-tech conditions], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, No. 4, 1998, pp. 171–175.

8. For an argument along these lines, see You Ji, "Chinese Military Security/Foreign Policy Challenge in the New Century," paper presented at the conference on Chinese Foreign Policy Facing the New Century, Beijing, June 10–11, 2000; and You Ji, *The Armed Forces of China* (St. Leonard's, New South Wales, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1999), pp. 202–204. A few recent analyses, including a June 2000 Pentagon report to Congress on the military power of the PRC, are big improvements over the arguments made in the peer competitor debate. Rather than just addressing China's ability to counter the United States as a peer competitor, they focus on Chinese efforts to handle specific security challenges in the region, particularly regarding Taiwan, in a manner that Beijing elites believe might preclude or complicate effective U.S. intervention. Department of Defense, "Report to Congress Pursuant to the FY2000 National Defense Authorization Act," June 22, 2000, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jun2000/china06222000.htm>. For related arguments, see James Lilley and Carl Ford, "China's Military: A Second Opinion," *National Interest*, Fall 1999, pp. 71–77.

If Beijing elites become convinced that relatively limited military capabilities and coercive tactics might allow for the politically effective use of force against Taiwan and, if necessary, American forces, then war between the United States and China becomes a very real possibility. This is true regardless of whether China's military force is generally backward compared with those of the United States and its allies, whether China still would be defeated in a toe-to-toe full-scale war with the United States, or whether the overall balance of power across the Taiwan Strait has changed enough to allow a successful amphibious invasion by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

This article first focuses on some basic theoretical problems with the peer competitor debate. I review various reasons why stronger powers have failed to deter weaker ones in strategic history, even in cases where the weaker powers' leaders understood the overall military superiority of their enemies. The next section presents general reasons why a relatively weak China might use force against Taiwan and, perhaps, American forces in the region. The focus of this section is on Beijing's coercive diplomacy, perceptions about the resolve of the United States and of its friends and allies, and the dangerous potential for political desperation in Beijing if Taiwan appears to be sliding toward independence. The following section offers some potential military strategies that China might adopt in the next several years to coerce Taiwan and the United States into a cross-strait political settlement. In this section I discuss how politics, geography, and perceptions can combine to encourage PRC belligerence even if nobody in Beijing believes that successful occupation of Taiwan is possible or even desirable. The final section focuses on the implications of this analysis for U.S. national security policy. Rather than considering how to maintain U.S. strategic superiority, this section concentrates on how the United States can adopt relatively simple and inexpensive military and diplomatic measures to better dissuade China from using force against Taiwan.

General Problems with the Peer Competitor Logic

Most debates about China's alleged future peer competitor status neglect to consider three central issues. The first is that U.S. forces are spread thin in more than one theater. America's difficulty in covering the globe is particularly acute in times of major operations in other parts of the world. In the past several years, Washington has all but abandoned in name its initial post-Cold War hope of being able to prevail in two simultaneous regional wars in different parts of the globe. American difficulties on this score are noted in China. In 1993 Chinese military officers made two observations about American military

power: first, that it was unrivaled and likely to remain so for a long time; and second, that during the Gulf War, the United States moved many of its most important assets, especially logistics assets, out of East Asia. This would have made it difficult to fight simultaneously in Korea, for example.⁹ So even if we were to focus exclusively on relative military power in East Asia, we should start with the understanding that overall American national assets are often not a useful basis of comparison to judge whether Beijing will perceive itself as able to use force effectively against American interests in East Asia.

A second related factor is the geography of potential conflicts with China. With the exception of the seas near the southernmost Spratly Islands, most potential points of conflict are very close to China geographically, and all are very far from the United States. American bases in Okinawa and other parts of Japan make areas of potential dispute such as Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, and the northeastern Spratlys (near the Philippines) much more accessible to American forces than they otherwise would be. But even under politically optimal circumstances, an American response from these areas would take time. Moreover, tight political coordination and intellectual consensus between the United States and Japan on whether and how the alliance should respond to such crises cannot be assumed. In the future, China might attempt a fait accompli strategy to gain political or military control of the situation before the United States can respond effectively. In a more protracted struggle, Beijing might employ a mixture of carrots and sticks to attempt to separate the United States from its important regional allies.

A third and more abstract failing of the peer competitor debate is the often implicit and invalid assumption that relative material strength means security because significantly weaker powers would not openly challenge the security interests of the stronger states. As T.V. Paul points out in his excellent book on asymmetric conflict, this questionable assumption runs through most of the realist approaches to war causation and deterrence, and even through approaches that otherwise disagree with each other about what fosters and threatens stability.¹⁰ But diplomatic and military history shows that this assumption is often invalid. A study by John Arquilla at the Rand Corporation

9. Author interviews with PLA officers and with Western military attachés in Beijing, March 1993. Civilian strategic analysts repeated a similar theme in interviews in Beijing in June 2000. For reasons of privacy, Chinese interlocutors are not identified by name in this article. For a written version of this thesis regarding the Taiwan issue, see Niu Jun, "Bu Pa Meiguo de Ganshe" [Do not fear U.S. intervention], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global times], September 24, 1999. Mr. Niu is an America watcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a state think tank.

10. T.V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiations by Weaker Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 5–10.

suggests that much more often than not, the loser of a great power war is the initiator. Even in the standard version of realist power transition theory, it is the rising challenger that generally initiates conflict to change the status quo. The still superior but declining hegemon does not generally start the conflict preventively. Other research helps to explain why small states often initiate and even sometimes win wars against much greater powers.¹¹

All of these works imply either that real-world actors simply misperceive the actual international distribution of power and behave in ways consistent with that misperception or that they simply discount the importance of that distribution and, for a combination of political and psychological reasons, decide to fight stronger powers anyway. Famous examples of the misperception of relative fighting capacity include widespread European predictions that Austria would defeat Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and that France would defeat Prussia at least in the early phases of the Franco-Prussian War four years later.¹² But as Paul points out, leaders sometimes decide to attack even when they know that their nations are not nearly as strong militarily as their opponents.¹³ Given China's widely accepted military weakness compared with the United States, this phenomenon should interest us more than the miscalculations of the balance of power by actual near peer competitors.¹⁴ Examples of conscious decisions to fight despite perceived national weakness should be seared into American strategic thinking: Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and China's crossing of the Yalu in October 1950. By almost any measure, Japan had only a small fraction of the national power assets of the United States in 1941.¹⁵ Moreover, Japanese elites seemed to have understood the

11. John Arquilla, *Dubious Battles: Aggression, Defeat, and the International System* (Washington, D.C.: Crane and Russak, 1992). I am grateful to Michael Pillsbury for bringing this work to my attention. For power transition theory, see A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). On small states attacking great powers, see Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April 1975), pp. 175–200; Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*; Michael P. Fischerkeller, "David versus Goliath: Cultural Judgments in Asymmetric Wars," *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 1–43; and Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "Arts of Darkness: Guerrilla War and Barbarism in Asymmetric Conflict," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1998. Arreguin-Toft argues that smaller states have become increasingly successful in taking on much stronger foes.

12. See Thomas J. Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliance in Europe: 1865–1940," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 65–98.

13. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, chaps. 1–2.

14. For this reason, some apparently relevant examples of great power peers designing inferior forces to deter intervention by superior ones, such as Tirpitz's "risk fleet" in the early twentieth century, are not explored in any depth here.

15. See, for example, Paul M. Kennedy's figures that place Japan's 1937 national war potential at less than 10 percent that of the United States. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New

hopelessness of a long war against the United States. Yet out of a combination of wishful thinking about American lack of resolve and largely self-imposed desperation about the implications of not fighting the United States as soon as possible, they ordered an attack anyway.¹⁶ One can only assume that, regardless of the metric used, China in late 1950 was much worse off compared with the United States than was Japan in 1941. Yet Chinese forces too attacked American forces in Korea when Chinese leaders convinced themselves that war was inevitable and that a bold stroke on land might drive the United States entirely off the peninsula, thus improving China's long-term prospects. In these real-world examples some combination of geography, assessments of American distraction elsewhere, beliefs about American resolve, the enemy's own risk acceptance, and the enemy's strategic desperation—however justified—led to the use of force.¹⁷

This analysis is not to suggest that Sino-American war is inevitable or that American power cannot deter Chinese use of force under many or even most circumstances. It is rather to say that what will determine whether China takes actions that will lead to Sino-American conflict will likely be politics, perceptions, and coercive diplomacy involving specific military capabilities in specific geographic and political contexts, not the overall balance of military power across the Pacific or across the Taiwan Strait. Especially if the goal is to prevent conflicts with China, not just design ways to win them on the battlefield, then it is important to study why politics, perceptions, and new capabilities might encourage China to use force against a stronger United States and its friends and allies. This should hold true even if one assumes optimistically that the more powerful United States will certainly prevail against China in an armed conflict, regardless of the political and geographic context (a very dangerous assumption in my opinion).

York: Random House, 1987), p. 332. A much more generous national power ranking for Japan in the interwar period still grants the Japanese less than half of the Americans' war-fighting potential. See Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 203–208.

16. Michael Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), chap. 13; Scott D. Sagan, "The Origins of the Pacific War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 911–912; Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1991), pp. 148–149; and Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, chap. 4.

17. Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960); Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–58* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), chap. 5.

Perceptions and Politics: Why a Weaker China Might Challenge the United States

Four related beliefs or perceptions in some combination could cause the leaders of a relatively weak China to use its military power to challenge American interests and, if deemed necessary, to attack American forces in East Asia: (1) if Chinese leaders believe that they are backed into a corner and that refraining from force is prohibitively costly to the regime; in such an instance, Beijing's high degree of concern about a particular issue (such as Taiwan) and its perception (probably correct) that it cares much more about the issue than does Washington might lead Beijing elites to decide to use force despite the risk of American intervention; (2) if Chinese leaders believe that they can deter effective U.S. intervention or compel U.S. withdrawal by raising the prospect of casualties or by actually killing or wounding American service personnel, as happened in Somalia in 1994; (3) if Chinese leaders perceive the U.S. military as sufficiently distracted or tied down in other parts of the world that the United States could not or would not take on a belligerent China effectively; or (4) if Chinese leaders believe that the United States can be separated from its regional allies by political persuasion or military coercion targeted at those allies.

CHINA AS BACKED INTO A CORNER

Nothing suggests that the contemporary Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is as aggressive as Tojo's Japan or even as internationally ambitious as the highly ideological founder of the PRC, Mao Zedong. In fact, it may be precisely because Beijing, rightly or wrongly, might feel so defensive and view the prospects of forgoing the use of force as so dismal that CCP elites might decide to launch an attack, particularly against Taiwan. Americans might not understand the psychological and political reasons for desperation in Beijing over the prospect of Taiwan's permanent independence from the Chinese nation, but it would be dangerous and naïve to project U.S. values and sense of security onto the PRC and then deem war unlikely. Especially if one considers not only Chinese national security more broadly, but regime security more specifically, then the CCP's use of force to attempt to dissuade a real or perceived move by Taiwan toward formal independence and to get Taiwan back "into the box" seems much more likely.

Given the near gutting of any other ideological justification for their rule during the capitalistic reform program initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, besides economic performance the Chinese Communists have little else to bolster

their mandate for power than nationalism and the maintenance of national stability and integrity. So from the perspective of state-society relations, the Chinese Communist Party must demonstrate effectiveness and resolve on the Taiwan issue. The loss of Taiwan as war booty to a previously inferior Japan in 1895 stands alongside the 1937 Nanjing massacre, in which many tens of thousands of Chinese citizens were killed by Japanese occupiers, as perhaps the greatest humiliation in Chinese history. As a result, individual leaders must appear tough on Taiwan independence not only to protect their current positions against potential rivals within the party, but also to protect their historical legacies as patriots and to avoid the opprobrium cast on historical figures, such as Li Hongzhang, accused of negotiating away Chinese sovereign territory in the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki.¹⁸

According to interlocutors in Beijing on my two trips in 2000, the Chinese government is extremely sensitive to criticism and the possibility of social unrest, despite frequent public displays of great confidence and achievement by the Chinese Communists. They say that not all of the complaints about the government relate to economic change, layoffs in the state sector, and the lack of a developed social safety net for displaced and retired workers. They argue that, increasingly, popular criticism is focused on the government's inability or unwillingness to stand up to foreigners and to Taipei. One prominent government analyst said that the Communist Party has grown accustomed to hearing criticism about the economy. But never before in the history of the CCP, he argued, had members of the public routinely accused party elites of being "traitors" (*maiguo zei*: a term that literally means criminal who sells out his country). He suggested that especially after Premier Zhu Rongji's failure to gain Washington's acquiescence to China's terms for entry into the World Trade Organization during his April 1999 U.S. visit, the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999, and Lee Teng-hui's enunciation of his "two-state theory" in July of the same year, there is a growing popular perception that the CCP is more interested in making money in international business deals than in defending China's national honor against slights from China's trade and investment partners. This trend is of great concern to the CCP elite, he continued, partially because nationalist themes would be easy ones around which currently disparate opposition forces could quickly come together and perhaps join disaffected hard-line nationalists in the party, including military personnel. For this reason alone, he believes, the Chinese

18. For more detailed discussion of this point, see Thomas J. Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (September/October 1996), pp. 37–52.

leadership will likely launch a war against Taiwan if Taipei continues to stall on reunification talks, regardless of the economic damage that would follow or the likelihood of U.S. military intervention. He stated that the time was not yet right on the military side, but that he views a cross-strait war and a Sino-American military confrontation as not only possible, but as nearly inevitable in the next several years. Most other interlocutors, including current and retired military officers, appeared only somewhat more sanguine than this analyst about the probability of peace with Taiwan and the United States. Although few Chinese security analysts saw war as likely in the next few years, true words of optimism regarding peace over the longer term appeared rare in Beijing in the first half of 2000. That said, few of my interlocutors seemed to have many illusions about the ease with which the mainland could effectively defeat Taiwan, about the incredibly large gap between the PLA and the U.S. military in overall fighting capacity, or about the potential damage to China's economy of a cross-strait conflict.¹⁹

In January 2001, the outlook in Beijing for long-term cross-strait relations appeared more optimistic. Only months after his May 2000 inauguration, Taiwan's new president, Chen Shui-bian, of the traditionally pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, faced severe economic difficulties, low approval ratings, and opposition criticism of his inability to improve relations with the mainland. As a result, Beijing elites seemed more confident than they were in 2000 about the prospects for a long-term peaceful settlement of cross-strait relations on the mainland's terms. But much of that confidence seems built on the questionable assumption of ongoing difficulties in Taiwan, continuing economic strength and stability of the mainland, and the eventual voluntary acceptance in Taiwan of Beijing's terms for meaningful negotiations about unification (discussed below). If those conditions change in the next few years and if Taipei's policies toward the mainland continue to disappoint and frustrate mainland elites, dangerous levels of pessimism might return to Beijing at a time when the PLA will likely have more coercive military options than it did in 2000.²⁰

19. Author's not-for-attribution interview with a civilian security analyst in the Chinese government, in Beijing, June 2000. One senior Chinese military officer said that the United States and China might very likely fight a war over Taiwan in the next several years. He seemed to be implying that this was regrettable but preferable perhaps to fighting an even larger war in the more distant future.

20. Author interviews with Chinese officials, government analysts, and scholars, in Beijing, January 2001.

THE SOMALIA ANALOGY

Among the most dangerous elements in U.S.-China relations is the fairly widespread belief in America's limited national willpower. If leaders believe that their enemy lacks the willingness to fight once a situation gets very dangerous for that enemy's personnel, then those leaders need not acquire weapons that can defeat that enemy militarily before deciding to use force. They need only to cross the much lower technological and numerical threshold of being able to hurt the enemy or at least convincing themselves that they can.

Just what costs do Beijing elites believe that the United States is willing to pay to support Taiwan in a shooting war? It is difficult to assess Chinese perceptions on this score, especially from open sources, but it is clear that at least one important strand of thinking in Beijing elite circles suggests that the United States cannot withstand many casualties. In fact, several of my interlocutors and the colleagues to whom they refer in my interviews seem to differ not on whether the United States can be compelled to back down over Taiwan, but how quickly and at what cost to China. A minority seem to believe that the United States can be deterred from entering such a conflict at all; others believe that a small number of American casualties would lead the Americans to withdraw; still others believe that it would require hundreds and perhaps as many as 10,000 American casualties to drive the United States out.²¹

Recent Chinese strategic writings have often emphasized America's unwillingness to fight in a protracted fashion against foes that can fight back even in rudimentary ways. So one National Defense University professor, Zhang Zhaozhong, states: "Americans usually give the impression that they are chiv-

21. Author interviews with civilian and military government experts in Beijing and Shanghai, 1995–2000. In a June 2000 interview in Beijing, one government analyst pointed out that belief in the high likelihood of war with the United States over Taiwan in the next ten years has become so widespread that strange fault lines have emerged in the party. He claims that now the soft-line elements in the party are the ones who believe that the United States will likely not get involved militarily in Taiwan scenarios or will leave quickly if it does, whereas hard-liners are preaching for more strike capacity against U.S. forces and U.S. bases. His point was that under normal conditions, where war is not considered inevitable, one would expect only hard-liners to be stating that war could be won cheaply, and soft-liners to be arguing for the hopelessness of the use of force for securing political goals. For an article in a pro-Beijing Hong Kong journal that says the United States might fight hard for awhile before eventually backing down, see Tsiao Hsia, "U.S. Constraints on China's Use of Force in Resolving the Taiwan Issue," *Kuang Chiao Ching* [Wide angle], February 16, 2000, pp. 43–45, in FBIS–China, February 16, 2000. Tsao writes: "China's use of force in achieving reunification with Taiwan is extremely unfavorable to the United States. If the war is indefinitely stalled or extended, it will be no different from another 'Vietnam War.' The United States will do its utmost to contain the war within a limited spatial or time frame. This will be favorable to China. However, this does not preclude the fact that the United States and Taiwan may resort to extreme measures."

alrous and generous [people] who want to help when they see something unjust, [but] underneath this superficial image, they are in fact extremely selfish. . . . Americans can never afford to take a beating, not even a light one." He concludes that "the United States is unlikely . . . to fight a large-scale war for the sake of Taiwan."²²

