



AUSTRALIA

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Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era

An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies

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Preface

The purpose of this report is to examine how China's approach to deterrence signalling is evolving along with its expanding objectives, growing military capabilities, and the availability of new communication channels, such as Chinese- and English-language social media. As China's pursuit of its goals becomes more assertive, one critically important question for analysts and policymakers in Australia, the United States, and other regional countries is how to interpret China's changing approach to deterrence signalling. This report is intended to contribute to a better understanding of deterrence and countercoercion across domains in the Indo-Pacific region at a time of increased friction and strategic competition with China. In particular, it presents a framework to evaluate China's changing approach, one that is intended to enable analysts and policymakers in Australia, the United States, and other countries to appropriately characterise, interpret, and respond to Chinese deterrence signalling.

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	iii
Figures.....	vi
Tables.....	vii
Summary	viii
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Abbreviations.....	xii
1. Introduction.....	1
Purpose of the Report	3
A New Era of Ambition: China's Growing Objectives.....	4
A New Era of Power: China's Growing Military Capabilities.....	7
A New Era of Signalling: China's Growing Range of Communication Channels.....	14
Research Approach	16
Organisation of the Report.....	17
2. Overview of Chinese Thinking on Deterrence	18
Chinese Conception of Deterrence	18
Core Components: Capability, Resolve, and Communication	20
Deterrence Phases: Peacetime, Crisis, and Wartime	22
Surveying Deterrence Actions	25
Psychological Emphasis and Deception	35
Deterrence Communication	39
Conclusion	43
3. A Framework for Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signals.....	44
Past Research	44
Keeping Pace with Evolving Trends	45
Factor 1: Strategic Context	46
Factor 2: Content	48
Factor 3: Intended Audience.....	54
Factor 4: Authoritativeness.....	56
Factor 5: Scope	61
A Six-Point Scale for Understanding China's Resolve	62
Enduring Principles, Evolving Details.....	63
4. Recent Chinese Deterrence Signalling: Peacetime Case Studies	64
Peacetime Case Study No. 1: Military Parades	64
Peacetime Case Study No. 2: PLAAF Bomber Flights	78
Peacetime Case Study No. 3: Cross-Strait Tensions Since the 2016 Taiwanese Presidential Election	90
Common Themes and Lessons for Australia.....	97

5. Recent Chinese Deterrence Signalling: Crisis Case Studies	99
Emergency Case Study No. 1: 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis	99
Emergency Case Study No. 2: 2017 Doklam Crisis with India.....	104
Emergency Case Study No. 3: 2019 Hong Kong Democracy Protests	111
Emergency Case Study No. 4: Korean Peninsula Tensions	117
Common Themes and Lessons for Australia	130
6. Implications for Australia	131
Changing Australia-China Relationship	131
Australia’s More Active Regional Role Means More Divergence with China	132
Australia Moving Towards Centre of Strategic Competition with Closer U.S. Ties	136
Greater Interaction with Chinese Military	138
Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling for Australia	140
Policy Recommendations	143
References.....	147

Figures

Figure 2.1. Core Components of Chinese Deterrence	20
Figure 2.2. A List of Chinese Deterrence Actions	27

Tables

Table 2.1. People’s Liberation Army Breakdown of Tailored Psychological Warfare.....	39
Table 3.1. Hierarchy of Authoritativeness for Chinese Deterrence Messaging	57
Table 3.2. Summary of Analytic Framework for Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signals....	62
Table 4.1. Applying the Framework to Military Parades	77
Table 4.2. Applying the Framework to Chinese Bomber Flights	90
Table 4.3. Applying the Framework to Chinese Coercion of Taiwan Since 2016	97
Table 5.1. Applying the Framework to the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis	104
Table 5.2. Applying the Framework to the 2017 China-India Border Crisis	111
Table 5.3. Applying the Framework to China’s Response to the 2019 Hong Kong Protests	117
Table 5.4. Applying the Framework to Chinese Messaging Related to North Korea	130
Table 6.1. Applying the Framework to Notional Deterrence Actions Aimed at Australia.....	143

Summary

In Xi Jinping's 'new era', Chinese ambitions are increasingly global, its behaviour is increasingly aggressive, and its military is increasingly a leading edge of national power. So, too, is China's approach to deterrence signalling changing in this 'new era'. In recent years, China has shown that it takes a comprehensive approach to deterrence and deterrence signalling, one that is based on the use and attempted integration of multiple instruments of national power—not only military strength but also economic leverage and diplomatic influence. As China's increasingly blatant use of economic coercion and diplomatic bullying in recent years demonstrates, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders view nonmilitary instruments as strong options for sending messages to China's rivals and competitors, but there is clear evidence they see military power as essential and uniquely suited for deterrence signalling, and that they are willing to wield it assertively in pursuit of China's growing ambitions as needed. Indeed, as the Chinese military undertakes a greater role in protecting Chinese interests at home and abroad under Xi's leadership, it is conducting more deterrence signalling with new capabilities and new communication channels. For China, deterrence (威慑, *weishe*) is not simply the objective of forestalling an adversary's undesired action, as in Western thinking, but it also includes aspects of compellence, meaning that China often uses its military to coerce other countries to take actions Beijing desires. This much more expansive understanding of deterrence makes deterrence signalling an even more prominent part of Chinese aggression abroad. Thus it is China's approach to military deterrence signalling that is the focus of this report.

As China is increasingly using its military capabilities abroad to signal potential adversaries, international understanding of these actions—and how to accurately decipher Chinese signals—requires updating to keep pace with changes in China's approach that have come along with more ambitious goals, greater military power, and new messaging options. Long gone are the days that China can only signal potential adversaries by massing its military on the border and sending messages through third-country diplomats, as it did in the Korean War, or lobbing missiles and conducting military exercises near Taiwan, sending messages through trusted intermediaries and forceful propaganda reports, as it did in 1995–1996. Now in 2021, China can send power projection platforms such as aircraft carriers or long-range bombers near disputed features in the South China Sea and demonstrate this capability by releasing images on foreign social media platforms.

This report is intended to help analysts and policymakers in Australia, the United States, and other countries better decipher Chinese deterrence signalling in this 'new era'. We provide a brief summary of Chinese current thinking on deterrence and provide an analytic framework to interpret Chinese deterrence signals. We then explore seven case studies of recent Chinese deterrence behaviour to illuminate what has stayed the same and what has changed in Chinese peacetime and crisis deterrence signalling. We focus on Xi's 'new era' due to China's more ambitious goals and increasingly assertive or even aggressive activities,

advances in Chinese military capabilities, and the proliferation of messaging platforms available to China during this period of time.

Overall, this report finds that while China's capabilities and communication channels have changed, its fundamental approach to military deterrence signalling as a form of political coercion has not changed. Rather, Beijing is employing military deterrence signalling more frequently and in bolder ways to achieve its grander objectives. This means analysts are likely to face an ever-greater task of deciphering this ever-expanding milieu to ensure that policymakers can separate the signal from the noise, and respond to what matters and look past what does not to better manage future crises.

The analytic framework leverages the enduring principles of China's military deterrence signalling to focus on five factors for consideration. First, it is important to understand the strategic context of any specific episode where China employs deterrence signalling—China's security interests, its threat perceptions and past behaviour. Second, analysts should identify the key content that is being communicated—what is China saying and doing? Third, analysts should identify the key audience(s) that China is attempting to reach and what these choices reveal about its deterrence objectives. Fourth, analysts should assess the authoritativeness of these signals based on the strict hierarchy within the Party-state system, while also understanding the role of social media and unofficial voices that often contribute more noise than signal. Fifth, analysts should assess the scope of Chinese signalling as another indicator of its willingness to consider the use of force.

Our seven case studies illuminate several key patterns in recent Chinese deterrence signalling, despite the fact that Beijing has no single publicly known playbook for deterrence signalling. First, Beijing is indeed using much of its newest and highest-profile hardware for signalling in many cases, evident in its unveiling of new missiles during military parades, bomber flights over disputed territories in Asia and carrier deployments around Taiwan, even if it calibrates the public messaging to be less provocative in some instances. Second, Beijing's employment of tailored deterrence—sending different signals to different audiences—is enabled by China's growing swath of its own global communication channels and its use of foreign platforms, especially social media. Third, Beijing can exercise restraint in signalling when the stakes are slightly lower and domestic political events take precedence, such as the Doklam standoff with India (and Bhutan) in 2017. Fourth, Taiwan is the clear focus of Chinese deterrence signalling, illustrating the panoply of potential deterrence actions Beijing can undertake and how these military actions can nest within the Party-state's broader whole-of-government approach. However, our understanding of Chinese signalling is inevitably incomplete, both because Beijing has not demonstrated its high-water mark of signalling in a full-blown crisis since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–1996 and because we lack insight based on public reporting into how Beijing has employed the space and cyber domains in recent crises.

In the end, we conclude that China's growing ambitions and military capabilities mean it is likely to employ military deterrence signalling as a coercive political tool more frequently going forward. Against the backdrop of hardening strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region, this will be especially true for those countries that push back against Beijing's

military expansionism, such as Australia and the United States. In light of this growing challenge, we make three policy recommendations. First, the governments of Australia, the United States, and other regional countries should pay closer attention to the nuances of Chinese deterrence signalling, especially as the signal-to-noise ratio is likely to get worse with more voices claiming to speak for China to global audiences. Second, Australia should engage the United States and other regional countries to identify and narrow any differences about how all sides would interpret Chinese deterrence signalling in a crisis. Third, future dialogue with China on strategic issues should explicitly address deterrence signalling to correct any misperceptions and avoid a future crisis accidentally spiralling into a conflict.

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Abbreviations

AAW	anti-air warfare
ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEW	airborne early warning
ALBM	air-launched ballistic missile
AMS	Academy of Military Science
ASBM	antiship ballistic missile
ASuW	antisurface warfare
ASW	antisubmarine warfare
AUSMIN	Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations
BMD	ballistic missile defense
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Science
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCTV	China Central Television
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CMC	Central Military Commission
CONOP	concept of operation
CRI	China Radio International
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DoD	Department of Defense
EW	electronic warfare
FDO	Flexible Deterrence Option
HGV	hypersonic glide vehicle
ICBM	intercontinental-range ballistic missile
INF	Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (treaty)
IRBM	intermediate-range ballistic missile
ISRR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
KMT	Kuomintang
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LACM	land-attack cruise missile
LRASM	long-range antiship missile
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MIRV	multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle

MND	Ministry of National Defence
MOD	Ministry of Defence [Japan]
MRBM	medium-range ballistic missile
NDU	National Defence University
NSC	National Security Council
NSSF	National Social Science Foundation
NUDT	National University of Defence Technology
PAP	People's Armed Police
PBSC	Politburo Standing Committee
PGM	precision-guided munition
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAA	People's Liberation Army Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLANMC	People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps
PLARF	People's Liberation Army Rocket Force
PLASSF	People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force
SAG	surface action group
SATCOM	satellite communications
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SOF	special operations forces
SRBM	short-range ballistic missile
SRO	sensitive reconnaissance operations
SSBN	nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine
SSN	nuclear-powered attack submarine
SSP	air independent-powered attack submarine
TALSG	Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group
TAO	Taiwan Affairs Office
TC	Theatre Command
THAAD	Theater High Altitude Area Defense
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicles
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
WMD	weapon of mass destruction
WMD-E	weapon of mass destruction-elimination

1. Introduction

After a summer of back-and-forth military exercises and presence operations by Washington and Beijing in the South China Sea, in August 2020, the Chinese military launched antiship ballistic missiles (ASBM)—widely known as ‘carrier killers’ for their intended purpose of sinking such ships—into waters off the Paracel Islands. Leaving no doubt that these were intended as a dramatic show of force following two U.S. Navy aircraft carriers operating in the South China Sea the previous month and a U.S. U2 sensitive reconnaissance operations (SRO) flight the day before, an unidentified Chinese source quoted in a Hong Kong newspaper explained, ‘This is China’s response to the potential risks brought by the increasingly frequent incoming U.S. warplanes and military vessels in the South China Sea’.¹

The launching of ballistic missiles by Beijing into waters off China’s shores surely isn’t new, as Beijing similarly tested ballistic missiles towards Taiwan during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. What is new, however, is both the actual Chinese military capabilities demonstrated and how these demonstrations are transmitted to the outside world. In 1995–1996, China launched ballistic missiles that could only reach Taiwan and the First Island Chain, and which were highly inaccurate and in very short supply—much more for show than operational use. In 2020, China launched both medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) that extend the range of China’s targets out into the Western Pacific—far past Taiwan all the way to the U.S. territory of Guam and the Second Island Chain—and now can strike U.S. aircraft carriers with high precision as the world’s first ASBMs, with a sizeable arsenal to boot. This demonstration represented an operationally relevant and highly credible show of force. As one Chinese military commentator told the state-run *Global Times* after the news was leaked, ‘the US should fully understand that the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] is not what it was in 1995 or 1996. . . . China has the capability to make the US lose its aircraft carriers, and this is a key deterrent China should display, and can show China’s firm determination in safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity’.² Coupled with this is the way China told the world about these missile tests. The Chinese military apparently leaked word of the tests to the *South China Morning Post* through an anonymous source, but let the U.S. government confirm the test while Beijing avoided any official acknowledgement.³

¹ Kristin Huang, ‘Chinese Military Fires “Aircraft-Carrier Killer” Missile into South China Sea in “Warning to the United States”’, *South China Morning Post*, August 26, 2020.

² Liu Xuanzun, ‘PLA Rocket Force Launches DF-26 “Aircraft Carrier Killer” Missile in Fast-Reaction Drills’, *Global Times*, August 6, 2020.

³ Huang, ‘Chinese Military Fires “Aircraft-Carrier Killer” Missile’; Brad Lendon, ‘China Test Fires So-Called “Carrier Killer” Missiles into South China Sea’, CNN, August 29, 2020. For the respective official statements, see Wu Qian, ‘Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on August 27’, Chinese Ministry of National Defence, August 28, 2020; ‘DOD Statement on Recent Chinese Ballistic Missile Launches’, U.S. Department of Defense, August 27, 2020.

While this ASBM example may be high-profile, it is not unique. China has similarly leveraged many of its new capabilities and new communication channels to conduct deterrence signalling for other important issues.⁴ In July 2016, after losing an international arbitration case over the international legality of its maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, Chinese Air Force H-6K bombers flew over Scarborough Shoal, one of the sources of the dispute with the Philippines, and broadcast the information first on its official social media account on Weibo, China's version of Twitter.⁵ In August 2019, as Hong Kong was engulfed in antigovernment protests and Western countries were expressing concerns about China's response, the Party's official mouthpiece *People's Daily* released a video warning on its official Weibo account about People's Armed Police (PAP) preparations across the border in Shenzhen for 'riots', and the nationalistic *Global Times* repackaged the footage to dramatically prove the point—on its Twitter account.⁶

This profusion of Chinese messaging also raises the risks of misinterpreting Chinese actions. In September 2020, the 'PLA-Airforce Online' Weibo account released a video that included footage of an H-6K bombing Guam, one potential People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) wartime mission against a U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency.⁷ This came while a senior U.S. official visited Taiwan for former president Lee Teng-hui's funeral and just weeks after the United States, Australia, and Japan held a large multilateral exercise based at Guam.⁸ The Chinese message even elicited a response by the U.S. military: 'It is yet another example of their use of propaganda in an attempt to coerce and intimidate the region'.⁹ So was this an authoritative signal to the United States and its allies about an immediate Chinese threat to Guam? More likely, this was intended as patriotic fodder for Chinese nationalists at home, for two reasons. First, the Weibo account that released the video was not the PLAAF's official account but a PLAAF propaganda account, which appears to have later deleted the post.¹⁰ Second, the footage of the actual strike on Guam was lifted straight from the Hollywood box-office hit *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*.¹¹ Rather,

⁴ The PLA has not used *all* of its newest hardware for deterrence signalling to the fullest extent possible, however, as the fifth-generation stealth J-20 fighter has been used for deterrence signalling less than might be expected. The authors would like to thank a reviewer for raising this point.

⁵ 'Air Force Announcements' [空军发布], Sina Weibo [新浪微博], July 15, 2016.

⁶ 'People's Daily' [人民日报], Sina Weibo [新浪微博], August 12, 2019; Global Times [@globaltimesnews], 'The People's Armed Police have been assembling in Shenzhen, a city bordering Hong Kong', Twitter post, August 12, 2019.

⁷ Minnie Chan, 'China-US Tensions: Video of PLA "Attack" on Pacific Airbase Uses Footage from Hollywood Movies', *South China Morning Post*, September 20, 2020.

⁸ Ben Wescott, 'US Holds Its Second High-Profile Visit to Taiwan in Two Months as Beijing Escalates Military Pressure', CNN, September 18, 2020; Jamie Hunter, 'Huge Pacific Exercise Centered on Guam Brings Allies Together amid Growing China Threat', *The Warzone*, July 24, 2020.

⁹ Brian W. Everstine, 'PACAF: Chinese Propaganda Targeting Andersen AFB Is an Attempt to Intimidate', *Air Force Magazine*, September 23, 2020.

¹⁰ 'PLA-Airforce Online', Sina Weibo.

¹¹ Thomas Newdick, 'Chinese Air Force Video Depicting Bombers Attacking Guam Steals Scenes from Transformers', *The Warzone*, September 21, 2020.

Chinese signalling to the United States about its ability to hold Guam at risk comes in the form of actual and increasingly routine H-6K flights to the launch basket for a strike on Guam.¹² This also highlights the fact that not all signals are public; sometimes the People's Republic of China (PRC) decides to communicate the signal government-to-government by conducting a military deterrence action that the general public is unlikely to observe. In the end, the deterrence signal is the same but some observers were looking at the wrong message.

As one Chinese interlocutor once remarked to the authors, China in the past has all too often, to paraphrase Theodore Roosevelt's mantra, 'spoken loudly but carried a small stick'.¹³ Now, under Xi Jinping's leadership, China is finally able to speak loudly *and* carry a big stick. Much like the brash diplomacy of its civilian counterpart the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Chinese military is ready to exert its influence in Asia and beyond. The question is whether the intended audiences will be able to decipher what the PLA is trying to say.

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to examine how China's approach to deterrence signalling is evolving along with its expanding objectives, growing military capabilities, and the availability of new communication channels such as Chinese- and English-language social media. For China, the three core components of deterrence are capability, resolve, and communication, so these growing capabilities and new communication channels are both important ways to improve its deterrence.¹⁴ China has shown that it takes a comprehensive approach to deterrence and deterrence signalling, one that is based on the use and attempted integration of multiple instruments of national power—not only military strength, but also economic leverage and diplomatic influence. As China's increasingly blatant use of economic coercion and diplomatic bullying in recent years demonstrates, Party leaders view nonmilitary instruments as strong options for sending messages to China's rivals and competitors. Yet there is also clear evidence they see military power as essential and uniquely suited for deterrence signalling, and that they are willing to wield it assertively in pursuit of China's growing ambitions as needed. Consequently, it is China's approach to military deterrence signalling that is the focus of this report. As competition over the shape of the security order in the Indo-Pacific region intensifies, one critically important question for analysts and policymakers is how to interpret China's changing approach to using military power for deterrence messaging.

Beijing has already begun to use its new military capabilities to send messages, often by displaying these capabilities through new communication channels, such as social media,

¹² Derek Grossman, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Logan Ma, and Michael S. Chase, *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights: Drivers and Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2018.

¹³ Authors' interview with Chinese expert, Beijing, China.

¹⁴ Academy of Military Science (AMS) Military Strategy Department [军事学学院战略研究部], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2013, p. 135.

in addition to traditional ones like newspapers. For instance, Beijing has amplified its pressure campaign against Taiwan involving military exercises and bomber flights by using communication channels such as Chinese microblogs (Weibo) and Twitter to speak directly to its intended audience. This is only one example of how Beijing's approach to deterrence signalling appears to be evolving as China pursues more ambitious goals, its military capabilities grow, and available communication channels multiply.

There is a substantial body of work on China's approach to deterrence signalling, but much of the available literature predates these important changes in goals, capabilities, and messaging channels. Consequently, a new framework is required, and this report aims to update the literature and inform policymakers and analysts by providing the first publicly available, comprehensive assessment of how China's approach to deterrence messaging is changing. The study is intended to contribute to a better understanding of deterrence and countercoercion across domains in the Indo-Pacific region at a time of increased friction and strategic competition between the United States and China. In particular, it presents a framework to evaluate China's changing approach, one that is intended to enable Australia, the United States, and other countries to appropriately interpret, and respond to Chinese deterrence signalling.

A New Era of Ambition: China's Growing Objectives

Since coming to power in 2012, General Secretary Xi Jinping has clearly ushered China into a 'new era' of ambitious objectives that chart a path towards his goal of 'national rejuvenation' and envision a more powerful China to secure its territorial claims and growing interests abroad. Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not appear to have officially demarcated the beginning of the 'new era', and several potential starting points are plausible, we assess it began when Xi ascended to China's top leadership positions, becoming General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) in 2012 and President of the PRC in 2013. Whenever precisely this 'new era' began, it is clear that it not only accelerates trends that were becoming evident under Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, but pushes China in a bold new direction. In his October 2017 speech delivering the 19th Party Congress work report, Xi announced the country would 'achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the country's founding.¹⁵ This will include 'build[ing] China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful', and having 'China [move] closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind'.¹⁶ Although these ambitions are global, embodied by Xi's Belt and Road Initiative and community with a shared future for mankind, for the foreseeable future Beijing's focus will remain concentrated

¹⁵ Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era', speech at 19th Party Congress, October 18, 2017.