The most common analogy raised in print and in my interviews in China over the past several years is the U.S. withdrawal from the humanitarian intervention in Somalia. A September 1999 article in the PLA daily, *Jiefangjun Bao*, argues that "hegemonists fear, first of all, personnel casualties. . . . The strong reaction of the American public to the death of 16 Rangers during the U.S. invasion of Somalia forced the U.S. Army to withdraw its troops from Somalia. . . . The defensive side should make good use of the dread of the enemy, and choose the right methods of operation . . . including distant air attacks, long-range raids, concealed sabotage by secret service personnel, network break-in, and sneak attacks against enemy warships." The same author faults Saddam Hussein for not striking American and Saudi bases in the multiweek staging process prior to Desert Storm.²³ Fu Liqun, a colonel at the prestigious Academy of Military Sciences in Beijing, argued in a February 1997 article: "After a war has started, [American strategy tries] every means to escape, regardless of any effects on the nation's face. . . . The United States was aggressive and arrogant at the start of the military intervention in Somalia. . . . However, after the body of a killed U.S. serviceman was paraded through the streets, things became unbearable for the government as well as people outside the government in the United States, and the government could not but declare the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This incident can be regarded as a typical example in recent years. The reason for all that is closely related to the U.S. society's humanist cultural tradition centered around the human person."²⁴

Because there were few American casualties in the Gulf War—and some Chinese strategists blame Saddam's passive strategy for this fact—that en-

22. An interview with Zhang Zhaozhong in Ma Ling, "Will Foreign Armed Forces Be Involved in a War between the Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait?" *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong), August 18, 1999, p. A3, in FBIS-China, August 19, 1999.

23. Author interviews in China, 1993–2000. Zhou Shijun, "Try as Far as Possible to Move Battlefields toward Enemy Side," *Jiefangjun Bao* [People's Liberation Army daily], September 14, 1999, p. 6, in FBIS-China, September 27, 1999. A similar argument states that "the government had no alternative but to succumb to mass pressure and call a halt to the military operations [in Somalia]"; see Zhou Demin, "Dialectical View of Information: Advantages and Disadvantages," *Jiefangjun Bao*, April 28, 1996, p. 6, in FBIS-China, May 20, 1998.

24. Fu Liqun, "Several Basic Ideas in U.S. Strategic Thinking," in *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, February 20, 1997, in FBIS-China, June 5, 1997.

counter does not seem to mitigate some analysts' disrespect for U.S. resolve. Neither does the 1999 NATO war in Kosovo, which is read in two ways in China, neither of which serves U.S. interests. First, the United States is seen as a bully, willing to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries; but it is seen as a weak bully, only willing to attack the weak from a safe distance.²⁵ One Shanghai researcher points out that when one compares U.S. belligerence toward Belgrade in putting down Kosovo separatism with American acquiescence to Russia's resolute attack on Chechnya, one sees that "the essence" of the United States and Western powers is "bullying the weak and fearing the strong."²⁶ In an article in a leading Chinese political newspaper, one prominent CCP America watcher, Niu Jun, opines that a condition that would prevent American intervention in a Taiwan conflict is the ability to raise casualties to an unacceptable level. He points to the "zero casualty" (*ling shangwang*) war fought in Kosovo as demonstrating that America's "ability to bear cost" (*chengshou li*) is "extremely frail" (*jidu cuiruo*).²⁷

On core sovereignty issues for China such as Taiwan, then, the perceived balance of interests may be much more important than the balance of power, to use Richard Betts's terminology.²⁸ Even for those who expect American intervention over issues such as Taiwan—and it seems that the majority do—the most important issue is not how to become as strong as the United States, but how to become strong enough to hurt the United States. For example, Chu Shulong of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (one of China's intelligence agencies) adopts the gross national power measures often found in the peer competitor debate. He first recognizes that "now and for quite a long time from now, China has no interest, no necessity, and no capability" to compete with the United States and its Western allies in a direct confrontation and power struggle (*zhengmian dui kang he jiaoliang*). But because he believes in the advantages of geography and resolve favoring China as a defensive actor fighting on what it perceives to be its own turf, he argues: "If China's strategic power [*zhanlue lilian*] and advanced conventional weaponry

25. See the views of Gen. Li Jijun as reported in Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2000), p. 76; see also James J. Perry, "Operation Allied Force: The View from Beijing," *Aerospace Power Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 79–91.

26. Zhang Zuqian, "Guofang Xiandaihua yu Taiwan Wenti" [National defense modernization and the Taiwan problem], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and management], No. 6 (1996), pp. 45–49, at p. 48.

27. Niu, "Bu Pa Meiguo de Ganshe." Niu does not argue that China currently has the ability to raise American casualties to an unacceptable level.

28. For this theoretical distinction, see Richard K. Betts, *Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1987).

[*xianjin changgui wuqi*] reaches 1/10th of the enemy's, we then can fairly effectively contain [*ezhi*] enemy armed intervention."²⁹

AMERICAN FORCES TIED DOWN IN OTHER THEATERS

Chinese analysts sometimes emphasize the political geography not only of East Asia, but also of the globe as another advantage that China has in settling problems such as Taiwan by force. The United States as the sole superpower often finds its military assets tied down elsewhere. So one strategy for addressing the Taiwan problem would be to wait until the United States is politically and militarily distracted in another part of the world. This, some Chinese analysts believe, would reduce both America's capability and willingness to intervene against China in a meaningful way. In the early 1990s, Chinese military analysts recognized this weakness when they observed that many Asia-based assets were used to defeat Saddam Hussein in the distant Persian Gulf. In June 2000, two civilian analysts made a similar argument to me, stating that the United States cannot handle the burden of two simultaneous military engagements in separate parts of the world.³⁰ Niu Jun argues that if the United States is in an intense conflict elsewhere and a war breaks out across the strait, it might then "give up on implementing military intervention in Taiwan. . . . Though American power is great, its power has limits." He describes American "strategic lines" as "too long" and its power as "scattered" (*fensan*).³¹

AMERICA'S UNCERTAIN ALLIANCES

Since the era of Mao, Chinese security analysts have understood and have even exaggerated the dependence of the United States on its regional allies to achieve U.S. strategic goals.³² While recognizing American power, one military analysis of the United States that was written shortly after the Gulf War stated that the United States was so dependent on allied assistance that it had

29. Chu Shulong, "Zhongguo de Guojia Liyi, Guojia Liliang, he Guojia Zhanlüe" [China's national interests, national power, and national strategy], *Zhanlüe yu Guanli*, No. 4 (1999), pp. 17–18.

30. Author interviews with two government think tank analysts in Beijing, June 2000.

31. Niu, "Bu Pa Meiguo de Ganshe."

32. One Chinese diplomatic historian wrote that even after the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the subsequent escalation of American military action against North Vietnam, Mao believed that the United States would be incapable of fighting China alone and would have to rely on active Japanese and South Korean assistance to do so. See Li Danhui, "Zhong Su Zai Yuan Yue Kang Mei Wenti shang de Maodun yu Chongtu, 1965–72" [Contradictions and conflicts in Sino-Soviet relations over the Aid Vietnam and Resist America War, 1965–72], unpublished Chinese-language manuscript presented at a conference entitled "New Evidence on China, Southeast Asia, and the Indochina Wars," Hong Kong, January 11–12, 2000.

become “the beggar policeman” (*jiaohuazi jingcha*).³³ One major strategy of a weaker China would likely be to lessen America’s ability to intervene militarily by isolating the United States from its key regional allies, especially Japan. This could be done by political persuasion or by putting at risk American and local personnel at American bases in the Western Pacific with missiles targeting those bases.³⁴ Such strike capabilities might be designed to deter allied cooperation. If deterrence failed, attacks on U.S. bases might be designed to slow America’s military response or, by raising casualties, to compel the United States and its allies to back down after their initial intervention.³⁵ Attacking military bases effectively with missiles, especially conventionally tipped ones, is a very difficult task. But for deterrence to fail and for there to be severe risks of escalation, Chinese elites might need to believe only that such attacks would damage American willpower or the willingness of Japanese citizens to support American war efforts.

China’s Developing Capabilities: A Counterrevolution in Military Affairs?

Through foreign purchases and domestic developments, China seems to be acquiring capabilities to better attack Taiwan and to complicate any American effort to enter a cross-strait conflict. Many of these acquisitions are last-generation weaponry. But they are still significant if Taiwan or the United

33. Cai Zuming, chief ed., *Meiguo Junshi Zhanlüe Yanjiu* [Studies of American military strategy] (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Publishers, January 1993) (internally circulated), pp. 218–220.

34. One military strategy book emphasizes the political means to separate attackers from their alliances. See Huang Yuzhang, chief ed., *Junshi Zhanlüe Gailun* [Introduction to military strategy] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, December 1991), pp. 264–265 (military circulation only). You Ji similarly discusses China’s need to be able to attack Japan if Tokyo decides to give assistance to U.S. efforts in Taiwan. See You, “Chinese Military Security/Foreign Policy Challenge in the New Century”; and You, *The Armed Forces of China*, p. 204. Several of my interlocutors in China in 1999 and 2000 also argued that Japanese assistance to U.S. forces in a Taiwan scenario would amount to a Japanese declaration of war on China and that China is developing its capability to attack U.S. bases in Japan.