¹⁶ Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

on the Asia-Pacific.¹⁷ A major task for the CCP, and thus the PLA, is to bring all of China's claimed territories under its full control, since 'achieving China's full reunification [is] essential to realising national rejuvenation'.¹⁸

In the October 2017 19th Party Congress work report, Xi set ambitious goals for the Chinese military over the next three decades.¹⁹ By 2020, the PLA is supposed to be fully mechanised, with progress towards informationisation and strategic capabilities. By 2035, the PLA's decades-long modernisation is supposed to be 'basically complete'. And by 2049, at the hundredth anniversary of the PRC's founding, the PLA is supposed to become a 'world class military'.²⁰ Although left undefined by Xi and the PLA, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) assesses that 'within the context of the PRC's national strategy it is likely that Beijing will seek to develop a military by mid-century that is equal to—or in some cases superior to—the U.S. military, or that of any other great power that the PRC views as a threat'.²¹

This stronger PLA, in turn, is intended to support the Party's broader pursuit of its interpretation of China's national interests. As Xi said in 2017, 'We will develop new combat forces and support forces . . . [and] strengthen the application of military strength', and this will 'enable [China] to effectively shape our military posture, manage crises, and deter and win wars'.²² The ultimate goal of Chinese military modernisation is to 'create a mighty force for realising the Chinese Dream and the dream of building a powerful military'. As the armed wing of the CCP, not a national military, the PLA is responsible first and foremost for ensuring the Party's continued rule, and therefore protecting China's national interests. According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), the Party's 'strategic objectives' are to perpetuate CCP rule; maintain domestic stability; sustain economic growth and development; defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity; and securing China's status as a great power.²³ For the PLA, China's 2019 defence white paper states that China's national defence aims—beyond ensuring CCP regime security—are, among others, to 'oppose and contain "Taiwan independence"', 'safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security', 'safeguard China's maritime rights and interests', and

¹⁷ Liza Tobin, 'Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and Its Allies', *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, November 2018, pp. 154–166; Daniel Tobin, *How Xi Jinping's 'New Era' Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing's Ambitions*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2020.

¹⁸ Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

¹⁹ Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

²⁰ Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

²¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, September 2020, p. vi.

²² Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

²³ Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Arlington, Va.: Defense Intelligence Agency, January 2019, p. 12.

‘safeguard China’s overseas interests’.²⁴ Some of the PLA’s missions in the ‘new era’ include ‘safeguarding national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests’; ‘safeguarding interests in major security fields’, such as the nuclear, outer space, and cyberspace domains; and ‘protecting China’s overseas interests’.²⁵ In sum, three broad primary objectives—enforcing territorial claims, safeguarding Chinese interests overseas, and generally defending China across all domains of warfare—are the biggest drivers of Chinese deterrence actions abroad.

Looking at the likeliest places for Chinese use of force, they are clearly the Taiwan Strait and Beijing’s disputed territorial claims.²⁶ As Xi said in 2017, ‘We stand firm in safeguarding China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. . . . We will never allow anyone, any organisation, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China!’²⁷ No potential flashpoint is more important to Beijing than Taiwan. Xi’s 2017 19th Congress Party pledge to achieve ‘full reunification’ by 2049 clearly includes ‘resolving the Taiwan question’, for which Xi reiterated long-standing policy in a January 2019 speech on Taiwan policy: ‘We do not renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures’.²⁸ Reflecting the fundamental components of deterrence, Xi said in 2017, ‘We have the resolve, the confidence, and the ability to defeat separatist attempts for “Taiwan independence” in any form’.²⁹ Beyond Taiwan, China’s territorial disputes include many well-known hot spots that carry the broader risk of U.S.-China conflict. In the East China Sea, there are the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, disputed with U.S.-allied Japan, and the lesser-known Socotra Rock (Ieodo/Polang), disputed with U.S.-allied South Korea.³⁰ In the South China Sea, there are numerous features disputed with six countries, such as the Scarborough/Huangyan Shoal, disputed with the U.S.-allied Philippines; the Spratly Islands, disputed with the Philippines and Vietnam; and the Paracel Islands, disputed with Vietnam. Both of these disputed maritime regions are specifically acknowledged as key priorities in China’s 2019 defence white paper: ‘China resolutely safeguards its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are inalienable parts of

²⁴ Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’, Xinhua, July 24, 2019.

²⁵ Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’.

²⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 99.

²⁷ Xi Jinping, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory’.

²⁸ Xi Jinping, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory’; Xi Jinping, ‘Working Together to Realise Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China’s Peaceful Reunification’, speech at the Meeting Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, January 2, 2019.

²⁹ Xi Jinping, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory’.

³⁰ The China-Republic of Korea dispute is not a territorial dispute because it is not an island, and thus the dispute is over exclusive economic zone delimitation. See Terence Roehrig, ‘South Korea: The Challenges of a Maritime Nation’, NBR Maritime Awareness Project, December 23, 2019.

the Chinese territory’.³¹ Away from China’s maritime boundaries, there is also the disputed border with India, which led to standoffs in 2017 and 2020, and a border dispute with Bhutan.

While the focus of China’s military power is largely regional for now, its ambitions are surely global in scope. In his 2017 speech, Xi hailed the fact that China was already ‘moving closer to the center of the world stage’, and set a national goal for China to become ‘a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence’ by mid-century.³² While China scholar Daniel Tobin argues these are not new ambitions for the broader CCP leadership, Xi (and his generation of leadership) is clearly pushing the Party’s agenda at a quicker pace. In 2013, Xi indicated China was moving away from Deng Xiaoping’s ‘hide and bide’ strategy as the guiding principle for Chinese foreign policy, instead adopting the much more active ‘strive for achievement’, and in 2018, he called for China to ‘actively participate in leading the reform of the global governance system’.³³ As Tobin notes, ‘one of the most striking features of Xi’s 19th Party Congress address is its combination of articulating China’s ambitions on an explicitly global scale (a dramatic departure from recent decades) with an assertion of the continuity of the Party’s goals throughout its rule’.³⁴ Tobin concludes that ‘Beijing’s aim is nothing less than preeminent status with the global order’. This aligns with formal U.S. government assessments as well.³⁵ The question is what role will China’s growing military power play in furthering and securing China’s increasingly global interests.

A New Era of Power: China’s Growing Military Capabilities

Undergirding this growing ambition is a decades-long modernisation of the Chinese military that is delivering more capabilities with which to conduct deterrence signalling as well as military operations. Facing a theoretical crisis in the near future, the Chinese military leadership would have a much greater suite of capabilities to leverage for credible signalling. These include capabilities in traditional domains—high-profile long-range power projection platforms, such as aircraft carriers—but also robust capabilities in emerging domains, such as antisatellite weapons for counterspace operations and offensive cyberweapons. By 2035, when PLA modernisation is slated to be ‘basically complete’, there will be even more advanced capabilities such as the H-20 strategic bomber and the Type 096 next-generation

³¹ Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’.

³² Xi Jinping, ‘Secure a Decisive Victory’.

³³ ‘Xi Jinping: China to Further Friendly Relations with Neighbouring Countries’, Xinhua, October 26, 2013; ‘Xi Jinping Stressed at the Central Foreign Affairs Working Conference: Adhere to the Guidance of Socialist Diplomatic Thought with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era and Work Hard to Create a New Situation of Diplomatic Power with Chinese Characteristics’, Li Keqiang Presided, Li Zhesu Wang Yang Wang Huning Zhao Leji Han Zheng Wang Qishan Attended’ [‘习近平在中央外事工作会议上强调: 坚持以新时代中国特色社会主义思想为指导 努力开创中国特色大国外交新局面, 李克强主持 栗战书汪洋王沪宁赵乐际韩正王岐山出席’], *People’s Daily*, June 24, 2018.

³⁴ Tobin, *How Xi Jinping’s ‘New Era’ Should Have Ended U.S. Debate on Beijing’s Ambitions*.

³⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 1.

nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). Indeed, it is not a coincidence that many key acquisition decisions, such as China's aircraft carrier program and its strategic bomber program, were made in the wake of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the May 1999 accidental bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade.³⁶ Beijing believes that in these two instances, and many more, it was subjected to U.S. deterrence signalling and coercion, respectively, but could not respond in kind due to its extremely limited long-range strike, strategic deterrence, and power projection capabilities. Indeed, then-General Secretary Jiang Zemin reportedly responded to the Belgrade bombing by deciding 'what the enemy is most fearful of, this is what we should be developing', specifically including *shashoujian*, generally translated as 'assassin's mace' and in this context summarised by a 2016 report as 'asymmetric capabilities targeting U.S. vulnerabilities'.³⁷

China now has growing military capabilities available to display for purposes of deterrence or intimidation.³⁸ As recently as the 1990s, China's deterrence signalling playbook was largely confined to displaying or launching missiles and conducting large-scale ground force exercises, as it did during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. China also had some limited ability to use its naval or air power for signalling purposes, doing so relatively infrequently, as in July 1999, when Chinese military aircraft intentionally crossed the Taiwan Strait median line in a display of China's indignation following President Lee Teng-hui's characterisation of the island's ties with China as a 'special state-to-state' relationship. Today, however, not only has China enhanced its options in these more traditional areas, but the PLA's growing power projection, long-range strike, nuclear, and space and cyberwarfare capabilities also present a variety of new deterrence signalling options. This has been fuelled by sustained investment in its military, with official spending rising from US\$7.6 billion in 1995 to US\$76.5 billion in 2010 to US\$178.6 billion in 2020, with some independent foreign

³⁶ For the early years of China's carrier program, see Minnie Chan, 'Mission Impossible: How One Man Bought China Its First Aircraft Carrier', *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2015; Minnie Chan, 'The Inside Story of the Liaoning: How Xu Zengping Sealed Deal for China's First Aircraft Carrier', *South China Morning Post*, January 19, 2015. For the early years of China's strategic bomber program, see Andreas Rupprecht, 'The PLA Air Force's "Silver-Bullet" Bomber Force', *China Brief*, July 21, 2017.

³⁷ Zhang Wannian [张万年], *Biography of Zhang Wannian* [张万年传], Beijing: Liberation Army Press [解放军出版社], 2011, pp. 416–419, via Tai Ming Cheung, Thomas Mahnken, Deborah Seligsohn, Kevin Pollpeter, Eric Anderson, and Fan Yang, *Planning for Innovation: Understanding China's Plans for Technological, Energy, Industrial, and Defense Development*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Congressional Economic and Security Review Commission, July 28, 2016, p. 26. To understand assassin's mace, see Jason E. Bruzdinski, 'Demystifying Shashoujian: China's "Assassin's Mace" Concept', in Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel, eds., *Civil-Military Change in China Elites, Institutes, and Ideas after the 16th Party Congress*, Carlisle, Pa.: Army War College, September 2004, pp. 309–364; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Towards Contextualizing the Concept of a Shashoujian (Assassin's Mace)', conference paper, Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, August 2002.

³⁸ For a U.S. government projection of Chinese military capabilities in 2025, see Hans Kristensen, '(The Other) Red Storm Rising: INDO-PACOM China Military Projection', Federation of American Scientists, September 15, 2020. For two early Xi speeches touting the importance of deterrence, see Xi Jinping, 'Continuously Advance National Defense and Army Building' ['把国防和军队建设不断推向前进'], text via People's Daily Online, November 16, 2012; Xi Jinping, 'Build a Strong Informatised Strategic Missile Force' ['建设强大的信息化战略导弹部队'], text via Xinhua, December 5, 2012.

estimates considerably higher.³⁹ These new capabilities, and related personnel and training reforms that have improved PLA operational forces, now both enhance Chinese credibility and in many cases physically or symbolically extend the reach of Chinese military power.

The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), which is responsible for China's land-based nuclear and conventional missile capabilities, perhaps best epitomises how China's military modernisation in the wake of the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis and the 1999 embassy bombing is intended to deter U.S. involvement in a regional contingency through its 'anti-access, area-denial' or 'counterintervention' strategy to asymmetrically target U.S. weaknesses.⁴⁰ Although development of the conventional missile force began in the 1980s, it accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, while the United States and Russia were constrained in this area by the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. In 1996, China had an estimated 190 SRBMs and MRBMs combined, but by 2010 that number had grown to upwards of 1,200 missiles (though by 2020, it shrunk to over 750 missiles as quality overcame quantity).⁴¹ This similar evolution has occurred for IRBMs that can reach the Second Island Chain, as China had no conventional IRBMs in 1996, but the DF-26, its first conventional and nuclear capable IRBM, which can also target surface ships, was rolled out in the 2015 military parade and by 2020 there were an estimated 200 launchers (with an assessed equal or greater number of missiles).⁴² In tandem with this conventional missile force, China also developed the world's first ASBM, the DF-21D MRBM, also unveiled in 2015 after much speculation, and now has an ASBM variant of the DF-26 IRBM. China is also pursuing hypersonic missiles, including the world's first, the DF-17 MRBM (unveiled in 2019). Lastly, China has also built up its strategic nuclear deterrent capabilities, improving its intercontinental-range ballistic missile (ICBM) force in both quantity—from the estimated 17 ICBMs it had in 1996 to over 60 in 2010 and roughly 100 in 2020 (projected to grow to 150 by 2025)—and quality—deploying missiles capable of carrying multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRVs) and road-mobile missiles.⁴³ In recent years, Beijing unveiled the DF-31AG, plus the newest DF-41 road-mobile ICBM, which is capable of carrying MIRVs.⁴⁴ Beijing's 2019 defence white paper explains that the PLARF is focussed on 'enhancing its credible and reliable capabilities of nuclear deterrence and counterattack, strengthening intermediate and long-range precision strike forces, and enhancing strategic

³⁹ 'What Does China Really Spend on Its Military?', ChinaPower, undated.

⁴⁰ For recent research on the PLARF, see David Logan, 'PLA Reforms and China's Nuclear Forces', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 83, October 2016; Jacob Stokes, 'China's Missile Program and U.S. Withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty', U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 4, 2019; David Lague and Benjamin Kang Lim, 'New Missile Gap Leaves U.S. Scrambling to Counter China', Reuters, April 25, 2019.

⁴¹ Compilation of reports by Taiwan MND and U.S. DoD in various years via Peter Wood. See Peter Wood [@PeterWood_PDW], 'Long overdue for an update—Chinese missiles—numbers and growth (end 2019)', Twitter post, June 9, 2020.

⁴² For the latest count, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 166.

⁴³ Kristensen, '(The Other) Red Storm Rising'.

⁴⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 56.

counter-balance capability, so as to build a strong and modernised rocket force’, and Xi Jinping personally described the service in 2016 as the ‘core of strategic deterrence, a strategic buttress to the country’s position as a major power, and a cornerstone on which to build national security’.⁴⁵ The August 2020 testing of the ASBMs into the South China Sea clearly indicates Beijing’s growing confidence in leveraging these capabilities for more coercive forms of deterrence signalling moving forward.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) represents another side of PLA modernisation, a more symmetrical approach modelled on the U.S. Navy, with its growing aircraft carrier fleet intended to serve as Beijing’s premier way to display its military power. Compared with its relatively outdated 18 destroyers and 36 frigates in 1995, the PLAN in 2020 has much more modern 32 destroyers and 49 frigates.⁴⁶ This includes the newest Type 055 *Renhai* cruiser, launched in 2020 and equipped with a variety of ASCMs, SAMs, antisubmarine missiles, and even ASBMs, with three being built per year on average. The PLAN’s missions have grown in tandem, with the service charged with ‘offshore waters defense and open seas protection’ in 2015, highlighting more active ‘protection’ of Chinese interests abroad.⁴⁷ Perhaps even more notable has been the development of China’s aircraft carrier fleet, with the operationally irrelevant *Liaoning* (purchased from Ukraine in 1998 and finally deployed in 2012) giving way to China’s domestically developed *Shandong* in 2017 and the third-generation carrier with more modern capabilities expected by 2024.⁴⁸ Importantly, the PLAN’s future flat-tops will represent a substantial leap in capability compared to China’s ski-jump carriers. In total, China is projected to have a fleet of six aircraft carrier battle groups by 2035, along with perhaps 20 *Renhai* cruisers.⁴⁹ PLAN Aviation bombers can also contribute to deterrence by threatening enemy surface ships. Under the surface, Beijing is seeking to overcome a persistent weakness relative to the United States with improved submarines such as the Type 039A/B *Yuan* class diesel-electric air independent-powered attack submarines (SSPs), Type 093A *Shang II* class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), and the Type 094 *Jin* class and future Type 096 SSBNs.⁵⁰ The Type 094 marks the first credible sea-based deterrent for China, but with limited submarine-launched ballistic

⁴⁵ State Council Information Office, ‘China’s National Defense in the New Era’; ‘President Xi Expects Strong, Modern Rocket Force’, Xinhua, September 27, 2016.

⁴⁶ *Military Balance 1996*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1996, p. 180; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 165.

⁴⁷ Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, ‘China’s Military Strategy’, China’s State Council Information Office, May 2015. For analysis, see Michael McDevitt, ‘China’s Far Sea’s Navy: The Implications of the “Open Seas Protection” Mission’, Center for Naval Analyses, April 2016.

⁴⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ Minnie Chan and Guo Rui, ‘China Will Build 4 Nuclear Aircraft Carriers in Drive to Catch US Navy, Experts Say’, *South China Morning Post*, February 6, 2019; Rick Joe, ‘Predicting the Chinese Navy of 2030’, *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2019. For a U.S. government projection of PLAN forces through 2040, see Ronald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 2021.

⁵⁰ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 45.

missile (SLBM) range, the Type 096 will further improve the naval leg of China's developing nuclear triad with the longer-range JL-3 SLBM to hold at risk the United States homeland from Chinese waters.⁵¹ It has also dramatically upgraded the antisurface warfare (ASuW), anti-air warfare (AAW) and antisubmarine warfare (ASW) capabilities of its surface fleet.

Beyond surface combatants, naval aviation, and submarines, the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC) is following the path of the U.S. Marines to likely become China's main power projection ground force. As part of the ongoing PLA reforms, the Marines are expected to grow to a total of roughly 40,000 troops (from current size of 10,000) with eight brigades.⁵² Reflecting this shift from defending China's immediate territorial claims in the South China Sea and preparing for a Taiwan invasion to greater missions outside the region, the PLANMC is already developing a new upgraded variant of its Type 075 LHD (still yet to enter service), called the Type 076, that will serve as a 'mini aircraft carrier' for drones and helicopters.⁵³

In the air domain, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) can use new capabilities such as its stealth fighters and growing fleet of long-range bombers to send a message to potential adversaries. As late as 1989, PLAAF aircraft had antidefection devices that limited the range of its aircraft, reflecting its homeland air defence mission.⁵⁴ The PLAAF has since embraced a new role as a 'strategic air force' in the 2010s, defined as having a mission with a strategic-level impact, and now frames its ambitions as becoming a 'world class air force'.⁵⁵ The current generation of PLAAF aircraft—the J-20 stealth fighter, Y-20 transport aircraft, among others—lays the foundation for Chinese airpower within the First Island Chain. Looking forward, the PLAAF will have more advanced forces for deterrence and warfighting. It is China's bomber force that will serve as the main deterrence force for the PLAAF going forward, especially when it is able to expand the targets it can cover beyond the Second Island Chain to places like Australia. Beyond the current H-6K conventional bomber, the upgraded H-6N extends its range with aerial refuelling capabilities, and the H-20 strategic bomber currently under development will reportedly provide an intercontinental strike capability. There are also reports of a future regional stealth bomber that may have the range to strike parts of Australia.⁵⁶ Most importantly, the H-6N's air-launched ballistic missile (ALBM) capability adds a nuclear mission for the PLAAF as the third leg of China's nuclear

⁵¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 86.

⁵² Dennis J. Blasko and Roderick Lee, 'The Chinese Navy's Marine Corps, Part 1: Expansion and Reorganization', *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 3, February 1, 2019; Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, pp. 47–48.

⁵³ Minnie Chan, 'Chinese Shipbuilder Planning Advanced Amphibious Assault Ship', *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2020.

⁵⁴ 'Anti-Defection Devices on China Planes Reported', Reuters, October 15, 1989.

⁵⁵ Michael S. Chase and Cristina L. Garafola, 'China's Search for a "Strategic Air Force"', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, September 2015, pp. 4–28; 'Xi Stresses Building World-Class Air Force', Xinhua, November 8, 2019.

⁵⁶ Tyler Rogoway and Joseph Trevithick, 'Intel Report Confirms China Developing Stealthy Tactical Bomber in Addition to Strategic Bomber', *The Warzone*, January 16, 2019; *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Arlington, Va.: Defense Intelligence Agency, January 2019, p. 88.

triad, and the H-20 will be able to hold at risk more distant targets in the 2030s.⁵⁷ These new capabilities will provide credible operational forces and capabilities to China's leaders, and therefore have the potential for a much greater deterrent impact. The PLAAF's bomber force will be capable of nuclear and conventional missions and thus will be able to send both nuclear and conventional deterrence messages. When the new strategic bombers currently under development enter into service, the PLAAF will also be able to conduct longer-range bomber patrols, extending the reach of its nuclear and conventional strike capabilities and its messaging in a way that may enable it to more closely resemble that of its U.S. and Russian counterparts, explored below in Chapter 4.

Looking to the emerging domains of space and cyber, the PLA created the Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) in 2015 as a way to find synergies across these domains. The PLASSF centralises many previously dispersed capabilities and responsibilities for space, cyber, electronic warfare and psychological warfare all under one roof, directly under the CMC.⁵⁸ Estimated at 175,000 troops in 2020, the PLASSF presents Beijing the ability to both better support other service's deterrence missions (for example, satellites are critical to the accuracy of the PLARF's ASBM strikes) and also have a deterrence effect on its own (whether through direct-ascent or space-based antisatellite weapons or crippling cyberattacks that target adversary homeland critical infrastructure and military mobilisation networks).⁵⁹ As the director of the DIA testified to the U.S. Congress in 2019, China 'recognize[s] the world's growing reliance on space and view[s] the capability to attack space services as a part of their broader efforts to deter an adversary from or defeat one in combat'.⁶⁰

Last, but not insignificantly, the PLA Army (PLAA) has also transitioned to become a smaller and more modern fighting force.⁶¹ The PLAA has downsized by more than half since 2000, including the latest reduction of 300,000 troops announced in 2015—yet it still has almost a million troops, making it among the world's largest.⁶² Instead, the Army has reorganised its force structure around combined arms brigades with improve main battle tanks (Type 99), organic air defences (HQ-16), improved attack helicopters (the Z-20), and

⁵⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, pp. 50, 85; Michael Chase, 'Nuclear Bomber Could Boost PLAAF Strategic Role, Create Credible Triad', *China Brief*, July 6, 2017; Roderick Lee, 'China's Air Force Might Be Back in the Nuclear Business', *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2020.

⁵⁸ Joe McReynolds and John Costello, *China's Strategic Support Force: A Force for a New Era*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2018.

⁵⁹ Personnel estimate from *Military Balance 2020*, London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, p. 265.

⁶⁰ Daniel Coats, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community', testimony to Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 29, 2019.

⁶¹ The PLA Army (PLAA) is the name of China's ground force under the reorganisation of the PLA that China undertook starting in December 2015.

⁶² For annual estimates of PLA Army force size, see *Military Balance*, various years; Edward Wong, Jane Perlez, and Chris Buckley, 'China Announces Cuts of 300,000 Troops at Military Parade Showing Its Might', *New York Times*, September 3, 2015.

longer-range rockets (the PHL-03 300mm MRL).⁶³ This increased operational mobility enables better flexibility for deterrence-related mobilisation and posturing, but the PLAA's deterrence value is relatively limited to China's potential ground scenarios on its borders—Korea, Vietnam, and India—or in the context of a cross-Strait crisis or conflict.

Along with upgrading its hardware, the PLA is also improving its training,⁶⁴ updating its doctrine,⁶⁵ and reforming professional military education,⁶⁶ all of which comes in the wake of a major reorganisation of the PLA launched in December 2015 to strengthen Party control, improve readiness, and enhance the PLA's joint warfighting capabilities.⁶⁷ These changes also have implications for deterrence signalling. For example, the PLA's emphasis on more realistic training appears intended not only to improve the PLA's warfighting capabilities, but also to strengthen its ability to deter or coerce, and it offers multiple ways to do so. First, improved training and readiness may persuade adversaries to conclude that the PLA is becoming a more formidable potential opponent, strengthening general peacetime deterrence. Second, China can highlight specific types of training at times of its choosing to send a more pointed deterrence message to a particular target audience, and it can use a variety of platforms ranging from authoritative official media to Chinese or English social media to amplify the message if desired.

As reflected by new capabilities, enhanced training and readiness, updated doctrinal guidelines, educational reforms, and the major reorganisation of the PLA that began in late 2015, China is clearly focussed on fielding a more modern, professional, and operationally capable PLA, one that will meet Xi Jinping's interim and long-term goals for PLA modernisation, ultimately resulting in a 'world-class' force by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1949. Taken in totality, these capabilities are designed not only for warfighting, but also to deter, or coerce, China's potential adversaries. As the director of the DIA testified to the U.S. Congress in 2018, 'Chinese military forces continue to develop capabilities to dissuade, deter, or defeat potential third-party intervention during a large-scale theatre campaign, such as a Taiwan contingency. China's military modernisation plan includes the development of capabilities to conduct long-range attacks against adversary forces that might deploy or operate in the western Pacific Ocean'.⁶⁸ Emphasising the expanding range of

⁶³ *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Arlington, Va.: Defense Intelligence Agency, January 2019, pp. 55–62.

⁶⁴ Li Wei, 'Xi Stresses Military Training to Raise Capability of Winning Wars', China Military Online, November 25, 2020.

⁶⁵ Li Wei, 'Guidelines on PLA Joint Operations (Trial) Aim for Future Warfare: Defense Spokesperson', China Military Online, November 26, 2020.

⁶⁶ Li Jiayao, 'Xi Signs Order to Publish Regulations on Military Professional Education', China Military Online, December 21, 2020.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N. D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019.

⁶⁸ Robert Ashley, 'Worldwide Threat Assessment', testimony to Senate Armed Services Committee, March 6, 2018.

these capabilities, General Ashley continued, ‘These capabilities, spanning the air, maritime, space, electromagnetic, and information domains, are most robust within the first island chain, but China is rapidly extending capabilities farther into the Pacific Ocean’.⁶⁹ Over the long term, as China further brings on-line more advanced hardware and improves its supporting ‘software’, the PLA may well adopt even more coercive behaviour as it becomes more confident in its ability to ‘fight and win’.

A New Era of Signalling: China’s Growing Range of Communication Channels

China has seen a dramatic growth of communication channels with the outside world and has an ever-greater number of voices speaking for Beijing, even as the actual diversity of views permitted to be expressed has fallen under Xi Jinping. The embrace of a state-run market economy under Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening led to a reduction of state funding to the Party-state propaganda and broader Chinese media industries, ending their monopoly on the Chinese information environment. This welcomed a proliferation of new voices speaking for China, both internally and externally. Alongside a broader relative tolerance of political discourse within China during the 1990s and 2000s, new media (propaganda) organisations sprang up, such as the nationalistic tabloid *Global Times*. Although *Global Times* is owned by *People’s Daily*, giving it a semblance of speaking for the Party, it carries a much livelier and often more strident discussion of Chinese policy, with an independently minded editor, Hu Xijin.⁷⁰ Instead, *Global Times* and other similar media are best understood as reflecting the bounds of acceptable debate and can occasionally serve as a platform for entrepreneurial messaging, both by *Global Times* staff itself and sometimes by officials in Beijing for semideniable or unofficial messages.⁷¹

The Party-state apparatus has also followed its citizens onto China’s domestic social media platforms. The two biggest platforms—Tencent’s WeChat, with 1.2 billion users, and Sina Weibo, with over 500 million users—dominate online conversations in China, and the Party has tamed both the companies that run them and the online discussions through legal crackdowns, myriad censorship tools, and paid propagandists to guide public opinion.

⁶⁹ Ashley, ‘Worldwide Threat Assessment’.

⁷⁰ Zheping Huang, ‘Inside the Global Times, China’s Hawkish, Belligerent State Tabloid’, *Quartz*, August 9, 2016; Javier Hernández, ‘When Trump Tweets, the Editor of “China’s Fox News” Hits Back’, *New York Times*, July 31, 2019; Alex Colville, ‘Hu Xijin, China’s Greatest Internet Troll’, *SupChina*, October 12, 2020.

⁷¹ In recent years, Beijing has learned how to selectively leak information to both PRC and Western newspapers. *South China Morning Post* is the most notable example, but the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and Bloomberg have all received carefully selected leaks on China’s negotiating position in the U.S-China trade negotiations, for example. For one example, see Kinling Lo, ‘What Killed US-China Trade Talks: A Tale of Two Texts’, *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2019; Wendy Wu, ‘Lost in Translation? How Verbal Mishaps and Lack of Chinese-Language Document Threaten US-China Trade Deal’, *South China Morning Post*, March 28, 2019. For a recent example with Australia, see Jonathan Kearsley, Eryk Bagshaw, and Anthony Galloway, “‘If You Make China the Enemy, China Will Be the Enemy’: Beijing’s Fresh Threat to Australia”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 18, 2020.

With all these efforts, it would seem that anything ‘allowed’ to trend on Chinese social media is thus tactically approved by the Party, but the torrent of criticism for the government’s handling of coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19) in early 2020 shows this is not always the case.⁷² Almost all Party-state organs have accounts on WeChat and Weibo, including the PLA. The PLAAF was the first service to open account on the two platforms in October 2015, with the PLA Army joining in 2018 and the PLAN and PLARF joining in 2019.⁷³ The only holdout, ironically given its cyber responsibilities, is the PLASSF. These PLA accounts most often post domestic propaganda and support recruitment, but they also disclose important activities and sometimes new capabilities.⁷⁴

Beyond diversifying its own media domestically, Beijing has also zealously embraced foreign media as further channels for communication with the outside world. This engagement crosses media from TV (China Global Television Network [CGTN] as the global version of China Central Television [CCTV])⁷⁵ to radio (China Radio International, CRI)⁷⁶ to newspaper (both CCP-run *China Daily* and CCP-paid inserts in major foreign newspapers).⁷⁷ Despite banning Facebook and Twitter at home, the Party-state has embraced social media with fervour over the last several years. After the Party-state propaganda apparatus (*Global Times*) joined Twitter in July 2009, the first major government office was the State Council Information Office (SCIO) on Twitter in August 2015. This was followed by the MFA in October 2019 and the CCP International Liaison Department in April 2020. The PLA, so far, is the last remaining part of Chinese Party-state that has not made this step onto foreign social media platforms. Instead, the Ministry of National Defence (MND) mainly uses press releases, foreign-language websites (since 2003), and monthly press conferences (since 2011, with English translations) to communicate directly to foreign audiences. However, members of the PLA propaganda system have advocated for a similar step onto Twitter since at least 2014, and it is quite possible that the PLA, most likely the MND, will open an account in the

⁷² Raymond Zhang, ‘As Virus Spreads, Anger Floods Chinese Social Media’, *New York Times*, January 27, 2020; Li Yuan, ‘Widespread Outcry in China over Death of Coronavirus Doctor’, *New York Times*, February 7, 2020.

⁷³ For a discussion of the PLA’s embrace of social media, see Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Michael Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea: The Chinese Military’s Use of Social Media for Influence Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, September 2019.

⁷⁴ Liu Zhen, ‘Did China Just Accidentally Show Off Its New Supersonic Cruise Missile?’, *South China Morning Post*, September 27, 2019.

⁷⁵ Paul Mozur, ‘Live from America’s Capital, a TV Station Run by China’s Communist Party’, *New York Times*, February 28, 2019.

⁷⁶ Koh Gui Qing and John Shiffman, ‘Beijing’s Covert Radio Network Airs China-Friendly News Across Washington, and the World’, Reuters, November 2, 2015.

⁷⁷ Mo Yu, ‘US Spending Report Sheds Light on China’s Global Propaganda Campaign’, Voice of America, June 26, 2020. For overviews of China’s external propaganda apparatus, see Louisa Lim and Julia Bergin, ‘Inside China’s Audacious Global Propaganda Campaign’, *The Guardian*, December 7, 2018; Anne-Marie Brady, ‘China’s Foreign Propaganda Machine’, Wilson Center, October 26, 2015; Sarah Cook, *Beijing’s Global Microphone*, Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, January 2020; Elizabeth Bachman and James Bellacqua, *Black and White and Red All Over: China’s Improving Foreign-Directed Media*, Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation, August 2020.

coming years.⁷⁸ Beyond official communication channels, China also operates covert social media accounts that can disseminate Chinese messaging in a deniable fashion, and it has done so in some fashion for likely several years.⁷⁹ Beijing has also unofficially (if not discreetly) deeply penetrated the Taiwan media sector and sought to control media outlets that serve the global Chinese diaspora community.⁸⁰

Despite this growing number of channels for China's communication with the outside world, the actual space for political discourse has been squeezed significantly by Xi's crackdown across the board on dissent, including substantial deviation from the Party line, even for Party media. In a sense, this should simplify the task of deciphering Chinese deterrence signalling because the message, when desired, should be easier for the Party to unify and coordinate. However, the reality is that the Chinese media sphere, despite increasingly tight restrictions, is still a much more vibrant environment with differing voices than that of even the 1990s. Indeed, the CCP Propaganda Department was criticised in 2016 for its failure to successfully enforce the Party line across the Chinese media.⁸¹ In practice, this means the task of accurately deciphering who speaks for China is still a considerable challenge.

Research Approach

To understand Chinese thinking about deterrence and deterrence signalling, our research approach included a review of the most authoritative sources available for Chinese military books, journal articles, and newspaper reports that address issues related to strategic communications, strategic deterrence, crisis management, and the use of social media for signalling. Of particular note, we reviewed articles from the PLA journal *Military Correspondent* (军事记者), a largely untapped source that includes discussions of topics such as how to portray military exercises for maximum propaganda impact and the PLA's use of social media. To understand the actual deterrence signals China sends out, we reviewed official PRC government statements, spokesperson press conferences, and official Party-state media. We also reviewed and analysed postings on Chinese-language PLA social media accounts, as well as postings related to PLA activities that have appeared on China's official English-language Twitter accounts. In addition, we interviewed a number of scholars, analysts, military officers, and government officials.

⁷⁸ Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

⁷⁹ The first known example is Tibet-related, without much success. See Jonathan Kaiman, 'Free Tibet Exposes Fake Twitter Accounts by China Propagandists', *The Guardian*, July 22, 2014. For a good analysis of one known case of Chinese disinformation, see Jake Wallis, Tom Uren, Elise Thomas, Albert Zhang, Samantha Hoffman, Lin Li, Alex Pascoe, and Danielle Cave, *Retweeting Through the Great Firewall: A Persistent and Undeterred Threat Actor*, Barton, ACT: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 12, 2020.

⁸⁰ Kathrin Hille, 'Taiwan Primaries Highlight Fears over China's Political Influence', *Financial Times*, July 16, 2019; Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, 'Beijing Builds Its Influence in the American Media', *Foreign Policy*, December 21, 2017.

⁸¹ 'Who Draws the Party Line?', *The Economist*, June 25, 2016.

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Organisation of the Report

The report is organised as follows. Chapter 2 presents a brief review of the Chinese literature on deterrence. It explores China's views on deterrence as a coercive political tool, the different phases of deterrence, and mechanisms for communication, as well as the types of deterrence actions that are described in Chinese military publications. Chapter 3 develops an analytic framework that focusses on five factors—strategic context, content, intended audience, authoritativeness, and scope—to decipher Chinese deterrence signalling. After presenting the core analytic framework, it offers a simple checklist for assessing Chinese signalling. Chapters 4 and 5 examine a series of case studies to illuminate Chinese deterrence signalling in peacetime and in crisis situations. The peacetime case studies we examine in Chapter 4 include Chinese military parades, Chinese bomber flights, and Chinese military signalling towards Taiwan since 2016. The crisis case studies we examine in Chapter 5 include the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the China-India (and Bhutan) border dispute in 2017, China's response to the Hong Kong protests in 2019, and recent tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Chapter 6 explores the implications of our findings for Australia and presents three policy recommendations.

2. Overview of Chinese Thinking on Deterrence

The CCP approach to deterrence is fundamentally based on capabilities, resolve, and communication, similar to Western conceptions of deterrence.⁸² However, China views deterrence not only as a means of avoiding military conflict, but also as a coercive political tool. This perspective requires analysts and observers to acquaint themselves with China's conception of deterrence as it is presented by Chinese scholars and strategists. This chapter provides an overview of Chinese thinking on deterrence, including its core aspects, as well as the different phases and types of deterrence presented in authoritative Chinese military texts. The chapter also explores whether China has a 'playbook' for military signalling and how it approaches the communication component of deterrence, and distils important insights from China's emphasis on deterrence as a coercive political, and thus psychological, means of achieving Beijing's policy objectives.

Chinese Conception of Deterrence

Chinese military publications stress the importance of linking deterrence actions to political objectives.⁸³ As former Second Artillery (now the PLARF) Deputy Commander Zhao Xijun puts it, 'Like war, deterrence is a continuation of politics'.⁸⁴ The 2011 PLA dictionary of military terminology defines a 'strategy of deterrence' (威慑战略, *weishe zhanlue*), as 'a military strategy of displaying or threatening the use of armed power, in order to compel an opponent to submit', categorised as offensive deterrence and defensive deterrence, as well

⁸² See, for example, Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence Now*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008; Patrick M. Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1983; Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980; Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence*, London: Polity Press, 2004; Paul K. Huth, *Extended Deterrence and the Prevention of War*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988; and Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

⁸³ For recent work on Chinese deterrence, see Christopher P. Twomey, *The Military Lens: Doctrinal Difference and Deterrence Failure in Sino-American Relations*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010; Dean Cheng, 'Chinese Views on Deterrence', *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 2011; Michael Chase and Arthur Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to 'Integrated Strategic Deterrence'*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR1366, 2016; Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob Heim, Bonny Lin, Mark Cozad, Lyle Morris, Christopher Twomey, Forrest Morgan, Michael Nixon, Cristina Garafola, and Samuel Berkowitz, *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1628-AF, 2017; Dennis J. Blasko, 'Peace Through Strength: Deterrence in Chinese Military Doctrine', *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2017. For a report on how to deter China, see Adam Shulsky, *Deterrence Theory and Chinese Behavior*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1161-AF, 2000.

⁸⁴ Zhao Xijun [赵锡君], ed., *Intimidation Warfare: A Comprehensive Discussion of Missile Deterrence* [慑战: 导弹威慑纵横谈], Beijing: National Defence University Press [国防大学出版社], May 2005, pp. 9, 165–167.

as conventional and nuclear, and comprehensive or limited.⁸⁵ Similarly, a classified manual for the PLA's Second Artillery, now the PLARF, dating from 2004 defines the purpose of 'campaign deterrence' as to 'compel an enemy to accept our will or to contain an enemy's hostile actions'.⁸⁶ Therefore, deterrence is a tool for achieving policy objectives and it is intended to support China's overall national strategy. One example would be that for Taiwan, deterrence for Beijing would include not only dissuading a Taiwanese declaration of independence (however unlikely) but also coercing a change of Taipei's political course to move it towards unification (even though Taiwan's current status presents no military threat to China, but a political challenge to the CCP).

Chinese authors state that the fundamental purpose of deterrence is to influence an adversary's decisionmaking calculus. In Zhao's words, 'the crux of military deterrence is to influence the other side's thinking'.⁸⁷ More specifically, according to Zhao, deterrence is a psychological process. It is intended to influence the strategic judgement of the other side so it will conclude that the costs of its actions will outweigh the benefits.⁸⁸ To accomplish this goal, Chinese security analysts have concluded that China needs a comprehensive, integrated set of strategic deterrence capabilities, including nuclear, conventional, space, and cyber forces.⁸⁹

China's definition of deterrence is also broad in the sense that the Chinese term most often translated as *deterrence* (威慑, *weishe*) also encompasses what U.S. political scientists typically refer to as compellence.⁹⁰ As Dean Cheng puts it, 'The Chinese focus is on compellence, including coercion, rather than solely, or even primarily, on dissuasion', meaning "'deterrence" is seen in both coercive and dissuasive terms'.⁹¹ Cheng notes that 'for Chinese decisionmakers, successful deterrence is ultimately a form of political activity and psychological warfare, whereby an adversary is constrained in his actions, allowing China to achieve its goals'. Accordingly, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of the Chinese term *weishe* as roughly equivalent to Thomas Schelling's broader concept of

⁸⁵ All Army Military Terminology Management Committee [全军军语管理委员会], *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* [中国人民解放军军语], Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2011, p. 51.

⁸⁶ Yu Jixun [于际训] and Li Tilin [李体林], eds., *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* [第二炮兵战役学], Beijing: PLA Press, March 2004, p. 270.

⁸⁷ Zhao Xijun, *Intimidation Warfare*, p. 12.

⁸⁸ Zhao Xijun, *Intimidation Warfare*, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Chase and Chan, *China's Evolving Approach*.

⁹⁰ Officially, a joint U.S.-China project did identify a separate Chinese term for compellence [威逼], but this is rarely used and appears intended more to specifically reflect the Western distinction than reflect an actual Chinese distinction. See U.S. National Academies Committee on International Security and Arms Control (CISAC) and the Chinese Scientists Group on Arms Control (CSGAC) of the Chinese People's Association for Peace and Disarmament, *Chinese-English English-Chinese Nuclear Security Glossary*, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2008, p. 9.