35. Over the past few years, Chinese interlocutors have emphasized that the PLA is developing better means to strike Japan and U.S. bases in Japan with conventional missiles. Without direct reference to Japan, an internally circulated military text discusses the conventional arm of the Second Artillery, the PLA’s rocket force, in the following terms: “The surface-to-surface missile weapons of the Second Artillery’s conventional missile battle groups [*changgui daodan junyi juntuan*] have the special characteristics of being long range, highly accurate, high speed, powerful [*weili da*], and so on. This is an extremely abundant [*jifu*] high-tech deterrent capability.” Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, p. 379.

States lacks the means to counter such systems effectively, or if the methods of countering them are politically unpalatable or overly risky to American forces or American alliances, and therefore are or seem unlikely to be employed. It is not enough to ask whether the United States can sink a new Chinese battleship or submarine or whether the United States can preempt against missile sites with strike weapons. In an actual crisis, the president might avoid taking such provocative actions in order to maintain crisis stability, to avoid escalation of an armed conflict with a nuclear power capable of striking the United States, or to avoid a rupture in regional alliances in the face of nervousness in Tokyo, Canberra, Seoul, or Manila. If in the absence of American preemption these systems posed real risks to American service personnel, then China might have political leverage in a crisis or conflict without the slightest capacity of defeating American forces in a toe-to-toe war. Of equal importance, and perhaps much more likely, Chinese elites might perceive that they have such leverage even when they do not. This alone could lead to a tragic escalation of conflict.

If Beijing chooses to use force, China will likely attempt to use old and new technologies to coerce Taiwan into a minimally acceptable political compromise (discussed further below) and to complicate America's attempts to respond to PRC belligerence. Some of these methods (such as laser blinding of American satellites) might be high-tech, while others (such as laying mines near ports and in sea-lanes) will be neither new nor high-tech. By developing such methods, China seems bent not so much on winning the revolution in military affairs, but on launching a counterrevolution in military affairs to weaken and coerce more advanced powers that are increasingly dependent on high-tech command and control and information-gathering systems to project their power.³⁶ None of the high-tech or low-tech methods discussed below will allow China to close the overall gap with the United States in military power to any significant degree, nor will they necessarily enable the PRC to invade and occupy Taiwan, but they might achieve certain political goals regarding Taiwan at acceptable costs. At a minimum, and perhaps more important, they might prove extremely dangerous if Chinese elites believe them to be effective even when they are not.

36. Along these lines, Chief of the General Staff Gen. Fu Quanyou argues that "there is inferiority within superiority and weakness within strength" and that high-tech advancements in weaponry have left "a vast leeway for the weaker side, giving free rein to man's courage and superior intelligence." See Fu, "Deepen the Study of the Characteristics and Laws of High-Technology Local War and Raise the Standard of Guidance for Winning High-Technology Local War of the Future," *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, February 20, 1999, pp. 6-14, in FBIS-China, July 1, 1999.

In the following sections, I discuss coercive military options other than amphibious assault against Taiwan. Coercive operations seem more likely to be adopted by China and might actually serve Beijing's political purposes better than an invasion would.³⁷ Those political purposes have more to do with halting and reversing Taiwan's perceived drift toward independence than with expanding the CCP's administrative control to Taiwan. In fact, in my experience, no one in Beijing shows any desire to run Taiwan's day-to-day affairs, nor do they have any pretenses that they would know how. Rather, to reverse the perceived trends toward Taiwan independence, my interlocutors argue that Beijing merely needs Taiwan's return to an abstract "one China" policy, such as the one Taipei espoused during the reign of Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, and a return to cross-strait negotiations on that basis. Recent statements by Chinese elites in public and private suggest that "one China" can be vaguely conceived and does not need to equate with the People's Republic of China. Moreover, the two sides can agree to disagree on what "one China" means (as many believe Beijing and Taipei did in 1992 in preparation for cross-strait talks in Singapore), as long as they consider some version of the abstract concept an existing reality that underpins those negotiations. Finally, mainland elites claim that in such "reunification" talks, Taiwan need not negotiate away its de facto political autonomy, its economic system, its democracy, or even its own military. It only must permanently forgo legal independence as a nation-state separate from China.³⁸ So from the perspective of

37. Amphibious assault using conventional and unconventional assets, such as an armada of fishing and merchant vessels, has been discussed in my interviews and in PLA writings. See, for example, Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, chap. 17, on amphibious landing. But because a direct successful amphibious assault would likely require a great deal of military might that China lacks, for the purpose of this article, I focus on other scenarios that might be alternatives to a direct amphibious assault.

38. A consistent argument by Chinese elites in private over the past two years is that Beijing does not demand that Taiwan simply become part of an expanded People's Republic of China in the unification process. Author interviews with Chinese government analysts in Beijing, Shanghai, and the United States, 1999–2001. For a public statement to this effect to a visiting Taiwan delegation by Vice Premier Qian Qichen, see Maubo Chang, "Qian Qichen Continues 'One China' Pitch to Taiwan Legislators," Central News Agency (Taipei), July 18, 2000, in FBIS–China, July 18, 2000. The article reports: "Qian on Tuesday continued his pitch for Beijing's 'one-China principle' after telling a group of Taiwan media executives in Beijing on July 14 that 'one-China' does not have to mean 'either this or the other,' referring to the two sides of the Taiwan Straits." A Chinese television report quoted Qian Qichen similarly as saying, "There is only one China in the world and both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China. This formulation is very inclusive." See "CCTV [Chinese Central Television] Reports Qian Qichen Interview on PRC-Taiwan Ties," September 11, 2000, in FBIS–China, September 11, 2000. For a more recent formula, see John Pomfret, "Beijing Signals New Flexibility on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2001, p. 1. For the most authoritative document containing Beijing's demands and the threat of war if they are not met, see Taiwan White Paper, February 2000, in *Beijing Review*, March 6, 2000, pp. 16–24.

many elites on the mainland, Taiwan does not need to be moved far to blunt or reverse what they perceive to be negative trends toward a declaration of formal independence.

Although Beijing's apparently accommodating stance on this score might seem reassuring, from the perspective of deterrence, that moderation is troubling. The limited nature of their political goals might convince Beijing elites that a coercion campaign far short of an amphibious invasion will likely succeed in convincing Taiwan and its potential international supporters that fighting a prolonged battle to avoid such an outcome simply is not worth it. As Paul argues, one of the key issues that leads weaker powers to take on stronger ones is precisely the pursuit of limited aims in war.³⁹ In this sense, mainland "moderation" on cross-strait relations can be seen as alarming, rather than reassuring, because such moderation makes limited Chinese military capabilities appear much more likely to be used. It is much more difficult for Taiwan to demonstrate the requisite combination of native military might, economic staying power, and political resolve to withstand a mainland coercive campaign if the PRC's goals are limited than if they are expansive (e.g., the goal of occupation). Of course, even under circumstances where the PRC has limited aims, any use of force by Beijing might prove terribly misguided either because PRC elites overestimate the PLA's coercive capacity, underestimate Taiwan's staying power, or ignore the potentially transformative power of warfare. Military conflict might very well spark a dedicated and resolute Taiwan independence movement that otherwise would not have existed. But by that point deterrence already would have failed in the Taiwan Strait, and the United States and China might also have started down the road to war.

The analysis below draws in part on a lengthy internally circulated PLA text, *Zhanyi Xue* [Military campaign studies], which was edited by two top-ranking officers at China's premier military academy, Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye, and is apparently used in national-level training courses for high-ranking CCP cadres. Because of the intended limited circulation of the source, the opinions expressed in it likely carry more weight than do the dramatic, much discussed, but probably less authoritative, *Chao Xian Zhan* [Unrestricted warfare], penned for a much wider audience by two lesser-known colonels.⁴⁰

39. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts*, pp. 12–13.

40. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Chao Xian Zhan: Dui Quanjihua Shidai Zhanzheng yu Zhanfa de Xiangding* [Unrestricted warfare: Scenarios about war and war-fighting methods in the era of globalization] (Beijing: PLA Arts and Literature Publishers, August 1999). The book analyzed here, Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, has no preface, but the cover places it in a series entitled "National-Level Education on Key Topics" (*Guojiaji zhongdian jiaocai*). The chief editors' positions as PLA Na-

Even if the plans outlined in the more cautious work examined here are themselves sometimes still too optimistic given current and likely future Chinese capabilities, they are a concern if Chinese military officers reading such assessments and the civilians they advise come to believe them to be efficacious as Chinese capabilities improve over the coming years. Moreover, they are especially concerning because the notion that China must strike hard, early, and by surprise if its plans are to be effective might make crises extremely volatile and hard to contain in the future. In this limited sense, China's weakness and inability to become a peer competitor may make it a more dangerous opponent in a future crisis than a more secure and powerful China might be. This is particularly true if Chinese elites feel desperate and are banking on opponents with limited resolve and willingness to bear costs.