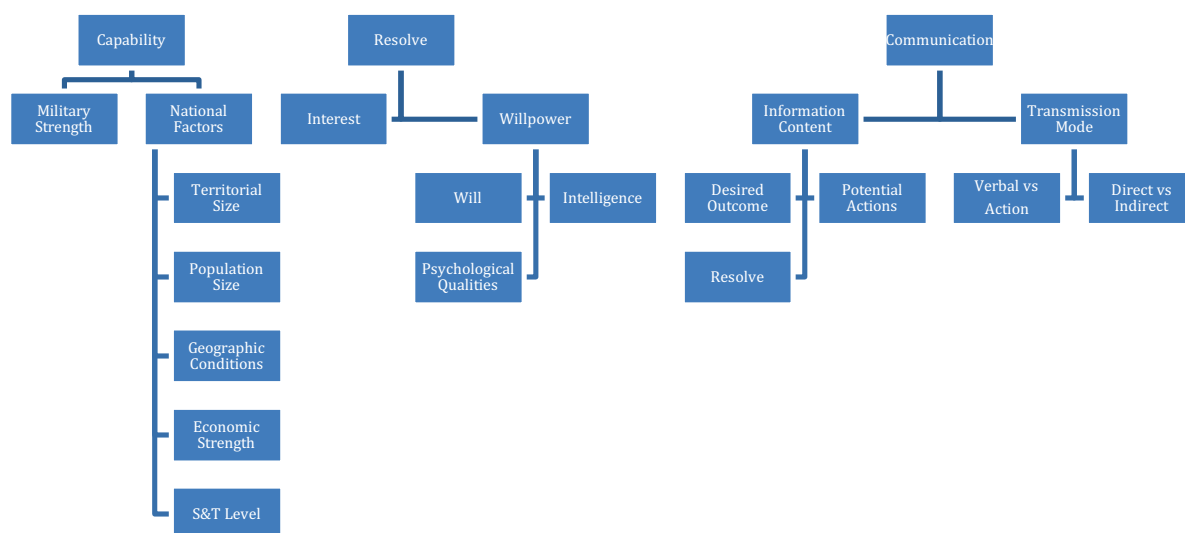
⁹¹ Dean Cheng, 'Evolving Chinese Thinking About Deterrence: What the United States Must Understand About China and Space', Heritage Foundation, March 29, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/evolving-chinese-thinking-about-deterrence-what-the-united-states-must>.

coercion, which includes both deterrence and compellence.⁹² Indeed, some Chinese scholars have stated that China's thinking about deterrence roughly approximates Schelling's broader concept of coercion.⁹³

Core Components: Capability, Resolve, and Communication

The three core components of deterrence for China are capability, resolve, and communication. The 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, published by the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS), defines the three as 'deterrence strength, resolve, and information transmission'.⁹⁴ These are illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1. Core Components of Chinese Deterrence



SOURCE: Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Department [军事学学院战略研究部], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 3rd ed., Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013, pp. 135–137.

A nation's overall capability, or 'deterrence strength' (威慑实力, *weishe shili*), is the core component undergirding its ability to deter others. Naturally, as the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* notes, 'The more powerful the deterrence strength is, the greater the possibility for deterrence activities to succeed'.⁹⁵ This capability for deterrence is mainly found in the military realm, especially in offensive capabilities, but extends to other broader

⁹² Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 69–78. For a recent review of U.S. deterrence thinking, see Michael Mazarr, *Understanding Deterrence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-295-RC, 2018.

⁹³ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 270; Li Bin, 'China's Nuclear Strategy', presentation at Carnegie International Nonproliferation Conference, Washington, D.C., June 25–26, 2007. For this as an issue in U.S.-China dialogue, see David Santoro and Bob Gromoll, 'On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China', *Issues and Insights*, Vol. 20, No. 1, November 2020, p. 11.

⁹⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 135.

⁹⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 135.

national factors, including the ‘nation’s territorial area, the quantity and the quality of the population, geographic conditions, economic real strength, and the science and technology level’.⁹⁶ This reflects what many analysts describe as China’s ‘whole of Party-state’ (which we simplify to ‘whole of government’) approach to deterrence and broader foreign policy.⁹⁷ Indeed, Chinese use of nonmilitary signals and threats to deter, compel, control escalation, and demonstrate resolve appears to be integral to China’s overall, comprehensive approach to thinking about deterrence and signalling. Although this report aims primarily to help understand China’s use of deterrence signalling in a military context, China’s employment of nonmilitary signals and threats—most notably wielding its economic leverage to influence other countries—appears to form part of a broader Chinese spectrum of deterrence signalling, one in which military capabilities exist alongside a range of nonmilitary capabilities that can be useful for sending messages intended to deter or compel rivals and competitors. Whatever the type of capability, the more powerful it is the better positioned China will be to use it effectively. Although the adversary’s perception of China’s military and nonmilitary capabilities can be manipulated by bluffing or exaggerating, this is successful only when there is an element of true capability to deter the adversary.

Assuming one has the capability, then the next requirement is to demonstrate credible resolve (决心, *juexin*) to use this capability. Since deterrence is utilising the threat of future violence to prevent certain undesired adversary behaviour—or for China, to also coerce desired adversary actions—the adversary must credibly believe you will use violence in this specific scenario. As the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* explains, ‘If merely having powerful strength but lacking the resolve to use the strength, that is, having no courage to hang the sword of deterrence strength high above the opponent’s head, it is difficult to make the opponent fear oneself’.⁹⁸ The credibility of this resolve is based on two factors—interest and willpower. Interest is simply the degree of national security interest at stake for each side, meaning that the more one side has at stake in any given scenario the more credible their claim to use force will be. Willpower is slightly more convoluted, but is defined as ‘comprehensive reflection of the deterring side’s subjective factors, including the will, intelligence, and psychological qualities’, meaning each side’s determination to use force.⁹⁹ If one has a lot at stake but is generally unwilling to use force, then overall one’s resolve will be naturally limited and deterrence—especially coercive aspects—will be more difficult.

Possessing both the capability and the credible resolve to use such force, however, is useless unless one is able to communicate this to the other side. Communication—or as the Chinese military describes it, ‘deterrence information transmission’ (威慑信息传递, *weishe*

⁹⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 136.

⁹⁷ For non-PLA writings on the nonmilitary aspects of deterrence, see Zhou Fangzhou [周方舟], ‘Research on the Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions Deterrence Function’ [‘经济制裁威慑功能有效性研究’], master’s thesis for MFA Foreign Affairs University, 2020.

⁹⁸ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 136.

⁹⁹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 136.

xinxi chuandi)—includes two aspects, the ‘information content’ that is transmitted and the ‘transmission mode’.¹⁰⁰ The information content is centred on the intended objective (what do you want the other side to do), what deterrence actions might be undertaken (what will you do), and one’s resolve to fulfil these threats (how committed are you). The transmission mode can be direct or indirect, and a statement or an action.¹⁰¹ Clarity, then, is critical: ‘Successful deterrence must make the deterred side be aware of the exact meaning expressed by the deterrence strength and the deterrence resolution’.¹⁰² Details of Chinese thinking on communication will be discussed more below.

Deterrence Phases: Peacetime, Crisis, and Wartime

The Chinese military conceptually breaks down deterrence into distinct phases, which will be familiar to Western analysts. These are generally consistent across the PLA publications we reviewed, though the specific terminology varies slightly.

In peacetime, the PLA generally relies on China’s comprehensive national power, but especially its strategic capabilities, to ensure sustainable long-term deterrence through a balance of power with the adversary. This ‘peacetime deterrence posture’ is based on a ‘static deterrence capability’ and is accomplished through ‘preventative deterrence activities’ targeted at ‘potential sources of threat’.¹⁰³ The goal is to ‘form a normalised deterrence posture to force an opponent to not dare to act lightly or rashly’, and it can be accomplished in part through ‘low-intensity military activities’ such as ‘display[ing] the existence of the military, express[ing] security concerns, and declar[ing] the strategic bottom line’.¹⁰⁴

In crisis, the PLA transitions to a more proactive approach to deterrence (‘contingency deterrence’).¹⁰⁵ This ‘emergency deterrence posture’ is based on a ‘dynamic deterrence capability’, leveraging mainly its military capabilities but also other national means.¹⁰⁶ Instead of deterring the adversary via a balance of power, this posture achieves deterrence through ‘a threat by revenge’.¹⁰⁷ In crisis, China should showcase its core deterrence components—capability and resolve—in order to force the adversary to back down, while also preparing for war. If the adversary persists and further action is necessary, China can undertake deterrence actions that edge closer to war to further force the adversary to back down.

¹⁰⁰ Also sometimes simplified to just ‘information transmission’ (信息传递). See AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 136.

¹⁰¹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 137.

¹⁰² AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 136–137.

¹⁰³ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 119, 136.

¹⁰⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 119.

¹⁰⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 134.

¹⁰⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 119.

¹⁰⁷ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 136.

In wartime, deterrence is still an inescapable part of the conflict because of the desire to control the course of the war and limit the costs.¹⁰⁸ The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* points out that for a Taiwan scenario, deterrence is still important to avoid U.S. intervention and to ensure other potential opponents, likely India, Japan, or South China Sea rival claimants, do not take advantage of China's distraction to seize the initiative on another front.¹⁰⁹

Chinese discussions of the concept of 'war control' (战争控制, *zhanzheng kongzhi*), which is somewhat analogous to escalation management, illustrate how the PLA envisions transitioning between these phases. In his speech to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi Jinping said the PLA should be able to 'to effectively shape the situation, manage crises, and deter and win wars', largely reflecting preexisting doctrine from the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy*.¹¹⁰ Yu Aishui, then the deputy political commissar of the Central Theatre Command (TC) Air Force, explained how this concept, derived from the laws of war, would apply in theory.¹¹¹ Facing a security threat, the first step is to 'shape the situation' (塑造态势, *suzao taishi*) so as to prevent it from escalating, using not just the military but also diplomacy. If this fails and the situation does escalate into a crisis, then the PLA should manage the crisis (管控危机, *guankong weiji*) by being ready for the outbreak of war but not starting the war itself.¹¹² If the crisis further escalates towards becoming an outright war, then war must be deterred (遏制战争, *ezhi zhanzheng*) through not just military actions but also diplomacy and 'mobilising public opinion forces'. If war does occur, then the PLA must win the war (打赢战争, *daying zhanzheng*) through constant vigilance against an adversary's surprise first move. This reflects how China's integrated approach to deterrence continues through all three phases.

Despite this public attention to escalation, there is concern the PLA will unintentionally stumble into hostilities during a crisis. One reason is that Western analysts remain concerned that the PLA does not appreciate the risks of escalation in a crisis, in part because of

¹⁰⁸ To see how deterrence is used during conventional warfighting, see Zhang Yuliang [张玉良], ed., *The Science of Campaigns* [战役学], Beijing: National Defence University Press, 2006, pp. 464–468.

¹⁰⁹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 119. For a recent report on this Chinese concern, see Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University INSS China Strategic Perspectives 15, June 2020.

¹¹⁰ The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., says, 'The nation's strategic capability is a crucial and supportive capability for creating situations [shaping the situation], for responding to crises, for restraining wars, and for winning wars, and thus for achieving the nation's strategic objectives' ('营造态势、应对危机、遏制战争、打赢战争') (p. 13); Xi's 2017 phrase was ('有效塑造态势、管控危机、遏制战争、打赢战争'). Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory'.

¹¹¹ Yu Aishui [余爱水], 'Deeply Grasping Xi Jinping's Strong Army Thought [深入贯彻习近平强军思想, 向能打仗、打胜仗聚焦: 学习领会党的十九大精神]', *Preacher Online* [宣讲家网], November 24, 2017.

¹¹² For further analysis on the crisis management component of Xi's phrase, see Zhou Ruochong [周若冲], 'Adjusting to the Requirement of the Times: Raising the Ability to Manage Crises' ['适应时代要求提升管控危机能力'], *PLA Daily*, April 12, 2018.

overconfidence in its ability to practice ‘war control’.¹¹³ Another reason is that the PLA clearly links deterrence actions and actual preparations for war, or at least this perception. The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* says, ‘The closer war preparations are to requirements of actual combat, the more capable they are to express strategic resolve and strategic capability, and the higher deterrence effectiveness they will have’.¹¹⁴ It adds, ‘combine strategic unfolding with actual combat disposition to create a high-intensity deterrence posture, to show a strong resolve of willingness to tight and powerful actual strength, to force an opponent to promptly reverse course at the last minute before danger, and accomplish well the full preparations to transition from deterrence to war’.¹¹⁵ It further emphasises ‘attaching importance to close cooperation between deterrence activities and actual combat activities’, and explains that deterrence actions can ‘not only express the rapidness, precision, and irresistibility of operational activities . . . but also at the same time, creat[e] favorable conditions for going from deterrence to war’.¹¹⁶ Approximating the concept of brinkmanship, it further says, ‘When necessary we adopt appropriate amount of activities that borderline on warfare to force an opponent to acknowledge the difficulties and retreat and terminate when seeing danger’.¹¹⁷ This means that during a crisis, the PLA could undertake actions that are intended to look like (and actually are) Chinese preparations for war, but in reality are simply intended as bolder deterrence signals, without Beijing actually intending to start the war. An adversary may well interpret these as Chinese preparations for actual conflict and thus either increase their own signalling, or even pre-empt a perceived Chinese first strike. Lastly, some deterrence actions the PLA apparently views as deescalatory would likely be considered highly escalatory by others.¹¹⁸ This could prove especially problematic in cases where PLA deterrence actions are indistinguishable from preparations to conduct strikes.

¹¹³ Alison A. Kaufman and Daniel M. Hartnett, *Managing Conflict: Examining Recent PLA Writings on Escalation Control*, Arlington, Va.: CNA Corporation, February 2016; Burgess Laird, *War Control: Chinese Writings on the Control of Escalation in Crisis and Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: Center for New American Security, 2017; Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, ‘Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation’, *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Fall 2019, pp. 61–109.

¹¹⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 152.

¹¹⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 118.

¹¹⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 153.

¹¹⁷ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 118.

¹¹⁸ As a recent report on U.S.-China strategic dialogues notes, ‘US participants reacted quickly to debunk the idea that Chinese strikes against US space-based assets would be de-escalatory. Chinese reasoning was that since the United States depends heavily on space-based assets even for conventional operations, if its space-based assets were quickly destroyed the United States would have to back down. US participants responded energetically that this was a dangerous misconception and that quite the opposite could be true: Chinese strikes against US space-based assets would be highly destabilizing, escalatory, and, depending on the circumstances, could even warrant a US nuclear response. The Chinese seemed incredulous that the United States would respond to such a threat in such a manner’. See Santoro and Gromoll, ‘On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China’.

Surveying Deterrence Actions

Chinese authoritative texts describe a broad range of activities that can be undertaken to deter an adversary. Usually referred to as ‘deterrence actions’ (威慑行动, *weishe xingdong*) or ‘deterrence methods’ (威慑手段, *weishe shouduan*), these can generally be categorised as military activity, military readiness, demonstrating capabilities, and degrading enemy capabilities, along with nonmilitary means. Some of these are fairly universal, such as holding military parades and increasing combat readiness, but others are much more aggressive and could entail major escalation risks, such as conducting demonstration strikes or attacking an adversary’s early warning systems. Although the following overview is clearly not a complete list of all actions China may undertake in the future, it provides a sufficient outline to understand the likely range of possibilities. These actions are not intended as discrete, independent options but rather are much more likely to be employed in combination.

One complicating factor for analysts of Chinese deterrence signalling is that many different types of PLA activities could be classified as deterrence actions, but they could include regular activities the PLA would undertake anyway, being leveraged for deterrent effect, as well as activities specifically undertaken for deterrent purposes. There is also a possibility that some PLA operations undertaken for other purposes, such as improving the PLA’s training, weapons research and development, or boosting the PLA’s image at home to make it more attractive to potential recruits, could be misinterpreted as primarily a deterrent action. In some cases, a particular action might serve multiple purposes. Deterrence signalling might be one of the purposes, but it might be a secondary goal, or it might not be a goal at all. Additionally, sometimes the PLA’s signalling may not be as clear and direct as it thinks it is, and based on the PLA literature, this could represent a failure in conveying its intended message. In other instances, however, China might be striving for ambiguity, in hopes that the resulting uncertainty would confuse the adversary and delay its decisionmaking, or perhaps make it behave more cautiously. In such cases, outside analysts of Chinese actions might see unclear intent or unclear messaging that raises questions about the PLA’s efficacy in deterrence signalling, but the PLA would likely regard the outcome as a success.

Another complicating factor is that there is no single PLA playbook, at least available publicly, for how to conduct deterrence signalling across contingencies.¹¹⁹ Instead, China believes its approach to deterrence must be tailored to each individual instance.¹²⁰ Addressing nuclear deterrence, the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* asserts that ‘deterrent tactics must change with variation in the object and in accordance with the circumstances, and strictly avoid always following the same pattern’.¹²¹ This tailoring of China’s deterrence should be based on ‘the character, psychology, and degree of rationality of the decisionmakers on the deterred side; the adversary’s political system, decisionmaking mechanisms, value system,

¹¹⁹ However, the below deterrence actions are remarkably consistent across services, domains, and authoritative texts. This has led some Western experts to suspect China may have an overarching deterrence doctrine that remains classified, but naturally we are unable to verify this.

¹²⁰ For a U.S. view on tailored deterrence, see Elaine Bunn, ‘Can Deterrence Be Tailored?’, *NDU Strategic Forum*, 225, January 2007.

¹²¹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 174.

and tradition of social change; and the influence of the masses on decisionmaking, plus the informationised levels of society, and the degree of national integrated-whole prosperity'. This information should inform a unique approach for the 'deterrence mode, deterrent intensity, and deterrence tactics', ultimately creating 'a tactic for each nation, a tactic for each event, and a tactic for each circumstance'.¹²² The deterrence actions below provide one set of baseline options for China to tailor its signalling.

The lack of a public PLA 'playbook' should not come as a surprise, since the United States also does not have a public playbook for its deterrence signalling. Nevertheless, the United States has well-known rhetoric and actions it undertakes to signal deterrence messages, known as Flexible Deterrence Options (FDOs). These are described as 'preplanned, deterrence-oriented actions tailored to signal to and influence an adversary's actions' that 'are developed for each instrument of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—but they are most effective when combined across the instruments of national power'.¹²³ The most notable of these, especially from China's perspective, is the use of U.S. aircraft carriers to signal both capability and resolve. Another is the use of bombers, whether the nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 or the conventional B-1B, to similar effect, flying near a country, such as around the Korean Peninsula or through the East or South China Seas. Rhetorically, successive U.S. administrations have consistently used graduating levels of 'all options are on the table' to signal their willingness to use force as well as exactly how close they are to using such force. In a sense, the absence of a U.S. signalling playbook is intentional, to leave strategic flexibility for U.S. responses to different situations, and the logic is very likely similar for China.

The clearest Chinese list of deterrence actions comes from the 2015 National Defence University (NDU) version of the *Science of Military Strategy*, which lists eight actions. These are displayed in Figure 2.2.

We divide PLA deterrence actions into the following categories: military activity; military readiness; demonstrating capabilities; degrading enemy capabilities and operational space; and other, nonmilitary actions. This assessment is based on the above list from the 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy*, as well as from a compilation of references to different types of deterrence action from other PLA publications, such as *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*.¹²⁴ It is important to note that there is some overlap between types of deterrence actions, as some activities may fit in more than one of these categories. In addition, in many cases a particular action benefits the PLA in certain ways (e.g., normal training) but can also be leveraged for deterrence signalling: we call this a 'dual-use' activity, in contrast with other PLA actions that might be undertaken solely for deterrence purposes.¹²⁵

¹²² AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 174.

¹²³ Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017, pp. F1–F8.

¹²⁴ The *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* lists seven distinct deterrence actions: (1) exerting pressure through public opinion, (2) raising the level of weapons preparation, (3) demonstrating strength, (4) creation of the momentum with the troops, (5) launch exercises, (6) nearby (critical region) test launches, (7) reducing the nuclear deterrence threshold (or adjusting nuclear policies). See Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, pp. 280–296.

¹²⁵ The authors would like to thank a reviewer for raising this point.

Figure 2.2. A List of Chinese Deterrence Actions



SOURCE: Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], Beijing: National Defence University Press [国防大学出版社], 2015, pp. 129–131.

This has the potential to create considerable noise in deterrence messaging and may raise some questions about the clarity of deterrence signals, which often need to be considered in the context of other purposes for which the PLA may be conducting the observed activities.

Military Activity

Mobilising, moving, or exercising military forces is the most common form of deterrence actions referenced across authoritative Chinese military texts. Indeed, these actions are often seen in the case studies detailed later in Chapters 4 and 5. Frequently referenced actions include

- military exercises
- adjusting military deployments/posture, troop manoeuvres, moving nuclear weapons, deploying new hardware
- military parades/displaying advanced weapons
- weapons tests, missile launches
- the selective release of information (via media leaks, inviting foreign officials or attachés to visit military facilities or events, revealed to overhead satellites, etc.).¹²⁶

These actions can be undertaken in any phase of deterrence—peacetime, crisis, or perhaps even wartime—and their scale and transparency can be calibrated to the intended

¹²⁶ Drawn from AMS Military Strategy Department, ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], 2nd ed., Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2001; Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*; Zhang Yuliang, *Science of Campaigns*; *China Strategic Missile Force Encyclopedia* [中国战略导弹部队百科全书], Beijing: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2012; AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed.; Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], ed., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], Beijing: National Defence University Publishing House [北京国防大学出版社], 2015.

effect. The 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* states that they ‘can be displayed publicly, or [they] can be treated with ambiguity, leaving the other party with room for conjecture and imagination’, with an objective of demonstrating capability and resolve, ‘creating a psychological fear of retaliation’.¹²⁷ These activities can be transmitted in a variety of ways, including in-person visits to missile launch sites, military diplomacy such as port visits, public release via the media, or even just revealed privately to satellites passing overhead.¹²⁸ Some of these, especially military exercises, can be undertaken with other countries so as to confuse the deterred side or to hide actual preparations for war.¹²⁹ They can even include deception, for example by exaggerating the troop strength for a military exercise or faking deployments.¹³⁰

As with the other categories of deterrence actions, these types of military activities can serve multiple purposes, and deterrence or intimidation of potential adversaries may not always be the primary goal associated with a given military activity. For example, the PLA conducts exercises for a variety of reasons, including for unit-level, combined-arms, and joint training, and for integrating new personnel into the PLA. As for military parades, they are also important for domestic reasons, such as appealing to nationalist sentiments and highlighting military modernisation as one of the accomplishments of the Party leadership. In addition, weapons tests and missile launches may be leveraged for deterrence purposes, but they are typically conducted primarily for other reasons, such as research and development, verification, or crew training. This can make it difficult to determine whether there is a particular deterrence signal associated with some weapons tests or missile launches, apart from a more general message highlighting advances in China’s capabilities. If the timing coincides with other events, such as high-level visits or tension in bilateral relationships, an otherwise routine weapons test or missile launch could be misinterpreted as a more pointed message where one may not have been intended.¹³¹

PLA writings address the value of properly calibrating the messaging around normal exercises.¹³² A November 2006 *PLA Daily* article notes the relationship between actual preparations for war (training) and deterrence, which Xi has highlighted as well.¹³³ It says, ‘In-depth and solid military training is not only considered a direct preparation for military

¹²⁷ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 129–130.

¹²⁸ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*; Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 129.

¹²⁹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 129.

¹³⁰ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*.

¹³¹ For example, the test of the J-20 during then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s visit to China in January 2011. See Andrew Scobell, ‘The J-20 Episode and Civil-Military Relations in China’, written testimony submitted to the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 10, 2011, CT-357.

¹³² For a recent analysis of Chinese military exercises use for signalling, see Christopher D. Yung, ‘“Politics in Command”: The Political Dimensions of Chinese Military Exercises’, in Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias, eds., *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, Rome: NATO Defence College, 2018, pp. 333–352.

¹³³ Zhao Zhongqi [赵中其], ‘Training Has Deterrent Power Too’ [‘训练也有威慑效能’], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], November 21, 2006.

struggle, but also a major means to deter the adversaries and create favourable strategic situation in peacetime'. It notes that 'major powers like the U.S. and Russia give top priority to the flexible use of military might, and more often than not, they would resort to the modus operandi of translating training into deterrence in the process of engaging in military training'. This is especially true for U.S. exercises such as the Schriever space exercise series and U.S. exercises in Asia. The goal is simple: 'To train the troops and enhance the actual fighting capability on the one hand, and to show off their fighting power so as to meet their strategic intention of deterring and containing the potential rivals on the other', which can be accomplished by 'establish[ing] the concept of using training as a means of deterrence and combining training with deterring purpose'. This can be done in two specific ways: 'First, we should give plenty of publicity to military trainings with low confidential value to display the achievements of our military modernisation drive and the improvement of combat effectiveness. Second, we should intentionally showcase the fine quality, first-rate operational strength and down-to-earth preparation for war by taking the opportunity of military exchanges with foreign countries in order to serve the grand strategy of containing war and safeguarding peace'.¹³⁴ A similar article in 2008 frames increased PLA transparency about its exercises, such as 'Peace Mission-2007' with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as a 'good opportunity to display its capabilities'.¹³⁵ More recently in January 2021, a PLA commentator reiterated this point: 'even if war never breaks out, the PLA has to be trained to that level, so it can serve as an effective deterrent'.¹³⁶

Military Readiness

Increasing military readiness can be a useful way to calibrate the intensity of deterrence. China has at times of crisis used public announcements of combat readiness and mobilisation. Frequently referenced actions include

- increasing combat readiness—battlefield construction, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) activity, patrols
- raising weapon alert/readiness status
- mobilising the military, recalling troops, declaring mobilisation orders from National People's Congress (NPC), China's rubber-stamp legislature
- enhancing national defence education
- making leadership visits or inspections
- making statements of resolve by leadership
- undertaking local civilian defensive measures such as emergency mobilisation, civil air defence, traffic protection, and defensive operations drills, frontline evacuation
- urging relevant countries to evacuate diasporas and office personnel.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Zhao Zhongqi, 'Training Has Deterrent Power Too'.

¹³⁵ Liu Feng'an [刘逢安], 'Increased Transparency in Military Exercises Can Enhance Deterrence' ['加大军事演习透明度可增强威慑效果'], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], April 29, 2008.

¹³⁶ Liu Zhen, 'China's Military "Prepares for War" with Joint Operations, Cross-Training', *South China Morning Post*, January 24, 2021.

¹³⁷ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*; *China Strategic Missile Force Encyclopedia*.

These actions are intended to signal increasing preparations for war, through both demonstrating a warfighting capability and communicating resolve for the use of force. As the 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* explains, the message is to ‘create the atmosphere that if you force the decision of whether or not to go to war [the choice of war] onto me, then I will absolutely fight without hesitation’, with the objective of forcing the other side to back down from its intended course of action.¹³⁸ Some of these actions are categorised by the 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* as ‘creating a climate of war’, which leans into psychological warfare, with the objective of ‘detering people with imminent war pressure’.¹³⁹

As with the other types of deterrence actions, many of the types of activities related to military readiness listed in Chinese sources can be undertaken for a variety of reasons apart from deterrence signalling. For example, increased combat readiness or military mobilisation could be required as preparation for actual use of force in a particular scenario. Additionally, China could determine that increasing readiness by dispersing mobile missile forces to hide sites was necessary to protect them from an anticipated enemy attack. As for leadership visits and inspections, Party leaders could see them as useful domestically, perhaps as a vehicle for demonstrating their personal power and authority, or as a means of underscoring their commitment to upholding the long-standing principal of Party control over the PLA. The risk, as with other militaries, is that the PLA increases military readiness during a crisis as a deterrence action, but it is misinterpreted by the target country as an actual preparation for war, unintentionally escalating the crisis towards a conflict.

Demonstrating Capabilities

At a certain point, if the adversary has not backed down, then conducting demonstration or warning strikes or limited offensive operations can once again signal capability and resolve. Referenced actions include

- a limited ‘warning’ strike against the enemy
- an inert ICBM strike into maritime area
- a conventional ICBM strike against adversary territory.¹⁴⁰

These are likely to be undertaken in a crisis or even during a war and are intended to be limited in scope. The 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* describes a warning strike as a ‘small-scale strike . . . in response to a serious provocation by the enemy’, aiming at ‘military and political targets that have obvious deterrent effects, are relatively isolated and easy to fight, and do not hurt the people’.¹⁴¹ These strikes will likely use ground- or air-launched precision-guided munitions (PGMs), but they can also involve artillery or special operations forces (SOF). The objective is to ‘show the capability to strike and, if necessary, the resolve to strike’, but not to actually degrade the adversary’s warfighting potential. However, since

¹³⁸ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130.

¹³⁹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*; *China Strategic Missile Force Encyclopedia*.

¹⁴⁰ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*; Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*.

¹⁴¹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130.

this includes the offensive use of force and thus risks escalation, it is ‘necessary to correctly judge the situation, strictly control the means and scale of the strike, and prevent operations from escalating and expanding into war’.¹⁴² For the extreme situation of deterring U.S. nuclear use, the 2004 *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* suggests deterrence actions such as launching ICBMs without nuclear warheads towards predetermined maritime regions, and striking U.S. (assumed to be continental United States [CONUS]) ‘key targets’ with conventionally armed ICBMs to spur antiwar sentiments and deter an impending attack.¹⁴³ The latter option illustrates how problematic some high-intensity deterrence actions described in PLA publications could be if carried out in an unfolding crisis or during a conventional conflict, especially one involving the United States or another nuclear-armed adversary. The United States (or another country) probably would not know the warheads were conventional until their arrival, and the ambiguity could be as likely to trigger further escalation as to deter it, if not more so.¹⁴⁴

General Secretary Xi has also suggested that beyond a limited strike, China may decide to conduct a small war to stop a larger war from occurring. In his October 2020 commemoration of the 70th anniversary of China’s intervention into the Korean War, Xi said, ‘It is necessary to speak to invaders in the language they know: that is, use war to prevent war [以战止战, 以武止戈] . . . and use a [military] victory to win peace and respect’.¹⁴⁵ While this statement may reflect some level of nationalistic sabre-rattling for domestic audiences, it also illustrates that the Chinese leadership does believe the use of force can ultimately have deterrent, and thus de-escalatory, effects if used correctly.

Degrading Enemy Capabilities and Operational Space

Another more aggressive set of options that could be intended to serve purposes of deterrence or intimidation is to degrade an adversary’s capabilities and/or operational space. Referenced actions include

- degrading adversary defensive systems through ‘information attacks’, such as early-warning, air-defence, and missile-defence systems by means of electronic warfare (EW) or cyberattacks
- restricting the adversary’s military operations—no-fly zone, close ISR, and so on.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 131.

¹⁴³ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, pp. 291 and 402.

¹⁴⁴ For discussion of related U.S. thinking, see Nate Jones, *Able Archer 83: The Secret History of the NATO Exercise That Almost Triggered Nuclear War*, Washington, D.C.: National Security Archives, 2016; Fred Kaplan, *The Bomb: Presidents, Generals, and the Secret History of Nuclear War*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020, p. 257.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Xi Jinping: Speech at the Ceremony Commemorating the 70th Anniversary of the Chinese People’s Volunteers’ Fighting to Resist the United States and Aid Korea’ [‘习近平：在纪念中国人民志愿军抗美援朝出国作战 70 周年大会上的讲话’], Xinhua, October 23, 2020. Translation via Shannon Tiezzi, ‘In Korean War Commemoration, Xi Warns That China Will “Use War to Prevent War”’, *The Diplomat*, October 24, 2020.

¹⁴⁶ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130.

These are likely undertaken during crisis so as to achieve maximum effect before the war begins, but could be undertaken during war. Degrading an adversary's defensive systems can be accomplished through using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to conduct electromagnetic interference, using EW aircraft to jam radars, jamming satellite communications (SATCOM), jamming airborne early warning (AEW), controlling adversary TVs, and conducting cyberattacks against potential targets.¹⁴⁷ While this has military effects, the deeper purpose is to create psychological pressure by limiting the adversary's warfighting ability. The other option is to limit the adversary's space for military operations by creating no-fly zones or no-sail zones under the pretext of military exercises and tests, controlling sea or airspaces, or organising patrols, as well as operating or even threatening the adversary's air and maritime traffic routes.¹⁴⁸ While there is less ambiguity in these deterrence actions, they similarly pose risks for escalation if they lead the target country to assume these actions are the first steps towards an all-out war, and not simply intended as a signal of Chinese capability and resolve.

Nonmilitary Actions

China has a broad view of the means that can be used for deterrence or coercion, and although they are less discussed in PLA texts, these include nonmilitary actions by actors other than the military. Referenced actions include

- diplomatic pressure
- economic pressure
- public opinion (psychological) pressure.¹⁴⁹

This represents what many analysts called Beijing's whole-of-government approach and what the PLA refers to as one aspect of 'integrated deterrence'.¹⁵⁰ As the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* succinctly describes, 'Jiang Zemin emphasised the importance of developing comprehensive national power for enhancing military deterrence', which includes politics, economics, science, technology, and culture.¹⁵¹ Most notable recent examples have centred on diplomatic disputes, such as China's retaliation against Australia for calling for an international inquiry into the origins of COVID-19. However, this approach can easily extend to the security domain, such as Beijing's opposition to South Korea's decision to allow the U.S. deployment of the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defence (BMD) system in 2016. Such actions would likely be coordinated to some degree at high levels of the

¹⁴⁷ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130.

¹⁴⁸ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130.

¹⁴⁹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 139.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Chase and Arthur Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence,"* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR1366, 2016. For two reviews of Chinese economic coercion campaigns, see Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, *China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, June 2018; Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracy Beattie, *The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy*, Barton, ACT: Australia Strategic Policy Institute, September 1, 2020.

¹⁵¹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 143, 6.

Party-state, and may even be Beijing's favoured approach when its nonmilitary leverage is sufficient to avoid resorting to military pressure.

There is little public discussion in authoritative Chinese texts about how these disparate whole-of-government tools would be coordinated towards coherent signalling. However, the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* does address this in the context of how to manipulate foreign public opinion for deterrence:

The method of exerting pressure through public opinion must be carried out under unified planning, in accordance with the deterrence plans of supreme command, and applying many types of public opinion dissemination tools. Early on, nonauthoritative suggestions and warnings and other methods of public opinion propaganda can be adopted to create momentum in order to seize the broad support of international public opinion. At appropriate times, high-level public opinion dissemination should be carried out from authoritative deterrence mechanisms, adopting the speeches by the highest officers, press conferences, public announcements, and other forms that are directed at the enemy to exert high-power psychological pressure.¹⁵²

Graduated Levels of Deterrence in Strategic Domains

As the service with the most developed thinking on deterrence, the PLARF has categorised these common deterrent actions into three levels of intensity for their intended impact on the adversary, reflecting a desire for a tailored and graduated approach to deterrence.¹⁵³ The first, low-intensity deterrence uses the missile forces in a nonconfrontational style to communicate their capability and resolve by increasing their combat readiness and recalling troops currently on leave. The second level, medium-intensity deterrence is intended to send a stronger signal through bolder actions by issuing combat readiness orders, switching weapon systems to higher-alert status, adjusting deployments, and by having leadership visit missile forces. The third level, high-intensity deterrence includes staging large-scale exercises, publicly announcing missile tests, and raising combat readiness to the highest level, as well as mobilising troops to launch sites and finalising launch preparations. These are to be increasingly targeted for the intended audience.

One important reason to appropriately calibrate deterrence intensity is to preserve strategic flexibility for both sides. As the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* makes clear in its detailed explanation of signalling for nuclear deterrence, it is important to 'leave sufficient room for maneuver. . . . During nuclear deterrence, one should retain ample room for maneuvering, prudently select the lowest threshold of the use of nuclear weapons to threaten the enemy'.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 283.

¹⁵³ *China Strategic Missile Force Encyclopaedia*, p. 80. This language is mirrored somewhat in the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy*, which mentions low intensity and high intensity in relation to deterrence without such detail. See AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 118–119.

¹⁵⁴ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 295.

It should be noted that one issue that arises in analysing PLARF publications is disentangling its discussion of nuclear and conventional forces. Sometimes it is clearly stated, or apparent from the context, that a particular discussion of deterrence actions or principles refers specifically to either nuclear or conventional missile forces. However, in other instances it is unclear if a passage is referring to nuclear or conventional missiles specifically or is intended apply to both nuclear and conventional missiles. The PLA clearly views both its nuclear and conventional forces as relevant in the context of deterrence signalling, and this is made explicit in the *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*.¹⁵⁵

Beyond the nuclear and conventional domains, the PLA is very focussed on the implications of new domains, namely space and cyber, for strategic effects and it believes they merit their own consideration for signalling—though they again appear quite similar to the broader PLA signalling playbook. As the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* says, ‘Since the entry into the new century, along with the rapid development and wide-ranging application of S&T [science and technology], and in particular IT [information technology], networks and outer space gradually developed into new strategic deterrence fields, and strategic deterrence could be achieved by synthetically applying multiple means of deterrence’.¹⁵⁶ In the cyber domain, PLA texts reveal four potential deterrence actions: ‘(1) demonstration of cyberattack technology testing; (2) partial disclosure of cyber weapons and equipment through the media; (3) [staging of] operational exercises in cyberspace; and (4) disclosure of cyberattacks that were conducted’.¹⁵⁷ PLA analysts discuss a similar ‘ladder of intensity levels’ for deterrence for the PLAAF.¹⁵⁸

In the space domain, authoritative PLA texts outline four incremental steps for deterrence signalling.¹⁵⁹ A 2013 AMS textbook on space operations asserts that signalling in space ‘often employs the method of gradual escalation to continually increase the intensity of enemy deterrence’, though it notes that these actions can be taken in any order, or all at the same

¹⁵⁵ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 281.

¹⁵⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 228–229.

¹⁵⁷ Zhang Shibo [张仕波], *New Highland of War* [战争新高地], Beijing: National Defence University Press [国防大学出版社], 2016, pp. 67, 84–85, as summarised in *NIDS China Security Report 2021: China’s Military Strategy in the New Era*, Tokyo: Japan, National Institute for Defense Analysis, November 2020, p. 34.

¹⁵⁸ Yuan Jingwei, *Research on Integrated Aerospace Combat Operations* [空天一体作战研究], Beijing: National Defence University Press, 2006; Cai Fengzhen and Tian Anping, *The Study of Integrated Aerospace Combat* [空天一体作战学], Beijing: PLA Press, 2006, via Murray Scot Tanner, ‘The Missions of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force’, in Richard P. Halloran, Roger Cliff, and Phillip C. Saunders, eds., *The Chinese Air Force: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2012, pp. 136–138.

¹⁵⁹ For recent analysis of Chinese views of space deterrence, see Dean Cheng, ‘Space Deterrence, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and Asian Security: A U.S. Perspective’, in Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, eds., *The U.S.-Japan Alliance and Deterring Gray Zone Coercion in the Maritime, Cyber, and Space Domains*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-379, 2017; Nicholas Wright, ed., *Outer Space: Earthly Escalation? Chinese Perspectives on Space Operations and Escalation*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, August 2018; Dean Cheng, *Evolving Chinese Thinking About Deterrence: What the United States Must Understand About China and Space*, Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, March 29, 2019.

time, and ‘should be employed flexibly based on the circumstances at the time’.¹⁶⁰ In growing order of ‘intensity’, the four actions are

1. ‘Displays of space forces’, which can be done during peacetime and early in a crisis. This ‘low-intensity deterrence action’ can be achieved through testing (disclosed publicly or not), propaganda, displaying equipment at exhibitions, and inviting foreign attachés to visit unspecified facilities. It is usually coordinated with political and diplomatic activities and can be communicated through TV, radio, computers, or newspapers.
2. ‘Space military exercises’, which can be conducted if the crisis escalates. Exercise types include ‘anti-spacecraft exercises’, ‘space assault exercises’, and ‘space information support exercises’, all across offense and defence with either actual troops, computer simulation, or live ammunition. These serve not only to communicate capability and resolve but also to actually prepare PLA forces for combat, if it occurs. As with some other examples, it is worth noting that such space exercises could fit into multiple categories of types of deterrence actions, and could also be conducted primarily (or even solely) for training purposes, potentially complicating their interpretation as deterrence signals.
3. ‘Deployment of space forces’, which can be conducted if the crisis further worsens and the adversary is preparing for war. This ‘medium- or high-intensity’ deterrence action can be achieved through either the ‘projection of space forces’, namely spacecraft launch and recovery (which would presumably rely on the rapid space launch capabilities and other advanced capabilities China is developing), or the ‘deployment and adjustment of space forces’, namely adjusting space-based and ground-based information and firepower networks. This serves not only to communicate capability and resolve but also to actually prepare PLA forces for combat.
4. ‘Space shock and awe strikes’, which are warning strikes and a ‘last resort’ as the ‘highest form of space deterrence’. These are divided into ‘soft strikes’, namely information-based attacks through cyber or other means to disrupt the adversary’s C4ISR, and ‘hard strikes’, namely sudden and limited kinetic attacks on ‘sensitive’ adversary systems.¹⁶¹

While there may be some public disclosure of these activities by China, and perhaps by the target country or countries, it will otherwise be very difficult for nongovernmental analysts to assess Chinese deterrence actions in these domains.

Psychological Emphasis and Deception

The focus on dissuading adversary decisionmakers from a specific undesirable course of action places a heavy emphasis on the psychological aspect of deterrence. This includes using information to manipulate adversary perceptions, and thus adversary behaviour, through psychological warfare and other means.

¹⁶⁰ Jiang Lianju [姜连举], *Course of Study of Space Operations* [空间作战学教程], Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2013, pp. 126–129.

¹⁶¹ Jiang Lianju, *Course of Study of Space Operations*, pp. 126–129.