THE CHALLENGE TO TAIWAN'S AIR SUPERIORITY AND THE THREAT TO U.S. BASES
Among the high-profile systems that China is acquiring are Russian Su-27 and Su-30 fighter jets with medium-range air-to-air missiles and Russian advanced warning aircraft technology. If employed effectively in sufficient numbers—and that is always an important qualifier in regards to the Chinese military—these systems could pose major problems for Taiwan in its efforts to maintain air superiority over the Taiwan Strait, a critical asset not only in preventing an invasion but in breaking blockades and limiting the general costs of war to the society. The problem of maintaining air superiority might be particularly nettlesome if China is able to damage Taiwan's air defense assets through dedicated and massive attack on command-and-control nodes and airstrips with special forces or with land attack cruise missiles and accurate ballistic missiles—capabilities that the Chinese military is striving to develop. In an excellent 1999 study that cites numerous open-source Chinese publications, Mark Stokes first raised the hypothesis that China was working hard to move beyond the use of missiles as inaccurate terror weapons and to obtain such a militarily useful, accurate missile force.⁴¹

The Wang and Zhang volume cited above strongly suggests that Stokes's study accurately reflects high-level PLA thinking about missile strikes. In almost every type of war-fighting scenario—from blockade to invasion (always

tional Defense University leaders and the book's limited distribution status, for military circulation only (*junnei faxing*), make it plausible to surmise that it is used in training elite military officers or civilian officials at the national military academies. The book is available at the John K. Fairbank Center for East Asian Research Library, Harvard University.

41. Maj. Mark Stokes, U.S. Air Force, *China's Strategic Modernization: Implications for the United States* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, September 1999), chap. 4.

against unnamed foes that usually have superior technology)—the authors view as essential concentrated attacks on enemy military assets by the PLA’s missile forces, the Second Artillery. Moreover, the current conventional missile force, though limited in number, is portrayed as having sufficient range and accuracy for attacks on such critically important enemy assets as regional naval bases, airstrips, and command-and-control centers, if the targets are well selected and the missile firings are sufficiently concentrated.⁴² The text argues that a concerted deep strike attack on important enemy assets can “seize battlefield initiative [*zhanyi zhudongquan*] and establish the conditions for victory; moreover, in politics it can frighten his [the enemy’s] psychology, shaking his will to fight a war [*dongyao qi zhanzheng yizhi*], and accelerating the progress of the battle [*jiasu zhanyi jincheng*].”⁴³ The authors are not contending that the PLA has an upper hand, or that it is closing the gap significantly with the West in any of these areas in the near term. Rather they are suggesting that through some improved capabilities, a higher level of morale and resolve than the enemy, careful targeting, and innovative methods of early strike, China might be able to use accurate missiles to fight and prevail politically in a regional war over issues related to Chinese sovereignty, such as Taiwan.⁴⁴

From the point of view of crisis management, one of the most disturbing aspects of discussions of missile attack on enemy bases are the lessons that some Chinese have drawn from recent American military conflicts. A common argument about both the Gulf War and the Kosovo war is that if Baghdad or Belgrade had attacked American bases early in the conflict, while the United States was assembling forces for war, the Americans might not have prevailed. These analyses criticize Baghdad for not attacking with assets in its possession, including Scud missiles, until after the Americans had launched Desert Storm,

42. In April 1998, the Second Artillery formally raised to the PLA its concept for sudden conventional assault. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, p. 369 and pp. 375–378, 411–412, 430–433. For similar themes, see Li Xinyi, “On the Air Superiority and Air Defense of Taiwan, China: Is Taiwan an Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier?” in *Taiwan de Junbei* [Taiwan armaments], July 1, 1996, pp. 11–18, in FBIS–China, November 13, 1997.

43. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, p. 376.

44. It might take most of this decade or longer for China to develop a ballistic missile and cruise missile force of sufficient size and accuracy to convince Beijing elites that such an attack could be politically effective. But because the targets of such a campaign would not only be military but psychological, Beijing’s standards for sufficiency might be lower than what an objective military assessment based on brute-force capabilities alone might prescribe. Moreover, any combination of Chinese overestimation of the power of PLA missiles or underestimation of Taiwanese, American, or Japanese resolve could make such a missile attack much more likely than we would otherwise expect.

and pity Belgrade for lacking the capacity to do so.⁴⁵ Such logic might make crisis management very difficult if the United States begins to assemble forces in Japan in the face of a mainland coercion campaign against Taiwan.

INFORMATION AND ELECTRONIC WARFARE

Another concerning aspect of China's hope for an effective asymmetric strategy against a more powerful foe is information and electronic warfare. Here is the clearest example of Chinese military elites accepting the PLA's inferior overall capabilities, but trying to create problems for others with more advanced command-and-control systems and surveillance assets.⁴⁶ The Wang and Zhang volume argues that, to fight more advanced foes, China needs to develop the following capabilities and tactics, all of which fit well with my notion of a counterrevolution in military affairs: special forces operations against enemy command and control; precision-guided missiles, including antiradiation missiles (*fan fushe daodan*); electromagnetic pulse weapons (*dianci maichong wuqi*); lasers (*jiguang*); electronic jamming (*dianzi ganrao*); and computer viruses and computer hackers (*hei ke*) to attack information networks.⁴⁷

Again, nowhere do the authors suggest that China will somehow catch up to or surpass the United States or other advanced powers in information systems or in the ability to attack them. Rather the argument is that more advanced countries might be vulnerable precisely because they depend on more advanced, high-tech systems than do less advanced countries such as China.⁴⁸ As

45. On Iraq, see Zhou, "Try as Far as Possible to Move Battlefields toward Enemy Side"; and Gen. Li Jijun, cited in Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, p. 76. On Kosovo, see Yan Xuetong, *Meiguo Baquan he Zhongguo Anquan* [American hegemony and Chinese security] (Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishers, March 2000), pp. 33–35. Commenting on the Kosovo war, Yan Xuetong of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations argues that the Yugoslavs drew the lesson that the war would have been impossible for NATO to pursue if Yugoslavia had possessed medium-range ballistic missiles, presumably because Yugoslavian forces could have struck NATO bases in Italy.

46. For two excellent studies of these RMA themes in Chinese open-source writings, see Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization*, sec. 2; and Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, chap. 6, entitled "Forecasting Future Wars." For recent confirming analysis of these themes, see Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, chap. 6 and passim. As with missile strikes, almost all forms of military activity call for some information warfare, from blinding enemies during all-out invasions to incapacitating the enemy's ability to track mine-laying submarines and to clear mines in blockade scenarios.

47. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 174–175; Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization*, chap. 3; and Fang Liangqing, "Development of High Technology and Changes in War Form," translated from *Chinese Military Sciences*, Vol. 3, 2000, pp. 100–105, by National Air Intelligence Center, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio, November 29, 2000.

48. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, p. 174.

with the notion of missile strikes, the target of Chinese information warfare (IW) is as much the enemy's resolve as it is its military might.⁴⁹ *Zhanyi Xue* includes psychological operations as part of IW. These can harm "the enemy's 'psychological conviction' [*xinnian xinli*], and can achieve the goal of breaking the enemy military's willingness to fight [*dou zhi*] and [its] ambition [*zhi qi*] and of reducing its combat effectiveness [*zhandouli*]." ⁵⁰ Moreover, the authors place a premium on attacking the enemy's information net before the enemy attacks one's own. They write that although both offense and defense in information warfare are indispensable, "offense is dominant" (*jingong zhan you zhudao di wei*). Without an effective offense, China will be unable to defend its information networks efficiently from attack by enemies, who, the authors imply, will likely be more technologically advanced and powerful than China.⁵¹

The combination of an emphasis on early attack, the danger of being struck first, and the potential effect of an early concerted strike on the enemy's resolve and fighting spirit, rather than just its capabilities, all suggest that a moderate increase in Chinese IW capabilities may pose a major challenge in the context of a Taiwan crisis. Chinese elites will likely view such a crisis primarily as a battle of wills. Moreover, if they accept the logic above, they might convince themselves that an early, concerted attack—however risky—is less risky than the alternatives. In such circumstances, again, China's overall inferiority could actually encourage, rather than discourage, escalation.

We cannot be certain from open-source data how developed China's IW capabilities really are. Unlike those relating to missile warfare, the Chinese writings on information warfare do not betray a high degree of confidence in China's current capabilities. But as James Mulvenon argues in an excellent study: "Behind all the rhetoric and hype, IW presents the Chinese with a potentially potent, if circumscribed, asymmetric weapon. Defined carefully, it could give the PLA a longer-range power projection capability against U.S. forces that its conventional forces cannot currently hope to match."⁵² Two Chinese officers at the Academy of Military Science point out that the most sophis-

49. One PLA text states, "The soul of the thinking behind information warfare is to wreck the enemy's decision-making and to cause the enemy's will to break down." See Wang Jianghuai and Lin Dong, "Viewing Our Army's Quality Building from the Perspective of What Information Warfare Demands," *Jiefangjun Bao*, March 3, 1998, p. 6, in FBIS-China, March 13, 1998.

50. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 174–175.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 172–179.

52. James C. Mulvenon, "The PLA and Information Warfare," in Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang, *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999), pp. 175–176. Mulvenon's chapter offers an excellent review of the current literature and thinking in China on information warfare.

ticated systems might be the most vulnerable, writing that “striking evidence of this is the case of the U.S. Defense Department network being paralyzed by a physically weak high-school student.”⁵³ Even if China currently lacks key capabilities to render such attacks, it might develop more impressive capabilities over the next decade. Moreover, Beijing elites might overestimate China’s IW attack capabilities as it develops or exaggerates Taiwanese and American vulnerabilities. Such miscalculations might have important implications for crisis management and conflict escalation.

BLOCKADE STRATEGIES

One of the options for coercing Taiwan that geography affords the PRC is blockade of Taiwan’s trade through the destruction of ports and shipping or deterrence of civilian shipping companies. Sea blockade provides a wide range of options for the PLA, including direct attacks on shipping with ship-to-ship missiles, air-launched missiles, land-based cruise missiles, and submarine-launched torpedoes. In addition, key ports such as those in Kaohsiung and Keelung are subject to missile attack or “missile blockade” if fear for physical safety or soaring insurance rates keep merchant ships out of harbor. In addition, China might be able to use a variety of methods to lay sea mines, including surface ships, aircraft, and submarines. Always nettlesome to even the most powerful navies, sea mines are more sophisticated and harder to detect than ever. They can be prepositioned and remotely controlled, or they can lie on the ocean floor until activated by the motion of ships. The proximity of Taiwan to the mainland (roughly 100 nautical miles across the strait), Taiwan’s massive trade dependence (more than half of Taiwan’s gross national product), the inherent difficulty in clearing mines, and the extreme weakness of American mine-clearing capacity, particularly in the theater (the United States has only two mine-clearing ships deployed in the Seventh Fleet) all make blockade a tempting and potentially effective strategy for a China that does not close the gap with either Taiwan or the United States in technology or overall military power.⁵⁴

53. See Huang and Zuo, “Holding the Initiative in Our Hands in Conducting Operations.”

54. On this score, Michael O’Hanlon apparently agrees. See his “Why China Cannot Conquer Taiwan,” pp. 74–79. It is not clear, however, what political conditions he has in mind when he discusses Taiwan’s “capitulation” as the standard of success for Beijing. For a pioneering discussion of a scenario involving a PLA blockade of Taiwan, see Paul H.B. Godwin, “The Use of Military Force against Taiwan: Potential PRC Scenarios,” in Parris H. Chang and Martin L. Lasater, eds., *If China Crosses the Taiwan Strait: The International Response* (New York: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 15–34. For PLA writings on blockade scenarios of unnamed foes, see Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 320–324 and chap. 16. America’s general weakness in minesweeping is widely rec-

New PLA Navy capabilities that should soon be integrated into the active forces and that increase the threat of blockade to Taiwan include four Kilo-class submarines with guided torpedoes and two Sovremennyi destroyers with supersonic Sunburn SS-N-22 missiles. These assets will supplement a larger but more technologically backward PLA Navy with dozens of louder, slower submarines with more backward offensive systems that are either still active or mothballed for future use. The more modern ships might greatly complicate the ROC Navy's ability to keep shipping safe. The PRC might also use Kilos and Sovremennyi destroyers along with sea mines and cruise missiles as coercive tools designed to deter the intervention of, or limit the nature and geographical deployment of, American forces.

American naval experts and officers have underscored the difficulty in defending against the Sunburn missile, designed by the Russians to attack U.S. carrier battle groups protected by Aegis air defense systems. But they also claim that the U.S. Navy can easily destroy a Sovremennyi long before American surface ships come into range of the Sunburn.⁵⁵ However, as in the case of long-distance strikes on mainland missile sites, one must question whether, in a political and military crisis over Taiwan, U.S. naval commanders in the theater would be allowed to operate under such politically provocative rules of engagement. If not, then the Sunburn becomes a potentially useful coercive tool to make Americans think twice about the possible costs of loitering in waters near Taiwan. Again, even if Beijing falsely concluded that it could deny or complicate access to certain waters through such coercive measures involving Kilos and Sovremennyis, the risk of crisis escalation and the security problems posed by these Cold War-era systems are still real.

Military and civilian elites in Beijing acknowledge both the advantages and the disadvantages of blockade scenarios, recognizing in particular American

ognized. Although the United States recently has developed new minesweeping and mine-hunting equipment, much of this equipment is kept on bases in the United States and would require a significant amount of time to be sent to the theater. A recent naval plan, "the fleet engagement strategy," backed by Secretary of Defense William Cohen, calls for increased "organic" mine-hunting and minesweeping capabilities within battle groups that would involve airborne (helicopters), surface, and submarine-based capabilities. It is unclear how effective these initiatives will be in providing U.S. forces in East Asia with readily available capability in a crisis. See Capt. Buzz Broughton and Comdr. Jay Burton, "The (R)evolution of Mine Countermeasures," *Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1998, pp. 55–58; "Cohen Expected to Respond This Week to Navy Brief on Mine Warfare," *Inside the Navy*, August 17, 1998, p. 3; and "Cohen Directs Navy to Add \$53 Million to Develop Minehunting System," *Inside the Navy*, August 31, 1998, p. 1.

55. Author conversations with U.S. naval officers and civilian experts on the navy. For a concise and illuminating discussion on the Sovremennyi and the Sunburn, see Bates Gill, "China's Newest Warships," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 27, 2000, p. 30.

and Taiwan vulnerability to sea mines. This provides a potentially very useful asymmetric tool to coerce technologically superior foes. As *Zhanyi Xue* points out, sea mines are economically damaging, last a long time, are hard to detect, and are “viewed with seriousness by every country’s military” (this appears to be a veiled reference to advanced countries such as the United States).⁵⁶ The text notes that there have been major advances in sea mines, particularly in their stealthiness, and that a great advantage of mine warfare is that one can supplement mines as they are cleared by the enemy, thus further complicating the enemy’s challenge and extending the duration of the blockade. PLA mine-laying assets in the air, on the surface, and under the sea are all vulnerable to attack by a technologically superior enemy’s defensive forces. Methods of deception, timing, and joint operations, however, are being designed to reduce this risk. In clear but still only implicit references to Taiwan, the authors discuss using forces in one area to distract the attention of the enemy while PLA submarines lay mines in other areas. Another tactic is to lay mines with submarines in periods of extreme weather, so that enemy antisubmarine warfare (ASW) patrol craft on the surface and in the air cannot be effectively deployed against PLA submarines (the discussion is almost certainly about Taiwan because blockades are seen as a way to “maintain national sovereignty”).⁵⁷ In more general weather conditions, the authors argue, mine laying and attacks on surface shipping might be combined in joint operations with information warfare and missile strikes on air and naval assets to complicate the enemy’s ability to conduct effective ASW and mine-clearing operations.⁵⁸

Blockade scenarios have obvious downsides in addition to the danger that they will simply fail on military grounds because of Taiwan’s antisubmarine, mine-clearing, surface warfare, and air defense capabilities combined with the limited punch of the PLA’s conventionally tipped missiles. The biggest additional danger, and the one most cited by my interlocutors and in military writings, is the protracted (*chi jiu*) nature of blockade warfare, which allows time for “third country” assistance and military intervention.⁵⁹ Moreover, because

56. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 415–416. Another text argues that “while Taiwan has a certain mineclearing capability, mineclearing is a difficult, time-consuming job.” See Li Wei, “The Taiwan Strait Has Become a Mere Pond,” *Taiwan de Junbei* [Taiwan armaments], July 1, 1997, pp. 34–36, in FBIS–China, February 6, 1998.

57. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 409, 415–416. On weather patterns near China, see *ibid.*, p. 64.

58. *Ibid.*, chaps. 12, 16.

59. Author interviews with security experts in Beijing and Shanghai, 1998–2000; and Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, pp. 321, 410–411. Interestingly, although the word “Taiwan” is never mentioned in the text, it is fairly clear what the editors have in mind when discussing blockade. Yet, re-

the authors of *Zhanyi Xue* envision blockade as a form of joint warfare with complex challenges, there is great concern that enemy counterattacks will reduce the sustainability of a blockade. Again, in a fashion that does not bode well either for crisis stability or for controlling wartime escalation, the authors' suggested solution is early, large-scale attack using missile strikes and submarines at the high end, and, if needed, large numbers of civilian ships for mine laying at the low end to achieve battlefield superiority relatively quickly.⁶⁰

Although they do recognize many difficulties in creating effective blockades, the PLA elites might still be overreaching their current and near-term future capabilities in designing some of the tactics addressed above. In discussions with this author, American naval experts have stated that accurate and safe deployment of sea mines near harbors with submarines is no easy task even in good weather and that it is extremely dangerous to plan to do so during or just after foul weather, especially with submarines that must snorkel periodically, as do most in the PLA Navy. Moreover, supplementing minefields after the initial mines are laid is very tricky. This is true not only because mine-laying submarines or surface ships are working against a fully alerted enemy, but because the submarines and ships themselves are endangered by mines laid in the initial round. Finally, complex joint operations that might reduce the exposure of mine-laying vessels, involving simultaneous mine laying, missile strikes, and information warfare attacks, are hardly the forte of the PLA.⁶¹

All that being said, if Chinese elites are willing to risk casualties and setbacks and believe their limited goals to be achievable, then a blockade strategy involving missiles, submarines, and mines might seem attractive. This is particularly true if those elites assess negatively the willingness of merchant shippers to travel in harm's way, the economic and political staying power of Taiwan under blockade conditions, and the willingness of third parties to intervene in a concerted and protracted way to protect Taiwan's sea-lanes. This point is particularly important when one notes the stated goals of blockade, which have more to do with disrupting "normal" economic activity and influencing enemy morale (*shiqi*) and domestic support for the war than they do with strangulation or damaging of military assets.⁶²

lated to the protracted nature of blockade warfare, they discuss the danger of assistance from "third countries" (*disan guo*), a term that would be politically incorrect in discussion of Taiwan scenarios because Taiwan can never be afforded the status of a state in Beijing's official parlance.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

61. Author discussions in 2000 with several American experts on the U.S. Seventh Fleet (including five retired U.S. Navy officers), the PLA Navy, and the ROC Navy.