This psychological component is consistent throughout Chinese military writings on deterrence. The 2001 AMS edition of *Science of Military Strategy* says, ‘only when the implementation of strategic deterrence brings about psychological shock on the opponent and he is aware of the outcome of his continuous confrontation to be the loss outweighing the gain, can he be forced to submit and compromise’.¹⁶² The 2013 AMS edition of *Science of Military Strategy* notes that ‘the carrier for deterrence to produce an effect is the opponent’s psychological activities’, and defines deterrence as ‘a military notion and also a psychological-political notion’, with the goal of ‘let[ting] the deterred side imagine or speculate [about] the horrible consequence that might be produced by this type of threat, so as to incite psychological fear in the deterred side’.¹⁶³ The 2011 PLA dictionary similarly explains that operational-level campaign deterrence has the goal of ‘putting strong military pressure on the enemy, causing it to worry and fear, and thus to abandon certain actions’.¹⁶⁴ This psychological impact can either be achieved by ‘brewing’ ‘in-advance’ deterrence to highlight the potential of future strikes, ‘creating a powerful psychological pressure within the enemy to strive for subduing the enemy without going to battle’, or it can extend into wartime, by using actual strikes for a deterrence effect to maximise ‘psychological shock and awe’.¹⁶⁵

Deception, including disinformation, is a key if often overlooked component of Chinese deterrence behaviour, found in nearly all authoritative military texts. Since the Chinese approach to deterrence is centred on achieving desired political outcomes and rests heavily on manipulating adversary perceptions, manipulating information is an inherently inseparable part of Chinese deterrence signalling. This is clearest in the PLARF’s 2004 *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, where one of the five principles of ‘campaign deterrence’ is to ‘integrate the true and the false and use stratagems to seize victory’.¹⁶⁶ It goes on to tout the leakage (泄露, *xielou*) of both true and false information as necessary to create a strong deterrent force, including false forces, false targets, false positions, false intelligence, and even false actions, such as exaggerating the size of an exercise.¹⁶⁷ The goal is to ‘cause the enemy to make faulty judgments’ and to ‘make it difficult to discern the true from the false, and . . . make it difficult for the enemy to decide upon operational decisions, ultimately achieving the goal of “victory through deterrence”’.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the 2011 PLA dictionary defines ‘intelligence deterrence’ as ‘using the information you have or releasing false information in order to force

¹⁶² Peng Guangqian [彭光谦] and Yao Youzhi [姚有志], *The Science of Military Strategy*, Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005 (translation of 2001 Chinese version), pp. 225–226.

¹⁶³ AMS Military Strategy Department *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 135.

¹⁶⁴ All Army Military Terminology Management Committee, *Military Terminology of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army*. [北京: 军事科学出版社], 2011, p. 121.

¹⁶⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 153.

¹⁶⁶ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 281.

¹⁶⁷ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 281.

¹⁶⁸ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 281.

the opponent to abandon or reduce the intensity of the confrontation'.¹⁶⁹ This even applies to nuclear deterrence: 'In the process of demonstrating nuclear strength, fake launch positions and already-known silos should also be used as sites of deterrence. At the same time, they should be equipped with various types of missiles and nuclear weapons and related supporting facilities to combine the true and the false and make false and real things reinforce each other. [Foreign] ambassadors, military attaches and reporters from the relevant countries can be invited to tour the sites and take photos to consciously show [our] strength'.¹⁷⁰ These all reveal a broad desire to accomplish deterrence through information manipulation in many forms.

Offensive psychological warfare is a related component of Chinese deterrence thinking. Often referred to as 'psychological deterrence', this concept focusses on undermining enemy will to fight as a way of reducing its resolve, improving your relative deterrence, and thus force the enemy to submit to your demands.¹⁷¹ This can apply to enemy leadership, troops, or the general public. A 2013 PLA textbook for psychological warfare explains the objective is to 'cause the enemy to be confused and make wrong decisions, making them reduce or lose combat effectiveness' through 'using radio, aircraft, balloons, or other means to amplify their anxiety of hostile warfare, fear of death and injury, aversion to hardships, and the thought of the hometown of loved ones'.¹⁷² The 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* even explicitly calls for the 'three warfares' (public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare) to be part of 'creating a climate of war', one of the prescribed deterrence actions.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ All Army Military Terminology Management Committee, *Military Terminology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, p. 225.

¹⁷⁰ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 287.

¹⁷¹ It can also simply mean achieving deterrence through degrading adversary psychological will to fight. See Zhang Yuliang, *Science of Campaigns*, pp. 493–500.

For some PLA writings on the topic, see Jiang Yibin [蒋一斌], 'Implementation Strategies of Strategic Psychological Warfare' ['战略心理战的实施策略'], *Journal of Xi'an Political Academy* [西安政治学院学报], May 2002, pp. 32–35 (the author is from PLA Xi'an Political Academy); Huang Xiaohua [黄小华], Wu Xiaofeng [吴晓锋], and Zhou Hongjiang [周洪江], 'Research on the Optimal Choice of the Tactics for the Deterrent Psychological Operations' ['威慑心理战战法优选研究'], *Ship Electronic Engineering* [舰船电子工程], May 2004, pp. 1–4, 91 (the authors are from the PLAN); He Lingfeng [贺岭峰], 'Research on Operational Mechanism of Deterrence Psychological Warfare' ['威慑心理战的作战机理研究'], paper presented to Tenth National Conference of Psychology [第十届全国心理学学术大会], October 2005 (the author is from Nanjing Political Academy); Xu Xinzhaio [徐新照], Chen Chong [陈冲], Xu Jun [徐珺], and Xue Renjie [薛仁杰], 'On the Psychological Activity Rules and the Psychological Effects in the Information Deterrence' ['信息威慑中的心理活动规律及其心理效应'], *National Defence Science and Technology* [国防科技], Vol. 32, No. 5, 2011, pp. 80–83 (the authors are from the PLA's Electronic Engineering University); Xu Zhouwen [徐周文], 'Brief Discussion on Psychological Deterrence Strategies' ['心理威慑谋略简论'], *Journal of Xi'an Political Academy* [西安政治学院学报], March 2015, pp. 123–125 (the author is from PLA Xi'an Political Academy).

¹⁷² Ye Zheng [叶征], *Lectures on the Science of Information Operations* [信息作战学教程], Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2013, p. 179.

¹⁷³ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 130. For brief overviews of the PLA's approach to the Three Warfares, see Peter Mattis, 'China's Three Warfares in Perspective', *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018; and Elsa Kania, 'The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares', *China Brief*, August 22, 2016.

The PLA developed this approach in part by learning from recent U.S. military operations, including the Iraq War, a major inspiration for PLA psychological warfare.¹⁷⁴

PLA researchers have explicitly explored the value of information manipulation (including disinformation) for deterrence.¹⁷⁵ During 2010–2011, a group of PLA National University of Defence Technology (NUDT) researchers explored the use of manipulated video for psychological warfare.¹⁷⁶ They explored psychological warfare deterrence, specifically ‘video deterrence’ (视频威慑, *shipin weishe*), along with other forms of manipulated videos such as ‘distorted videos’ (篡改视频, *cuangai shipin*) and ‘fake videos’ (虚拟视频, *xuni shipin*).¹⁷⁷ They described this as one component of ‘psychological warfare deterrence information’ (心理战威慑信息, *xinlizhan weishe xinxi*), which can be delivered in person, through dropping leaflets and through radio, television, and computer networks, with the goal of ‘causing psychological damage’.¹⁷⁸ ‘Video deterrence’, according to the NUDT researchers, can be applied alongside ‘limited or selected true deterrence’ in peacetime and wartime and uses ‘multimedia, online information and other methods to transmit virtual military exercises, and display weapons to the other side’, with the goal of achieving ‘the largest psychological suppressive effect for the smallest cost’.¹⁷⁹ Most notably, they specifically suggested using ‘audio-visual technology to imitate the voice of the national leadership and battlefield commanders to mislead the adversary’s decisionmakers into wrong decisions’.¹⁸⁰ Table 2.1 provides a translated table from this 2011 NUDT article that explains in explicit terms the breakdown of psychological warfare tactics employed in service of deterrence during peacetime and wartime (but not crisis) against an adversary.

There are some real-world examples of PLA signalling that align fairly well with this approach. Most prominently is the PLAAF’s December 2016 release of a photo of Chinese H-6K bombers flying near an island with mountains, which the PLAAF claimed to be Taiwan. However, Taiwan’s MND rejected this claim and labelled it ‘psychological warfare’, saying

¹⁷⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 140; Zhang Yulian, *Science of Campaigns*, p. 204. For a U.S. analysis, see Dean Cheng, ‘Chinese Lessons from the Gulf Wars’, in Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples’ Wars*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2011, pp. 153–200.

¹⁷⁵ This section expands on previous research in Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, ‘Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA’s New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations’, *China Brief*, September 6, 2019.

¹⁷⁶ Body of research identified by two grants from 2006 (National High-Tech Research and Development Plan #2006AA01Z316) and 2009 (National Youth Science Fund Project #60902094) that resulted in publications spanning 2009–2016.

¹⁷⁷ Bu Jiang [卜江], Lao Songyang [老松杨], Bai Liang [白亮], Guo Xiaoyi [郭小一], and Liu Haitao [刘海涛], ‘The Research on Video Based Psychological Warfare and Its Key Technology’ [‘基于视频的心理战及其关键技术’], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], December 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Guo Xiaoyi [郭小一], Lao Songyang [老松杨], and Wu Xiaoxi [吴晓曦], ‘Research on Psychological Warfare Video Information Product Development System’ [‘心理战视频信息产品开发系统研究’], *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* [军事运筹与系统工程], Vol. 24, No. 2, June 2010, pp. 40–44.

¹⁷⁹ Guo Xiaoyi, Lao Songyang, and Wu Xiaoxi, ‘Research on Psychological Warfare Video Information Product Development System’, pp. 40–44.

¹⁸⁰ Bu Jiang et al., ‘Research on Video Based Psychological Warfare’.

Table 2.1. People's Liberation Army Breakdown of Tailored Psychological Warfare

Operational Phase	Operational Target	Tactics	Information Type	Vector	Operational Goal
Peacetime	Domestic masses International society	National Programming Plan	Truthful		Strengthening domestic confidence International public opinion support
Wartime	Adversary elites Battlefield troops Masses	Edit video content Selectively broadcast true information Pure disinformation	Truthful + disinformation Truthful Disinformation	EW interference Internet penetration	Oppose war Pressure wartime psychology [Induce] commanders' incorrect decisions

SOURCE: Bu Jiang et al., 'The Research on Video Based Psychological Warfare and Its Key Technology' ['基于视频的心理战及其关键技术'], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], December 2011, via Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 'Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA's New Holistic Concept for Influence Operations', *China Brief*, September 6, 2019.

the Chinese planes did not fly close enough for such a photo, and thus it must have been manipulated.¹⁸¹ The PLAAF has nonetheless continued to use the video to taunt Taiwan via social media. This example is explored more in a case study in Chapter 4.

Looking forward, the advent of 'deep fakes' and related manipulated information online, enabled by advanced processing software, is very likely to facilitate further PLA use of disinformation for deterrence. These manipulated videos for deterrence require advanced video-processing technology and something referred to as 'sound-image synthesis technology' (声像合成技术, *shengxiang hecheng jishu*), which appears to have been a PLA version of 'deep fakes' before the term was popularised, dating to at least 2007.¹⁸² Various versions of this 'synthesis' technology have been employed over the years by PLA researchers to make it a rare but consistent component to psychological warfare research. More recently, the PLA has expanded its research to deep fakes (深伪, *shenwei* or 换脸技术, *huanlian jishu*), including in a 2019 article that mentioned the application of deep fakes for psychological warfare in the context of military operations in smart cities.¹⁸³

Deterrence Communication

Although China acknowledges the importance of communicating deterrence signals, there is limited available public writing to understand how China thinks about the actual specifics of this communication. Insofar as it is discussed, this is most often described in authoritative

¹⁸¹ Matthew Strong, 'Military Denies Yushan in China Bomber Picture', *Taiwan News*, December 17, 2016.

¹⁸² Yang Chengping [杨成平] and He Wei [何秧], 'The Main Contradictions and Countermeasures in Wartime Political Work' ['战时政治工作面临的主要矛盾及对策'], *Journal of Political Work* [政工学刊], November 2007.

¹⁸³ Li Hengrui [李恒锐], Wang Haiyuan [王海元], Fan Ming [樊明], and Jia Lili [贾理理], 'Study on the Future Smart City Joint Operations' ['未来智慧城市联合作战'], *National Defence Technology* [国防科技], Vol. 40, No. 5, October 2019, pp. 117–121.

texts as ‘transmitting deterrence information’ (传递威慑信息, *chuandi weishe xinxi*) through channels (途径, *tujing* or 渠道, *qudao*), though this phrase is not used in much of the broader PLA literature.

Although national strength and overall capabilities are crucial elements of deterrence, Chinese military thought reveals that communication and transmission are almost equally important because deterrence in essence is psychological and thus opponents must receive and believe the messages being conveyed. The 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* acknowledges that deterrence inherently involves interacting with the adversary and ‘requires taking [one’s] capabilities and resolve to use those capabilities as information transmitted to the other side, and to directly create psychological pressure on the other side through a sense of awe’.¹⁸⁴ However, there is no detailed discussion of how to properly transmit this information. The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* qualifies that the specific methods used should ‘mainly be determined according to the [intended] effect of the information’, while emphasising that a basic prerequisite is to ensure transmission channels remain unblocked.¹⁸⁵ The 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* provides minimally more guidance, recommending ‘through multiple channels to clearly transmit capability and resolve to use force in a timely, fast, and accurate manner’.¹⁸⁶

There are, nonetheless, some broad trends in discussions of how deterrence messages should be transmitted. Most recently, both the 2013 AMS and 2015 NDU versions of the *Science of Military Strategy* emphasise both direct and indirect communication, with the 2015 NDU version recommending ‘fully using all types of exchanges and communication, including directly communicating with the decisionmakers and going through third-party intermediaries’, and specifically mentioning that ‘wireless radio, TV and other media as well as the Internet are effective transmission methods’.¹⁸⁷

It is not an accident that the clearest descriptions of communication are from discussions of how to use psychological warfare for deterrence. One of the PLARF’s deterrence actions, shaping foreign public opinion through propaganda, is fundamentally based on psychological warfare tactics. The 2012 PLARF encyclopedia defines this as ‘sending definitive messages through various media and propaganda of combat resolve, will, capability, and so on, to the opponent in order to achieve the goal of shock and awe’.¹⁸⁸ In a rare example of specific steps for how to transmit deterrence information, the 2004 *Science of Second Artillery*

¹⁸⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 2nd ed., p. 232. The 2001 language is, ‘deterrence requires turning the strength and the determination of using strength into the information transmitting to the opponent, and to impact directly on his mentality in creating a psychological pressure to shock and awe the opponent’. Translation via Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 214.

¹⁸⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd. ed., p. 137.

¹⁸⁶ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 120.

¹⁸⁷ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 134; AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 135–137.

¹⁸⁸ *China Strategic Missile Force Encyclopedia*, p. 80.

Campaigns explains that ‘using multiple types of propaganda vehicles’, the strategic missile force should

1. release a news announcement showcasing new missiles through TV, internet, or press conferences
2. release images of missile forces training to foreign media
3. issue a serious warning to the adversary that a missile strike will be launched.¹⁸⁹

The *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* also addresses what the PLARF should do and how it should communicate deterrence signals in the event of an intervention by the ‘strong enemy’, namely the United States, during a Taiwan conflict:

- If the ‘enemy’ begins to intervene, Beijing should ‘fiercely denounce the enemy’s interventionist activities, and prepare for comprehensive operations’.
- If the ‘enemy’ threatens China, Beijing should broadcast videos of missile exercises to show that it is prepared to fight.
- If the enemy’s aircraft carrier combat group uses military force against China, Beijing should communicate via diplomatic, broadcast, and TV channels that the potential for PLA conventional missile strikes against the aircraft carriers ‘will not be removed from possibility’.¹⁹⁰

In practice, however, it is difficult to imagine Beijing responding to a U.S. use of force against China in a Taiwan scenario with only a warning and no retaliation.

There is some awareness that deterrence messages may not be transmitted seamlessly.¹⁹¹ The 2001 *Science of Military Strategy* warns that deterrence will be unsuccessful ‘if the other

¹⁸⁹ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 283.

¹⁹⁰ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 283.

¹⁹¹ The most prolific PLA scholar on deterrence signalling is Xiang Ganghua at the PLARF Command Academy. See Wang Yongxian [王永县] and Xiang Ganghua [向钢华], ‘An Analysis of Mutual Deterrence Stability Based on Evolutionary Game Approach’ [‘基于进化博弈方法的相互威慑稳定性分析’], *Operations Research and Management Science* [运筹与管理], 2005, pp. 1–6; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘Game-Theoretical Analysis of Probe Strategy in Military Deterrence’ [‘军事威慑中试探策略博弈分析’], *Systems Engineering* [系统工程], 2005, pp. 8–11; Wang Yongxian [王永县] and Xiang Ganghua [向钢华], ‘The Research of Military Deterrence Theory Based on Game Analysis’ [‘基于博弈分析的军事威慑理论研究’], *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* [清华大学学报(哲学社会科学版)], 2005, pp. 66–70; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘A Dynamic Game Model of the Tripartite Extended Deterrence with Incomplete Information’ [‘一种三方不完全信息延伸威慑动态博弈模型’], *Systems Engineering* [系统工程], 2006, pp. 40–43; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘A Summary of Contemporary Western Game Theory-Based Deterrence Theories’ [‘当代西方基于博弈论方法的威慑理论综述’], *Social Sciences Abroad* [国外社会科学], 2006, pp. 71–75; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘Preference and Information in Deterrence Games’ [‘偏好、信息与威慑博弈’], *Chinese Journal of International Politics* [国际政治科学], 2006, pp. 1–33, 152; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘The Model of Bounded Rational Deterrence Based on Cumulative Prospect Theory’ [‘基于累积前景理论的有限理性威慑模型’], *Systems Engineering* [系统工程], 2006, pp. 107–110; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘Models Comparison for Predicting Challenger’s Behaviours in Military Deterrence Game’ [‘军事威慑博弈中挑战者行为预测模型比较’], *Mathematics in Practice and Theory* [数学的实践与认识], 2008, pp. 98–102; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘A Bargaining Model of Mutual Deterrence with Incomplete Information’ [‘一种不完全信息相互威慑讨价还价模型’], *Operations Research and Management Science* [运筹与管理], Vol. 17, No. 6, 2008, pp. 16–19; Xiang Ganghua [向钢华] and Wang Yongxian [王永县], ‘Game Theoretical

side does not receive this information, or if the information they receive is unclear, or if the side being deterred believes it is a bluff'.¹⁹² The 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* recognises the importance of the two sides sharing 'an identical or close cognitive logic, for example both sides want to avoid war, reduce casualties and uphold stability'.¹⁹³ The challenge, however, is if one side is 'willing to take risks at any cost'. This means that one 'must seriously research the other side's decisionmaker's psychological characteristics and behaviour (way of acting), flexibly employ deterrence methods and apply comprehensive pressure in a targeted manner'.¹⁹⁴ The 2013 AMS version notes this applies to nuclear deterrence as well, in that 'the practical effect of nuclear deterrence directly depends upon how the side being deterred perceives and understands the deterrent information'.¹⁹⁵

Highlighting this relative lack of emphasis on the communication component for deterrence signalling is a 2014 article focussed on developing a systematic approach to strategic deterrence.¹⁹⁶ Published in a Chinese military journal, it analyses a case of deterrence in which China (referenced as Actor A) is using force against another party, likely Taiwan (Actor C), and there is a risk that the United States (Actor B) might

Analysis of Compellence in Military Affairs' ['军事威逼博弈分析'], *Operations Research and Management Science* [运筹与管理], 2010, pp. 5–8; Zhang Xiaojuan [张小娟], Xiang Ganghua [向钢华], Hu Xizhen [胡喜珍], and Cao Suping [曹素平], 'Game Theoretical Analysis of Military Compellence Bargaining Process with Incomplete Information' ['不完全信息下军事威逼讨价还价博弈分析'], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], Vol. 41, No. 10, 2016, pp. 55–58; Zhang Xiaojuan [张小娟] and Xiang Ganghua [向钢华], 'Analysis of Strategy Deterrence Combining with Evident and Recessive Ways Based on Signal Game Theory' ['基于信号博弈的'显隐结合'战略威慑分析'], *Ordnance Industry Automation* [兵工自动化], 2018, pp. 54–57.

For other PLA articles on deterrence signalling, see Cao Shixin [曹士信], 'Evaluation on Information Transmission Efficiency of Deterrence Based on Bayesian Networks Simulation' ['基于贝叶斯网络仿真的威慑信息传递效能评估'], *Journal of the Academy of Equipment Command and Technology* [装备指挥技术学院学报], Vol. 21, No. 2, April 2020, pp. 113–116 (the author is from the PLA Army's Shenyang Artillery College); Xu Jiaqiang [徐加强], Bi Yiming [毕义明], Qiao Jing [乔婧], and Li Rui [励锐], 'Military Deterrence Signalling Game Analysis Based on Argumentative Domains' ['面向争议领域的军事威慑信号博弈分析'], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], Vol. 37, No. 9, September 2012, pp. 146–149 (the authors are from various PLARF units).

¹⁹² AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 2nd ed., p. 232, translation via Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, *Science of Military Strategy*.

¹⁹³ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 120.

¹⁹⁴ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 120.

¹⁹⁵ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 174.

For more detailed writings, see Zhao Juan [赵娟], 'Research on the Rationality of Strategic Deterrence Target Country Decisionmakers' ['战略威慑目标国决策者理性研究'], *Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics* [南京政治学院学报], Vol. 6, 2010, pp. 63–66; Zhao Juan [赵娟] and Tian Yu [天羽], 'On the Strategic Deterrence Target Countries' Decisionmakers' Way of Thinking' ['战略威慑目标国决策者的决策思维方式探析'], *Military Politics Review* [军事政治学研究], Vol. 2, 2013, pp. 83–95; Zhao Juan [赵娟], 'Psychological Factors Affecting Decisionmakers of Strategic Deterrence Target Countries' ['战略威慑目标国决策者的决策心理要素探析'], *Journal of Military Transportation University* [军事交通学院学报], Vol. 18, No. 7, July 2016, pp. 73–76.