62. See Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, p. 409.

DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES: LIMITING DAMAGE FROM ATTACK

One final aspect worthy of consideration is the PLA's growing air defense capabilities. Again, the issue is not whether China can develop a system that can defeat American air power or counter all American cruise missiles. The key issue is whether the PLA might be developing the active and passive air defenses that its generals believe are necessary to limit the offensive punch of China's potential enemies while raising the costs to the attacking nation of air assault. Stokes argues that China has an impressive program of passive defense, including a military communication network that relies increasingly on underground fiber-optic cables. These are difficult to destroy and relatively hard to tap for intelligence-gathering purposes.⁶³ Encouraged by the survival experience of Yugoslav forces in Kosovo, in particular the survivability of high-value targets such as mobile surface-to-air missile (SAM) launchers, the PLA also apparently is working to improve concealment and increased survivability of its offensive forces and air defense assets through the use of mobility, dummy targets, camouflage, smoke and water screens, and so on. Some attention apparently is also being paid to improving damage assessment, repair, and recovery operations to get sites up and running again after successful enemy strikes.⁶⁴ Finally, the sheer size and large number of potential targets might constitute China's greatest passive air defense asset. As one U.S. naval officer put it, China is a "cruise missile sponge" capable of exhausting even America's large arsenal of strike weapons.⁶⁵

On the active defense side, it appears that China is attempting to import and to build indigenously a fairly impressive layered air defense system to counter cruise missiles and advanced aircraft. In addition to reported clandestine acquisition of Patriot technology, China has purchased and is seeking to purchase from Russia an undisclosed number of SA-10 (S-300) and SA-15 (TOR-1) SAM systems. Some of this Russian technology might be successfully integrated into China's own domestically produced SAM systems, such as the HQ-9.⁶⁶ China is also working to develop antistealth and antisatellite capabilities.⁶⁷

63. Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization*, chaps. 3–5.

64. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, chap. 18, especially p. 450.

65. Author discussion with a U.S. Navy officer.

66. Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization*, pp. 112–113.

67. See Fang Fenghui, "Stealth Does Not Mean Invisible—On Striking at Stealth Planes," *Jiefang Junbao*, November 16, 1999, p. 6, in FBIS—China, December 16, 1999. The author celebrates the downing of an F-117A by Yugoslav forces; along the same lines, Huang and Zuo, "Holding the Initiative in Our Hands in Conducting Operations," point out hopefully that Saudi radars picked up

Even if the Chinese programs have only limited effect against more technologically advanced foes, they may still pose a future security challenge to Taiwan and the United States. If Beijing elites believe that they are in a protracted war of wills over an issue that they care about much more than do the Americans, such as Taiwan, those elites might still be emboldened by the perceived capability—however limited—to increase costs to American and Taiwanese forces and to reduce costs to mainland assets in such a struggle. This problem is only exacerbated by any perceptions that Chinese elites might have about America's supposed limited willingness to fight such protracted wars and to suffer casualties.

Implications and Prescriptions for U.S. Strategy

If the analysis above is correct, preventing war across the Taiwan Strait and between the United States and China is much more difficult than a straightforward net assessment of relative military power in the region might suggest. To deter China from launching attacks against Taiwan and escalating crises and conflicts by attacking American assets in the region, the United States must do more than demonstrate an ability to prevail militarily in a conflict; it must also demonstrate American resolve and, perhaps, the ability to protect its forces not only from defeat but also from significant harm. On the other hand, if Beijing believes that Taiwan is moving toward independence, it might be impossible to deter, regardless of the degree and nature of American military superiority. So the United States must take actions not only to deter China but also to reassure it that Washington has no intention of backing Beijing into a corner by supporting Taiwan's legal independence now or in the future.⁶⁸

On the deterrence side, it might be helpful whenever possible to develop more military capabilities that can blunt Chinese coercive capacities in credible ways that do not require provocative measures such as preemption and massive attacks on the mainland. Future upper-tier theater missile defenses to protect American bases and forward-deployed forces are a good concept when the

F-117s during the Gulf War. On PLA antistealth and antisatellite writings and programs, see Stokes, *China's Strategic Modernization*, chap. 5.

68. Recently, a few American Taiwan experts have argued to this author that Taiwan leaders are extremely unlikely to declare formal independence and that therefore this issue is a red herring. For the purposes of war prevention, however, it might not be enough to convince Taiwanese and Americans of that reality. Beijing elites must also be convinced, and many of them do not appear to be so confident that a Taiwan declaration of independence is impossible long into the future.

alternative might be provocative preemptive strike warfare attacks against missile sites on the mainland. The United States has never unleashed anything so aggressive against the homeland of a nuclear-armed state in the past, and it is doubtful that an American president will be eager to become the first to do so. For similar reasons, it would be extremely helpful if better active fleet defenses could be created against systems such as the Sunburn missile, so that preemption against Chinese surface ships would not be necessary to improve the safety of the U.S. Navy near Taiwan. The alternative of a preemptive strike against the Chinese navy risks not only escalation with a nuclear power but Washington's alienation of allied and world opinion.

Another good investment would be more minesweepers and other mine-clearing assets stationed in the Seventh Fleet to better counter mainland mine warfare tactics in a timely fashion without relying on Japan's more extensive mine-clearing assets. Reliance on Japanese forces for either mine clearing or missile defense near Taiwan would be extremely provocative and more likely to lead to short-term escalation and long-term instability in the region than would the deployment of Taiwanese and American operations alone. This is due to the high-degree of mistrust and animosity felt in China toward Japan and the emotional historical legacy regarding Japanese imperialism in the Taiwan case in particular. Also damaging would be a Japanese refusal of an American request to provide such military services in a crisis. Such an outcome would severely undermine domestic support for what arguably is America's most important alliance.⁶⁹ Finally, to enhance deterrence, the United States should transfer to Taiwan the defensive capabilities it needs to withstand a Chinese *fait accompli* strategy and to afford the United States time to intervene on Taiwan's behalf if it so chooses. Those capabilities include limited point defense from ballistic and cruise missiles—such as lower-tier theater missile defense systems—much more robust mine-clearing assets, and more advanced antisubmarine warfare assets, especially P-3 aircraft. At the same time, the Pentagon should continue to encourage Taiwan's military authorities to implement cheaper and arguably more effective methods such as hardening key military assets, securing military lines of communication, and strengthening defenses against information warfare attacks.

Such enhanced American and Taiwanese capabilities should help on the margins first in reducing the chance of war and then in limiting the dangers of

69. For further discussion, see Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 49–80.

escalation if war did occur. Beijing elites must consider the difficulties that they would face in using force to coerce Taiwan to the negotiating table if the United States had more robust, politically usable military options to protect American forces from PLA coercion. Beijing elites are debating their chances of deterring American intervention or coercing early American withdrawal. Therefore America's ability to defend its forces against PLA attack reduces China's ability to achieve those critical goals easily and thus should make China, all things being equal, less likely to choose the risky option of force.

At the same time, the United States should work hard to disabuse Chinese elites of any belief they might have about American unwillingness to suffer casualties and pay economic costs in war. This goal is difficult, but not impossible to achieve. It would be helpful if American officials, scholars, and businesspeople pointed out to their Chinese counterparts the stark differences between Somalia and China in American strategic thinking. Increased military-to-military contacts can expose more Chinese military elites not only to America's awe-inspiring military equipment, but also to a very dedicated and professional U.S. military rank and file and officer corps. Visits by Chinese leadership delegations to war memorials at Pearl Harbor and Gettysburg should help in driving home the anomalous nature of the Somalia experience and the dangers of questioning American resolve and staying power. Finally, getting Chinese visitors out of cities such as Washington, D.C., New York, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and into small towns in rural America with their many American flags and hometown war memorials should reduce Chinese perceptions of an apathetic and indifferent American public interested in only money and comfort. Any subsequent reduction in Chinese beliefs about the PLA's ability to coerce an early American withdrawal from the Taiwan theater should, all things being equal, increase deterrence and reduce the likelihood of war.