¹⁹⁶ Cai Yequan [蔡业泉] and Liang Yi [梁熠], 'The Composition, Application and Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Strategic Deterrence System' ['战略威慑体系的构成、运用及其效用评估研究'], *Military Operations Research and Systems Engineering* [军事运筹与系统工程], January 2014, pp. 13–19.

intervene.¹⁹⁷ One graphic in the article depicts how the authors envision Chinese deterrence actions shaping the United States' decision whether to intervene on behalf of Actor C. Despite much effort put into depicting the inputs, decision points, and possible interactions between all three actors, the graphic contains only a single component actually linking the two sides. The graphic describes that 'Actor A [China] transmits its power, objective and resolve through a series of deterrence actions', which Actor B (the United States) then makes a judgement on and responds to. This is to say, there is no analysis of how the signal may be received, misperceived, misinterpreted or the possibility that China's action could unintentionally escalate the crisis to an unexpected or undesired state.

Conclusion

Although the PRC does not have much recent experience with high-end deterrence in a crisis situation, it clearly has invested time and energy into developing its own thinking on deterrence. This PRC thinking on deterrence appears relatively consistent over time, though it has evolved with some important exceptions, such as a growing emphasis on the space and cyber domains and discussions about transitioning to a launch on warning posture for China's nuclear missile force.¹⁹⁸ This external appearance of continuity may reflect a dearth of new authoritative PLA sources in recent years, and as new versions of the *Science of Military Strategy* likely are published in the coming years, analysts should be prepared to update their understanding of PRC deterrence signalling. Nevertheless, the core principles remain the same and this chapter presents the best information available and closest approximation to what the PLA teaches its own officers.

For Western analysts, the key to understanding PRC deterrence is to realise that *weishe* embodies both dissuasion and compellence, and that Beijing will use military tools for coercive political objectives. The PLA focus, much like the United States, on tailored deterrence to each specific adversary and incident—and on operating without a public playbook—means that analysts must have a foundational understanding of Chinese thinking on deterrence and a framework for deciphering Chinese deterrence signalling. With this chapter providing the foundation, the next chapter provides such a framework for analysts observing, characterising, and interpreting Chinese deterrence behaviour.

¹⁹⁷ The article cites several U.S. reports that focus on U.S.-China interaction over Taiwan, including Paul Godwin and Alice Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2013; James Dobbins, Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, David C. Gompert, Derek Grossman, Eric Heginbotham, and Howard J. Shatz, *Conflict with China Revisited: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-248-A, 2017.

¹⁹⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2020*, p. 88.

3. A Framework for Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signals

This chapter provides an analytic framework to decipher Chinese deterrence signals. Although each instance of Chinese deterrence signalling will be unique in some ways, there are sufficient consistent components to China's deterrence behaviour to identify some core principles. These principles can serve as guidelines for government and independent analysts to interpret deterrence actions by China. This analytic framework centres on five factors: (1) the strategic context as background, and (2) the signal's content, (3) the intended audience, (4) authoritativeness, and (5) scope. The chapter begins by reviewing previous efforts to distil Chinese deterrence principles. It then addresses two key evolving trends with implications for understanding Chinese deterrence signalling: the growing array of military assets China can now use for deterrence actions and China's embrace of new communication channels for sending out these signals. Next it presents the core analytic framework. It concludes by creating a simple checklist for assessing Chinese signalling in a crisis. We believe this represents the first attempt in the literature at creating a comprehensive framework for interpreting contemporary Chinese deterrence signalling.

Past Research

Foreign scholars have long sought to understand and properly interpret Chinese deterrence behaviour. Indeed, it has been a subject of considerable attention since the PRC's founding. The PRC's frequent use of military force under Mao—involvement in three major wars in 20 years (against Australia and the United States in Korea, the 1962 border conflict with India, and PRC support for North Vietnam during the Vietnam War) and at least three more crises (border clashes with Russia in 1969 and the 1954–1955 and 1958 Taiwan Strait Crises)—provided ample material for researchers to draw historical precedents. Allen Whiting was one of the earliest scholars to leverage these events to understand Beijing's behaviour. In his 1975 book *The Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, Whiting developed a 'modest codification of deterrence principles' for Beijing.¹⁹⁹ It summarises that

1. the best deterrence is belligerence:
 - a. to be credible, move military force; words do not suffice
 - b. to be diplomatic, leave the enemy 'face' and a way out
 - c. to be prudent, leave yourself an 'option'
 - d. if at first you don't succeed, try again but more so

¹⁹⁹ Allen Whiting, *The Calculus of Chinese Deterrence: India and Indochina*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975, p. 202.

2. correct timing is essential:
 - a. warning must be given early when a threat is perceived but not yet imminent
 - b. the rhythm of signals must permit the enemy to respond and us to confirm the situation
 - c. we must control our moves and not respond according to the enemy's choice.

In the Deng era, the 1979 China-Vietnam border war added an important case study for scholars. However, the lack of PLA involvement in major combat operations since 1979 has left general understanding of Chinese deterrence behaviour in the post-Cold War era limited to only peacetime and crisis, notably Taiwan in 1995–1996, and thus incomplete. The most recent study to explore Chinese deterrence behaviour is Godwin and Miller's 2013 *Chinese Forbearance Has Its Limits*, but its applicability to future Chinese behaviour is attenuated by the recent trends covered below. Making the case for consistency over time, they assert that 'this approach has been employed consistently despite the sweeping changes in the PRC's place in the international order, the proliferation of foreign policy instruments at its disposal, the more complex crisis decisionmaking process and domestic political environment, and the dramatic evolution in the Chinese media over the decades'.²⁰⁰ Writing in 2013, they ask 'whether improving military capabilities will lead Beijing to substitute sudden or surprise attack for the politically calibrated deterrence signalling it has employed prior to its past use of force'.²⁰¹ In this report we argue that enough has changed to warrant a new look at Chinese deterrence signalling. As such, this framework draws heavily from the 2013 study but has also updated it to include new developments since its publication.

Keeping Pace with Evolving Trends

As covered in Chapter 1, the most important changes and ongoing trends for consideration by analysts are the more ambitious goals China is pursuing in the 'new era', the increased numbers of tools China has at its disposal for conducting deterrence actions, and the profusion of communication channels for sending out these signals. China's more expansive goals have set new targets for the use of deterrence or coercion. China's military modernisation has provided a range of high-profile and highly capable power projection platforms and long-range strike capabilities that are well suited for deterrence actions. These include China's two aircraft carriers, mobile missiles such as the DF-21D, DF-26, and others, and growing fleet of conventional and nuclear-capable bombers. The arrival of social media is the natural focal point of discussion for new communication channels, but the broader story is the rise of China's extensive foreign propaganda network across many media over the last 20 years. Both of these new trends will continue in the coming years and complicate analysing Chinese deterrence signalling.

²⁰⁰ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 1.

²⁰¹ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 1.

Factor 1: Strategic Context

In order to understand any signal(s) Beijing is sending, an analyst must have an understanding of China's security interests, threat perceptions, and past behaviour on various issues. As the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* states, deterrence must be built 'on the basic trend of national security interests development under globalisation and informationised conditions' and China must 'objectively analyse security threats and their sources that may face China in the progress of peaceful development'.²⁰² The key drivers of deterrence requirements are ensuring the global strategic balance (ensuring China's overall security, especially from U.S. nuclear coercion), deterring local wars (conflicts on China's periphery), safeguarding China's maritime interests (territorial claims, maritime trade, and energy imports), protecting China in new domains (space, cyber), and safeguarding global stability (China's interests abroad).²⁰³ The CCP is fairly transparent on its claimed interests and what it views as threatening to its espoused interests, outlined in key policy documents.

Questions to Ask:

- Is China reacting to an action (however small) by another country, and/or is it proactively seizing a perceived opportunity to advance its interests?
- What does China view as threatening? What is it worried about?
- What actions by others have altered Chinese threat perceptions?
- What are Beijing's preexisting red lines on this issue?
- Does Beijing intend this as general deterrence (peacetime) or immediate deterrence (crisis or wartime)?
- Is this domestically motivated within China or by external factors?

Understanding Chinese Interests

Security concerns are an important priority for the CCP. As noted above, according to the DIA, the CCP's 'strategic objectives' are 'perpetuate CCP rule, maintain domestic stability, sustain economic growth and development, defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, [and] secure China's status as a great power'.²⁰⁴ For the PLA itself, China's 'national defence aims' are 'to deter and resist aggression; to safeguard national political security, the people's security and social stability; to crack down on proponents of separatist movements such as "Tibet independence" and the creation of "East Turkistan"; to safeguard national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests; to safeguard China's security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space and cyberspace; to safeguard China's overseas interests; and to support the sustainable development

²⁰² AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 145.

²⁰³ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., pp. 145–146.

²⁰⁴ Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Arlington, Va.: Defense Intelligence Agency, January 2019, p. 12.

of the country'.²⁰⁵ In essence, this means the PLA is tasked with defending the CCP's political survival, supporting the CCP's territorial claims—including the stated core interests of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, plus the disputed features in the South China Sea and the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands—and broader goals of economic development and overseas interests.

The vast majority, if not all, of China's deterrence actions since the founding of the PRC have naturally been focussed on China's periphery, where its interests are highest. The CCP and PLA's past use of force have all been on its border—Korea (1950), India (1962), Vietnam (1979)—or related to Taiwan and the ongoing maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. The PLA generally believes the most likely war for China will be a regional war, suggesting that, for the foreseeable future, China's deterrence signalling is likely to remain focussed on these potential areas of conflict relatively close to China.²⁰⁶ One trend to watch, however, is whether as China's interests extend further around the world and Chinese military capabilities follow to protect those interests, Chinese deterrence signalling will similarly extend beyond the Indo-Pacific region? If so, there would probably be some clear signposts ahead of the evolution of Chinese deterrence signalling in a more global direction. These could include developments such as an adjustment to China's military strategic guidelines, changes in the PLA's guidelines for joint operations, and publication of PLA books on strategy that include discussions of using power projection capabilities—such as PLAN aircraft carriers and the marine corps—for deterrence or intimidation more globally.

Understanding Preexisting Red Lines

Beyond official statements of China's interests and objectives in authoritative policy documents, Beijing has at times issued high-level statements on issues of importance indicating actions China opposes. For example, regarding North Korea, China's policy has long been 'no war, no instability, and no nuclear weapons' (不战, 不乱, 无核), and this 'red line' has been repeated by the Foreign Minister in times of crises, including 2014 and 2016.²⁰⁷ For Taiwan, Chinese statements in past crises have clearly expressed opposition to any Taiwanese moves towards independence, including government actions (declaring independence) and mass movements (referendums).

²⁰⁵ Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, 'China's National Defense in the New Era'.

²⁰⁶ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed.; Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, 'China's National Defense in the New Era'.

²⁰⁷ For a Chinese source mentioning the policy, see Li Xiaodong [李效东], ed., *A Study of Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula* [朝鲜半岛危机管理研究], Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2010, p. 4; Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, 'Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula', Center for Strategic International Studies, 2012, p. 1. For foreign minister statements, see 'Wang Yi: China Has a "Red Line" on the Korean Peninsula Issue and Will Never Allow War and Chaos' [王毅: 中国在朝鲜半岛问题上有“红线”绝不允许生战生乱], People's Daily Online, March 8, 2014; 'Wang Yi Talks about Principles China Upholds in Dealing with the Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, February 13, 2016.

Understanding Motivations

It is also important to understand the international and domestic motivations of Chinese use of force abroad. Beyond the obvious external causes, China's past use of force has at times been at least in part driven by domestic politics, such as Deng's decision to attack Vietnam in 1979 as a way to spur military modernisation.²⁰⁸ At other times, the decision to go to war has been very contentious within the Chinese leadership, such as Mao's hesitancy and Lin Biao's pushback to intervene in the Korean War.²⁰⁹ Although domestic factors are difficult to assess for how they will play out—either pushing or restraining China's willingness to use force—this may have an impact on how China signals deterrence, and the clarity of those signals. China has also, at times, seized perceived windows of opportunity to advance its interests through 'grey zone' coercion.

Factor 2: Content

The first question to ask to understand Chinese deterrence signalling is simply what deterrence messages are being sent or, in other words, what is China saying and doing? Chinese military publications emphasise the importance of clearly conveying messages by words and action. The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* addresses the 'information content' that is intended to be conveyed to the deterred side, specifically noting that this content should centre on the intended objective, the activity China may adopt, and its resolve to make good on this threat.²¹⁰ It asserts that 'Successful deterrence must make the deterred side be aware of the exact meaning expressed by the deterrence strength and the deterrence resolution'. Separately, it explains that the deterrence information can be conveyed via either 'verbal transmission', namely deterrence rhetoric, and 'activity transmission', namely deterrence actions.²¹¹ This provides a basic overview of Chinese thinking on the topic.

Questions to Ask:

- What is China saying?
 - What action is Beijing warning others against taking?
 - What red lines is Beijing setting for warranting a further Chinese response?
 - What is China threatening to do in response?
 - What propaganda narratives are being sent via state-run media?
 - What diplomatic messages are being sent via nonpublic channels?
 - How clear and specific is Chinese rhetoric?

²⁰⁸ Joshua Eisenman, 'China's Vietnam War Revisited: A Domestic Politics Perspective', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119, March 2019, pp. 729–745.

²⁰⁹ Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, 'China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 121, March 1990, pp. 94–115; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

²¹⁰ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 137.

²¹¹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 137.

- What is China doing?
 - What military action(s) are China undertaking?
 - What nonmilitary action(s) are China undertaking?
 - Are these new actions or revealing new capabilities?
 - What scale are these actions?
 - Is this likely a preplanned action or a rapid response to an event?
 - Is there a potential gap/nonalignment between what China is saying and what China is doing?

Understanding Chinese Rhetoric

The first aspect is to understand what Beijing is trying to prevent—this may well be obvious based on the strategic context and Chinese messaging. China intends its deterrence rhetoric to be correctly interpreted by the deterred side, meaning its messages should be increasingly clear and specific. Beijing is likely to attempt to communicate what it seeks to avoid and what it will do in response. In practice, however, this can be difficult at times. Even if China intends to send clear messages, there is increasingly a lot of noise. Indeed, one downside to Beijing's broader communication strategy is that it produces a high noise-to-signal ratio: Beijing is always upset about *something*, countries are often at risk of butting up against an imagined Chinese sensitivity, and *someone* is frequently 'hurting the feelings of the Chinese people'.²¹² Chinese analysts appear to be aware of this contradiction. They suggest it could be advantageous if the resulting uncertainty or ambiguity induces the adversary to be more cautious. At the same time, they acknowledge it could be disadvantageous if it instead leads the adversary to misunderstand Chinese messages, or even to miss them completely. This was even a problem in the past, as Whiting comments that Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi noted how Beijing's signalling for Korea was missed: 'At the time of the Korean War, we first warned against crossing the thirty-eighth parallel but America ignored the warning. The second time, we warned again, but America occupied Pyongyang. The third time, we warned again, but America aggressed close to the Yalu River and threatened the security of China'.²¹³

However, China reserves a special language for crises to signal its level of seriousness about using force to prevent an adversary's undesired action. Whiting notes the Chinese desire for consistent signalling with escalating severity. He finds that in Korea, 'Chinese warnings carried a steady, authoritative signal of interest and intervention with increasing emphasis and more explicit content', while the India conflict had 'precise changes in formal vocabulary accompanied [by] more bellicose military and media postures', with 'subtle escalation of language'.²¹⁴ Godwin and Miller assert that Beijing has a long-standing 'calculus of threat and retaliation signals intended first to deter an adversary from taking actions contrary to Chinese interests by threatening the use of military force, and if deterrence failed,

²¹² Amy King, 'Hurting the Feelings of the Chinese People', Wilson Center, February 15, 2017.

²¹³ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 206.

²¹⁴ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, pp. 209, 211.

to explain and justify Beijing's resort to military force'.²¹⁵ This is implemented 'by a carefully calibrated hierarchy of official protests, authoritative press comment, and leadership statements'. Moreover, they highlight the 'systematic integration of political and diplomatic action with military preparations as the signalling escalates through higher levels of authority'.²¹⁶ Providing more detail, they outline a 'lexicon of threat and retaliation warnings . . . with increasing explicitness that conveys Beijing's readiness to use force'.²¹⁷ In order of increasing seriousness (with 1 being least serious and 9 most serious in terms of signalling willingness to consider the use of force), these include

1. X is 'playing with fire' and may 'get burned'.
2. Beijing so far has 'exercised the greatest restraint and forbearance' but this 'should not be taken as weakness and submissiveness'.
3. Do 'not turn a deaf ear to China's warnings'; China 'cannot stand idly by'.
4. 'How far will you go? We shall wait and see'.
5. 'China's forbearance has limits'; X is 'deluding itself in thinking we are weak and can be bullied'.
6. If X does not cease its behaviour, it 'will meet the punishment it deserves'.
7. 'Do not complain later that we did not give you clear warning in advance'.
8. We have been 'driven beyond forbearance' and are 'forced to counterattack'; our 'restraint was regarded as an invitation to bullying'; our 'warning fell on deaf ears'.
9. 'We will not attack if we are not attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack'.²¹⁸

Although much has changed in recent years in terms of China's strategic goals, military capabilities, and available communication channels, the available indications suggest that this hierarchy of warnings remains highly relevant today. For instance, in September 2020, when Beijing sought to demonstrate its displeasure following the visit of a senior U.S. Department of State official to Taiwan, it not only engaged in stepped-up Chinese military signalling aimed at the island, but also issued a warning employing language drawn from this lexicon. Speaking to reporters, a PRC MND spokesperson said, 'Those who play with fire will be burned'.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 1.

²¹⁶ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 49.

²¹⁷ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 33.

²¹⁸ China would likely claim that its actions are a response to some sort of provocation, whether political (such as some sort of action Party leaders perceive as unacceptable movement towards independence by Taiwan) or military (such as some sort of military construction or other military activity along the disputed border with India). Additionally, Beijing would very likely aim to send the message that its actions as a reasonable and fully justifiable response for propaganda reasons, even if its portrayal of events is disconnected from the reality of the situation.

²¹⁹ Gerry Shih, 'China Launches Combat Drills in Taiwan Strait, Warns U.S. Not to Play with Fire', *Washington Post*, September 18, 2020.

Understanding Chinese Actions

Accompanying this deterrence rhetoric would be deterrence actions intended to demonstrate capability and resolve. Building on Chapter 2's overview of these actions, analysts must determine the level of seriousness, or willingness to consider the use of force, Beijing is conveying. There is a noise problem here as well. Indeed, an issue that can complicate the messaging associated with particular actions by the PLA is the reality that the PLA is much more active, and in more sophisticated ways than it was 10 to 20 years ago. This can lead to questions about what constitutes a clear signal and what represents the 'new normal' in PLA operations. This means analysts must distinguish between three categories of action, as noted above in Chapter 2: (1) military activities the PLA intends as signals, (2) military activities the PLA normally undertakes that serve a dual purpose as a signal (likely based on Party-state media amplification), and (3) military activities the PLA undertakes (whether normal or not) that are not intended as signals but misinterpreted as such. There are several ways for analysts to try to address this problem.

The actions can be categorised by deterrence intensity following the rough rubric of graduated deterrence, drawn from the *Strategic Missile Force Encyclopedia*. Another important consideration is the scale of the actions. If China is conducting an exercise, how many personnel are involved? How joint is it? How well does it align to the assessed operational plan? Is China conducting the exercise in a new location, in a new way, or integrating a new capability? What is different from before? If China is undertaking nonmilitary actions, such as cutting off trade or tourism, is it being enforced comprehensively or is it merely a symbolic announcement?

One important consideration is how to weigh the balance of any action as a specifically initiated deterrence signal or normal military activity that has been repurposed for propaganda value. Although there is likely some overlap between the two, analysts must be prepared to sort out which activities are intended as signals. Looking at how Beijing expected its signals to be received, Whiting argues the 'regular intervals' of signals 'suggested planned initiatory behaviour rather than unanticipated reactive steps'.²²⁰ This is because the "signals" and "feedback" of enemy response requires some pre-planned rhythm of activity and passivity if the crises are not automatically to end in war'.²²¹ Whiting warns that because all bureaucracies naturally prefer to operate on regular intervals, 'it is difficult to determine from timing alone when discernible patterns simply reflect systemic behaviour and when in addition they are in pursuit of conscious political objectives'. Instead, 'by juxtaposing the specific content of diplomatic and military actions against patterns of timing, certain logical inferences may be drawn pertinent to the hypotheses presented by this study on Chinese deterrence strategy'.²²²

²²⁰ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 213.

²²¹ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 213.

²²² Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 213.