But all things are not always equal. Under certain conditions Beijing will likely be fully undeterrable. If, for example, Taiwan were to declare independence, it is hard to imagine that China would forgo the use of force against Taiwan, regardless of the perceived economic or military costs, the likely duration or intensity of American intervention, or the balance of forces in the region. But even if it only appears to elites in Beijing that Taiwan is moving in the direction of such a declaration—with increasingly clear and powerful American and Japanese military backing—then Beijing might perceive itself as faced with a closing window of opportunity to reverse that trend before the military and

political conditions are even less favorable to the mainland. Under these conditions, deterrence of Chinese military action might be increasingly difficult.⁷⁰

Therefore, on the reassurance side of the equation, the United States should attempt to avoid, as much as possible, backing China into a corner on the Taiwan issue. If the above argument is correct, then what would make Beijing so hard to deter—despite its relative military weakness—would be a sense of political desperation, however justified, not aggressive intent or expansionism. It would therefore be constructive for the United States to draw a line in the sand not only for the mainland, but also for Taiwan, in advance of hostilities, letting Taiwan know publicly that a move on its part from de facto to legal independence is not worth a war that it might lose and, in the process, drag American forces into an otherwise avoidable war with China. Such a war would not only set back the prospects for healthy U.S.-China and Chinese-Japanese relations, but would also likely hinder any long-term progress toward democratization on the mainland by hardening Chinese nationalism and anti-Western thinking. Advocates of democratic reform inside and outside of the Chinese Communist Party might be repressed even further as dupes, or even agents, of the United States, Japan, and the Taiwan traitors. Conflict would also severely damage Taiwan's economy and probably its fledgling democracy as well, as civil liberties and freedoms would likely be curtailed or abolished in the setting of war mobilization and an extended emergency.

Thus the United States should publicly reassure China by warning Taiwan that American soldiers will not be asked to defend Taiwan if it declares independence. At the same time, Washington should warn Beijing and reassure Taipei that an attack on a Taiwan that remains legally Chinese and holds out the prospect of eventual unification under mutually acceptable conditions will meet an American military response.⁷¹ Some critics will certainly find this formula overly accommodating to Beijing, especially given American military superiority. But they should ask themselves, How long would the United States be willing to fight, even if it were winning all the battles and losing few personnel, to prevent a Taiwan that had declared independence from accepting negotiations with the mainland under conditions where Taiwan's democracy

70. This is another reason why more explicit efforts by Taipei to demonstrate Taiwan's political and economic resolve against mainland coercion campaigns are potentially problematic. Not only are they unlikely to convince mainland elites that Beijing could not obtain the limited concessions from Taiwan that are discussed above, but they are also likely to fuel conspiracy theories in Beijing that Taiwan is gearing up for a declaration of independence. Such expressions by Taiwan elites might make conflict more likely rather than less likely.

71. I develop this argument further in Christensen, "Clarity on Taiwan," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2000, p. A17.

and de facto autonomy were guaranteed, but it had to surrender legal independence? Before answering, they should remember that the United States thoroughly trounced Yugoslav forces in the Kosovo operation, but supported only autonomy, not independence, for the Kosovar Albanians.

The United States should also avoid whenever possible transferring systems to Taiwan that are fundamentally offensive or that appear to link the American and Taiwanese militaries in a quasi alliance in peacetime. For example, a decision in the near term to include Taiwan in future upper-tier theater missile defense systems in the region could lead to an assumption in Taipei or in Beijing that the United States and Taiwan were informally restoring their alliance and that Taipei could be certain of American military support regardless of its diplomatic behavior. Unlike lower-tier systems, the upper-tier system currently under development might require Taiwan's military to be linked in advance to American (and perhaps Japanese) intelligence-gathering systems, sensors, and so on, and therefore carry fundamentally different political implications than systems such as the PAC-2 plus or PAC-3 Patriot systems. Taiwan's potential inclusion in the future upper-tier system could contribute to Beijing's sense that it is facing a closing window of vulnerability or opportunity to settle the Taiwan problem before it becomes more intractable.⁷²

Conclusions

A June 2000 news article exemplifies the problem that this article seeks to address. In it, the journalist discloses an internally circulated Chinese military report from the president of the PLA National Defense University stating that China is decades behind the advanced militaries of the world and requires a long-term, arduous military modernization program to close the gap. Given the works I cite above, this is not surprising. What is disturbing, however, is the journalist's conclusion from these data. He states, "The Taiwan authorities can take a breath in the face of military threats from across the strait, and rest a little easier for at least 10 years."⁷³ Such a conclusion fully disregards the potential for military conflict despite PLA inferiority if the factors discussed above combine to make military action appear to Beijing elites as more prudent than inaction. By way of emphasis, these factors are rising political con-

72. I discuss this issue in more detail in Christensen, "Theater Missile Defense and Taiwan's Security," *Orbis*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 79–90.

73. Xu Yufan, "China's Military Brings Up the Rear," special to *Asia Times Online*, June 13, 2000, at <http://www.atimes.com>. The author cites a report by Gen. Xing Shizhong.

cern on the mainland about trends in cross-strait relations; geography; the distraction of the United States in other theaters; Beijing's perceptions and misperceptions about enemy military vulnerabilities and enemy resolve; and any related belief in Beijing, false or real, about the ability to reach an acceptable political conclusion to an armed conflict without dominating all of one's enemies militarily.

Under almost all political circumstances, the PLA will likely go to great lengths to avoid the use of force until at least the middle of this decade, because it has not yet fully developed many of the capabilities necessary even to carry out some of the limited coercive campaigns discussed above. This does not mean, however, that once China has sufficient force to initiate some of these campaigns with more assurance that it will be eager to do so—to the contrary, judging from the military writings cited above. Even though they do appear dangerously overconfident at times, in general the Chinese military authors writing the various chapters of *Zhanyi Xue* recognize the high degree of difficulty and uncertainty involved not only in invasion, but in blockades, information warfare, and so on. And this is not to mention the huge economic costs that China would suffer if it attacked Taiwan and, in the process, alienates its other two biggest trade partners—Japan and the United States. Although they do not see any operations as easy, these PLA authors do not conclude that force is not an option. Instead they say that China must design asymmetric strategies for when they are absolutely necessary.⁷⁴

The most dangerous period in cross-strait relations may be between the years 2005 and 2010. During that period many important political and military events might come to pass that could destabilize cross-strait relations. President Jiang Zemin will almost certainly not serve in any high party office past 2007, so if he wants progress on unification as part of his legacy and seeks to avoid being tarred in the history books as a leader who lost China's grip on Taiwan, then Beijing might take dangerous actions to coerce Taiwan to the negotiating table before then. By the second half of this decade, China may have many more of the tools necessary to attempt a campaign of coercion against Taiwan, the United States, and U.S. regional allies, even if such an attempt might still appear incredibly imprudent on purely military grounds. Moreover, my Chinese interlocutors have stated that for both political and military reasons, Beijing sees this decade as a closing window of opportunity for China on

74. Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi Xue*, repeatedly recognize China's relative backwardness compared to unnamed "advanced" potential enemy nations and discusses the extreme complexity and difficulty for China of carrying out all forms of warfare.

the Taiwan issue. A combination of social and political trends on the island could lead Taiwan further away from the mainland, while some regional and global military developments seem to be working against China. These include the development of American and Japanese upper-tier theater missile defense capabilities (slated for completion around 2007), the building of an American national missile defense system, the transfer of more sophisticated weapons to Taiwan, the potential for inclusion of Taiwan in the U.S.-Japan regional upper-tier system, and the political implications this involvement would carry for Taiwan's ability to rely on those quasi allies in a fight.⁷⁵ The weakness of the Taiwanese economy in 2000, Taiwan's increasing contacts and economic dependence on the mainland, and the domestic political weakness of Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian—whose party has long advocated independence—appear to have rendered some mainland elites more confident about China's long-term leverage over Taiwan. But it remains to be seen how sturdy that newfound confidence is, particularly as it seems to be partially based on extremely questionable assumptions about the increasing attractiveness of mainland China to Taiwan. Disappointment over the inability to persuade Taipei to accept the "one China principle" and to return to meaningful negotiations over the next few years could easily revive the pessimism about long-term trends evident in the first half of 2000.⁷⁶

It would be folly for Taipei to believe itself safe for ten years because of PLA weakness in comparison to either ROC forces or U.S. forces in the region. This is especially true if this conclusion is drawn for all projected political scenarios, including ones in which Taipei has taken diplomatic steps that aggravate Chinese nationalism, threaten CCP legitimacy, and augur near-term or eventual Taiwanese independence if PRC action is not taken. For the same reasons, it would also be folly for Washington elites to use balance-of-power analysis to draw similar conclusions about the low likelihood of war across the Taiwan Strait, the ability of Taiwan to prevail quickly and easily in such a war either with or without American help, or the ability of the United States to avoid dangerous degrees of escalation in a military conflict with China over Taiwan. Washington should take seriously both China's political concerns and military modernization, and attempt to find the best possible balance of deterrence and reassurance so that war can better be avoided and the likelihood and costs of escalation of any war that should occur can be limited.

75. Author interviews in Beijing and Shanghai, 1995–2000.

76. Author interviews with Chinese officials, government analysts, and scholars, in Beijing, January 2001.