For example, the transit of China's aircraft carriers near Taiwan can be, at the extremes, an intentional decision by the PLA and broader CCP meant solely to demonstrate capability and resolve for retaking Taiwan by force or a necessary movement to conduct sea trials in the open ocean to ensure the carrier is ready to enter service. In reality, at least some of China's manoeuvres of the carrier near Taiwan so far have certainly been for testing, though they have been leveraged for their propaganda value at times. This is similar to North Korea, whose nuclear and missile tests are of technical necessity to make advances on these developmental programs, but the specific timing and rollout are almost always leveraged for maximum political and propaganda effect. Analysts must be careful not to overinterpret all Chinese actions as deterrence signals, but the propaganda messaging that accompanies these nominally routine activities can reveal Beijing's current sentiment on a related issue: if a carrier sailing past Taiwan for a sea trial is unremarked upon by Chinese media in February, the same manoeuvre in June that receives heavy media treatment suggests Beijing's attitude towards Taiwan has changed for some reason over the preceding months. The alternative case, where an action clearly intended as deterrence is explained away as a normal manoeuvre, is less remarkable but can be equally revealing to understand that Beijing is not yet ready to publicly signal an escalation, yet wants the target government to know China is concerned about its actions.

Another consideration is whether the activity is new in some way. Another downside to Beijing's attitude that *someone* is always doing *something* to challenge its interests means that it always has to deter *something* and thus faces diminishing returns on its deterrence actions. These actions, in individual doses, become normalised and no longer serve their intended purpose of signalling others that Beijing is upset. This forces Beijing to either increase the quantity of the original action as a form of ever-growing pressure or undertake a new action to reset the game. This is playing out in the air above the Taiwan Strait, as China has turned the Strait's median line into a de facto barometer for its attitude towards Taipei, as discussed more in Chapter 4.

The last question is to consider whether the information China is communicating (actions or rhetoric) is deception and/or disinformation. As noted above in Chapter 2, authoritative Chinese sources clearly emphasize the psychological component of deterrence, and thus the ability to manipulate adversary perceptions and behaviour. Historically, China's concerns over its own vulnerabilities and inferiority vis-à-vis its main adversaries, especially the United States, meant that it favoured nontransparency and exaggerating its capabilities in order to compensate. As China's material capabilities grow, it is able to transition towards increased transparency to display its actual capabilities. However, the psychological emphasis means that Beijing still may include deception and/or disinformation within its deterrence signalling. For analysts, it is thus important to have a cautious attitude and compare the information Beijing is conveying against what can be observed: Are the military exercises as big as it claims? Is China actually taking the steps towards a war footing it is claiming?

Understanding China's Whole-of-Government Deterrence Signalling

Chinese deterrence actions should be considered along a spectrum, or in a hierarchy, reflecting Beijing's whole-of-government approach to deterrence signalling that escalates from peacetime to crisis to wartime. While this report is focussed on the military components of such signalling, the Party-state does not differentiate between military and nonmilitary aspects of national power or its applications for deterrence (coercion), as noted above in Chapter 2, and thus uses a much broader toolkit for signalling. In reality, the CCP generally reserves the PLA's role in deterrence signalling for cases where other nonmilitary signals have failed to achieve the desired political objectives for compellence (resorting to military coercion of Taiwan in peacetime), or to actually dissuade an adversary from damaging China's national security (conducting military exercises during a Korea crisis).

China is often able to achieve the political objectives of its deterrence (coercion) via this nonmilitary signalling. A recent study on China's behaviour in the South China Sea distinguishes between four types of 'assertive actions', defined as ways a state can improve its position in a dispute: '(1) declarative, (2) demonstrative, (3) coercive, and (4) use of force'.²²³ Most applicable to our study are the tools of coercion, below the use of force: 'threat or imposition of punishment, may be verbal, diplomatic or administrative, economic punishment, warning shots, physical interference with foreign activities in disputed area'.²²⁴ A separate report on CCP coercive diplomacy identified eight categories of actions: 'arbitrary detention or execution, restrictions on official travel, investment restrictions, trade restrictions, tourism restrictions, popular boycotts, pressure on specific companies and state-issued threats'.²²⁵

While specific nonmilitary signalling will be tailored to each instance of deterrence, Beijing does rely on some actions more than others. The specific mix will be based on an array of factors, including Beijing's perception of the balance of comprehensive national power (where it has the most leverage), its timeline for a resolution (how quickly it seeks to change the target country's behaviour), and the cost it is willing to incur (broadly defined to include economic, diplomatic, and even domestic). At the low end, in the information domain, this includes declaratory policy, often relying on the Party-state media for low-level signalling before escalating to official government statements. The challenge is that because this is ongoing day to day, identifying new issues takes special attention and can otherwise be easily missed. In the diplomatic realm, another clear action is curtailing official interactions, such as cancelling bilateral ministerial visits. In the economic realm, for tangible actions, a common initial action is inflicting economic punishment on the target country, even at a

²²³ Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970–2015', *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3, January 2021, pp. 79–121. For other recent articles on the topic, see Ketian Zhang, 'Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing's Use of Coercion in the South China Sea', *International Security*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Summer 2019, pp. 117–159; Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'The PLA's Evolving Role in China's South China Sea Strategy', *China Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 66, Winter 2020.

²²⁴ Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea'.

²²⁵ Hanson, Currey, and Beattie, *Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy*, p. 7.

higher cost to China (and indeed, bilateral trade often paradoxically grows during these episodes).²²⁶ One study on Beijing's economic coercion against South Korea over THAAD in 2016–2017 found three broad categories of economic sanctions: first, 'apparently deliberate and coordinated retaliation by Chinese authorities'; second, 'government involvement likely but not nationally coordinated'; and third, 'boycotts and other activities that lack direct government involvement'.²²⁷ Economic coercive actions can include a selective de facto embargo of one or several imports from the target country, a de facto banning of Chinese tourists to the target country, or the selective 'enforcement' of Chinese laws against high-profile companies from the target country with business in China. Although these actions are always unofficial, they are usually 'confirmed' through industry sources or Party-state media, in order to make the signal clear.²²⁸

Factor 3: Intended Audience

Once the message(s) are understood, the next step is to determine who is the intended audience. While this may be quite clear given the message content and international context, sometimes more nuanced analysis is required. Chinese writings acknowledge the necessity of tailoring deterrence signals to specific audiences, as discussed above. The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* emphasises the importance of considering 'the character, psychology, and degree of rationality of the decisionmakers on the deterred side', among other considerations, with the goal of creating 'a tactic for each nation, a tactic for each event, and a tactic for each circumstance'.²²⁹ This means that, at least from Beijing's point of view, any deterrence signals are targeted at specific audiences.

There may be more than one intended audience, however, since any deterrence action can be targeted at multiple audiences. For example, a PLAAF bomber flight around Taiwan could be intended to signal to Taiwan's leadership, the Taiwanese public, and/or U.S. leaders, and/or even to reaffirm domestic narratives to a Chinese audience. Thus, the question is whether Beijing is sending different messages to different audiences. Additionally, many military activities serve multiple purposes (bomber flights serve training purposes, for instance), which could complicate or obscure the deterrence message for one or more of these audiences.

²²⁶ For example, China's import ban on Australia barley is estimated to cost Beijing ten times more (AUS\$3.6 billion to Australia's AUS\$360 million), and it is reported that the import ban on Australian coal plunged some Chinese cities into power outages due to lack of supplies. See Andrew Tillet, 'Barley Backfire: Tariffs to Cost China \$3.6b, Birmingham Reveals', *Financial Review* (Australia), June 17, 2020; Sun Yu, "'Politics Come First" as Ban on Australian Coal Worsens China's Power Cuts', *Financial Times*, December 20, 2020.

²²⁷ Darren J. Lim and Victor Ferguson, 'Chinese Economic Coercion During the THAAD Dispute', *Asian Forum*, December 28, 2019.

²²⁸ Party-state media can even pick up these reports and thus, in a sense, confirm them. See Zhang Tao, 'US Media: China Has Multiple Ways to Sanction South Korea', China Military Online, March 1, 2017.

²²⁹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 174.

Questions to Ask:

- Where is the activity located?
- What propaganda channels are being used to send the message?
- What language(s) are the message(s) being conveyed in?
- Are the messages the same across different potential audiences?
- Has China revealed or amplified the signal publicly?

Understanding Clarity and Ambiguity

Chinese deterrence rhetoric is often quite direct and clear, but the language matters. Whiting notes that part of this language is the ‘specificity of the threatened response to enemy behaviour’. For example, during China’s involvement in the Vietnam War, when Chinese diplomatic warnings failed to change U.S. behaviour, Beijing shifted towards more military signalling to increase its credibility.²³⁰ Although China’s deterrence messaging is often best understood in the original Chinese, any translations for foreign propaganda can reveal the intended audience. For example, the PLAAF clearly made an intentional decision and undertook considerable effort to dub its propaganda videos about H-6K flights around Taiwan into the main language in Taiwan, along with English and Japanese. However, not all deterrence signals are translated, especially when China does not want them to be public. Moreover, English is the default language for Chinese external messaging and broader propaganda, so an English-language deterrence message does not necessarily mean it is meant for an English-speaking country.

One complicating factor can be the ambiguity, intentional or not, of Chinese deterrent actions. Although Chinese deterrence messages are likely to be relatively clear on their intended audience, some deterrence actions may not be so clear. For example, amid tensions on the Korean Peninsula, if China’s Northern TC conducts a military exercise near the border, is this intended to signal to North Korea that Beijing is unhappy with its provocation or is it intended to signal to South Korea and the United States that China is prepared to take military action in its own defence—and possibly in defence of Pyongyang—if the allies start hostilities against China’s neighbour? This ambiguity may be intentional as a way to warn both parties to back down, but analysts may be able to extrapolate Beijing’s intentions based on other subtle indications.

Understanding Going Public

China’s decision to make its signalling public can reveal insights into how Beijing is approaching the issue. A decision to go public means Beijing wants not only the other government to know but also the foreign population. If Beijing conveys similar messages in its domestic propaganda to Chinese citizens, then it is in a sense incurring an audience cost.²³¹

²³⁰ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, pp. 209–211.

²³¹ Chinese authoritative texts do not address audience costs as a form of signalling, but PLA researchers have on occasion referenced it as a way to increase credibility. See Rong Ming [荣明] and Yang Jingyu [杨镜宇], ‘Strategic Deterrence Decision Model Based on Deep Learning’ [‘基于深度学习的战略威慑决策模型研究’], *Journal of Command and Control* [指挥与控制学报], January 2017; Zhang Xiaojuan and Xiang Ganghua, ‘Analysis of Strategy Deterrence’.

A decision to keep a signal private, whether by using nonpublic channels such as diplomats or intermediaries or by conducting military activities only visible to foreign governments, suggests that China is trying to control escalation. For example, Whiting focusses on a ‘pattern of deliberate revelation’ by Beijing across Korea, India, and Taiwan.²³² This was an intentional decision by Beijing to selectively reveal military forces to the adversary governments so that they would be considered credible, but not to do so publicly so as to avoid locking in action by either Beijing or the adversary. The challenge, Whiting notes, is that these overt (but private) signals were then followed by covert military movements to position China for the operational initiative—and this deception was overly successful, so as to allow the adversary to believe Beijing had bluffed on its first signal. He argues that ‘only in Indochina did the PLA make its moves early enough to be credible but covertly enough to avoid public provocation and confrontation’.²³³

Factor 4: Authoritativeness

The most intangible factor for assessing Chinese deterrence signals is the authoritativeness of the source issuing the signal and it has often been a topic of immense debate for analysts. In an era of *Global Times* accounts on Twitter, a critical question is who speaks for China? One critical historical case of missed signalling is that when China first began signalling the United States against invading North Korea during the Korean War by using the Indian ambassador in Beijing as an intermediary, the CIA and others dismissed it as an unlikely channel.²³⁴ However, in reality this has not changed as much as it may appear. The CCP and PLA are hierarchical organisations, so the origin and nature of the signal should be assumed to be intentional choices that can clarify the seriousness of the signal.

Questions to Ask:

- What is the source of the deterrence signal?
- What level of Party, government or military bureaucracy does it represent?
- How is this message being communicated/transmitted?

Understanding the Party-State and Its Media

In order to clarify messaging, at least directly from China, Godwin and Miller proposed a hierarchy of authoritativeness for China, which we have adapted in Table 3.1 to include the PLA. Of note, any authoritative deterrence message is very likely to be first released in Chinese, and that should be treated as the original source. Any translations or summaries by Chinese government departments or state-run media, while convenient, should not be considered the definitive text of the statement and should be treated with caution to avoid

²³² Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 207.

²³³ Whiting, *Calculus of Chinese Deterrence*, p. 208.

²³⁴ Presidential Daily Brief, October 3, 1950, declassified January 2, 2019; Presidential Daily Brief, October 4, 1950, declassified January 2, 2019.

Table 3.1. Hierarchy of Authoritativeness for Chinese Deterrence Messaging

Leadership Statements	Official Protests	Military Messaging	<i>People's Daily</i> Commentary
CCP general secretary and PRC president or premier	PRC government statement	CMC statement	Editorial
CCP Politburo member and PRC vice premiers	MFA statement	CMC member	Commentator article
Central Committee department chief or PRC minister	MFA spokesperson statement	Theatre Command/War Command	Observer article
Provincial party chief or governor	MFA press briefing comment	MND statement	Quasi-authoritative commentary

SOURCE: Adapted from Paul Godwin and Alice Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits: Chinese Threat and Retaliation Signaling and Its Implications for a Sino-American Military Confrontation*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2013.

misinterpretation. The hierarchies described in the table are only relative and not equal across categories—for example, a provincial party chief statement is unlikely to have the same weight as an MND statement.

The role of the PLA in communicating deterrence messaging is still a matter of debate. Godwin and Miller do not address the PRC MND as the military's parallel bureaucracy to the MFA, and they dismiss sources beyond official CCP and government statements, such as the *PLA Daily*, the official newspaper of the PLA's Political Work Department, as 'a step or more removed from the core authority of *People's Daily*' for deterrence messages.²³⁵ However, *PLA Daily* and China Military Online, the English-language webpage for the Chinese military, are the most likely sources of information on Chinese military deterrent actions, so they are still an important resource for analysts to understand Chinese military deterrence signalling. Moreover, the MND began public briefings, following the MFA's public messaging approach, in April 2011.²³⁶

The breadth of Chinese Party-state-run media can complicate this analysis.²³⁷ Godwin and Miller focus solely on *People's Daily* as the only authoritative media in China, but even then they recommend limiting the focus to 'quasi-authoritative' commentaries that represent high-level CCP thinking.²³⁸ Although the specifics of *People's Daily* commentary bylines shift over time, recent bylines include such pseudonyms as Zhong Zuwen, which represents the

²³⁵ Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, p. 32.

²³⁶ Gao Jiquan [高吉全], 'The Ministry of Defense Formally Establishes a System of Regular Press Conferences' [国防部正式建立例行记者会制度], *PLA Daily* [解放军报], April 28, 2011. For a record of all briefings, see PRC Ministry of National Defense, 'Press Spokespersons/List [of Press Briefings]' [新闻发言人 / 列表], undated.

²³⁷ Graham Webster, 'Who Speaks for the Chinese Government?', *SupChina*, January 20, 2017.

²³⁸ For an overview of these commentaries, see David Gitter and Leah Fang, 'The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret', *Asia Policy*, January 31, 2018; Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Peng-Hsiang Kao, 'Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 214, May 13, 2013, pp. 394–410.

views of the CCP Organisation Department; Ren Zhongping, which represents the views of the *People's Daily* editorial committee; and Zhong Sheng and Guo Jiping, which have slightly lower authoritativeness and represent the *People's Daily's* commentary on foreign affairs.²³⁹

Beyond *People's Daily*, the broader Party-state media can be an opaque and labyrinthine system.²⁴⁰ Under Xi, the Party has been moving to rein in what had become over the Jiang and Hu years a relatively entrepreneurial Chinese media, including for foreign affairs. After the CCP Propaganda Department was criticised in 2016 for its failure to successfully enforce the Party line, the Party centralised its vast propaganda apparatus in 2018, including moving several of its high-profile foreign propaganda outlets under a new organisation, Voice of China.²⁴¹ This should make it easier for analysts to track and understand Chinese messaging via the Party-state media in a crisis, but in reality it is unlikely the Party will be able to make all of the Chinese media speak with one singular voice in a crisis, complicating such analysis. Although other Chinese media have achieved widespread readership both in China and abroad—most notably the *Global Times*—these are not meant to represent authoritative signals in a time of crisis. Instead, their utility for analysts is better understood as ‘map[ping] the boundaries of acceptable debate’.²⁴² Acknowledging this complexity makes assessing the authoritativeness of any one outlet a challenge, one shortcut for analysts is to focus more on Factor 5: Scope, below.²⁴³

Understanding the New Role of Social Media

The advent of social media in recent years presents additional complications to this framework. The Chinese government’s propaganda apparatus has embraced both Chinese and foreign social media with increasing speed and zeal.²⁴⁴ *Global Times* was the first Chinese state-run media organisation to open a Twitter account in June 2009, and the SCIO was the first government department to open an account in August 2015. Party-state media have a similar, if varied, presence on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, among others. The MFA

²³⁹ For one example with an English explanation by People’s Daily Online, see ‘Losing No Time in Progressing: Grasping the Historic Opportunity for Common Development’, *People’s Daily* via En.People, December 31, 2019.

²⁴⁰ For one overview of the foreign-direct Party-state media, see Bachman and Bellacqua, *Black and White and Red All Over*.

²⁴¹ ‘Who Draws the Party Line?’, *The Economist*, June 25, 2016; Hilton Yip, ‘China’s \$6 Billion Propaganda Blitz Is a Snooze’, *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2018.

²⁴² Webster, ‘Who Speaks for the Chinese Government?’

²⁴³ The authors would like to thank a reviewer for raising this point.

²⁴⁴ Chauncey Jung, ‘China Ventures Outside the Great Firewall, Only to Hit the Brick Wall of Online Etiquette and Trolls’, *South China Morning Post*, February 23, 2020; ‘China’s Informal, Confrontational Twitter Diplomacy’, *Taipei Times*, January 15, 2020; Laura Zhou, ‘Chinese Officials Have Finally Discovered Twitter: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?’, *South China Morning Post*, August 4, 2019; Eric Olander, ‘China’s New Twitter Diplomacy in Africa Used to Challenge US Critics’, *Africa Report*, December 19, 2019; ‘China Finds a Use Abroad for Twitter, a Medium It Fears at Home’, *The Economist*, February 20, 2020.

has led the Chinese Party-state's adoption, rapidly expanding its opening of official accounts during 2018 and 2019, including the Chinese ambassador to the United States in June 2019 and the MFA spokesperson in October 2019. Beyond the United States, Chinese ambassadors around the world have also opened Twitter accounts and Chinese state-run media have opened region- or even country-specific accounts, such as Xinhua Indonesia (which posts in Bahasa), or CGTN Africa. Even the CCP itself is beginning to embrace Western platforms, as the spokesperson for the International Liaison Department opened an account in April 2020.²⁴⁵ The last remaining holdout is the Chinese military, but it is possible the PRC MND may open an account at some point soon.²⁴⁶

Although social media is more likely to be one of several channels for relaying the deterrence message to the outside world, it is possible that statements on social media alone could serve as an intended message. Insofar as social media is a barometer for authoritativeness, verified accounts of PRC government departments should be viewed as relatively more authoritative, followed by government officials, such as ambassadors abroad, followed by the main accounts of Chinese state-run media. Regional or country-specific accounts on foreign social media by state-run media are certainly the least authoritative, but could be used to release relevant deterrent messages for that country, especially if it is not in English. However, since China so far has limited propaganda accounts on foreign social media specifically for the most likely targets of deterrence signalling—Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, India, or the Philippines—this appears so far unlikely to be an issue.

Understanding Unofficial Voices

Unofficial or otherwise one-off independent statements by high-profile Party-affiliated individuals can complicate understanding Chinese messaging. Indeed, this type of messaging is always difficult to interpret and is best done on a case-by-cases basis: it could either be a true persona, unapproved message or a semideniable message approved by the Party-state. This complexity of navigating unofficial views is now further exacerbated by the growing engagement of Chinese government officials, especially MFA officials, directly with foreign audiences. Factors for assessing their authoritativeness can include their personal background (such as princeling status),²⁴⁷ status and rank in the military, the media platform where it was said (CCTV vs personal WeChat), and past statements on the topic. The most useful approach to these unofficial voices will be to look at the scope of the messages collectively, instead of tracking specific one-off unofficial messages.

Chinese senior officials during past crises have sent strong signals above and beyond the general government line, resulting in mixed messaging. In March 2020, as tensions were running high between Beijing and Washington about COVID-19, a Chinese MFA spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, blamed the United States in a Twitter post for bringing the virus

²⁴⁵ Hu Zhaoming [@SpokespersonHJM] on Twitter.

²⁴⁶ Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

²⁴⁷ The term 'princeling' refers to the children and relatives of high-ranking CCP officials.

to China, and this was subsequently promoted across Chinese state-run media.²⁴⁸ The MFA never disavowed the comment but the Chinese ambassador to the United States, Cui Tiankai, said two weeks later that this view was ‘crazy’, and Zhao may have later walked back his claim.²⁴⁹ Zhao’s comments were interpreted by some at the time as an unsanctioned forward-leaning statement by one high-profile individual that the MFA decided to tolerate, and perhaps exploit for disinformation.²⁵⁰ However, the specific machinations in Beijing are unclear and it is possible this was all orchestrated ahead of time with high-level approval in Beijing.²⁵¹ Although this was not a deterrence signal, it is quite possible to imagine a future crisis scenario where a MFA spokesperson or other high-profile government official makes a single independent statement that is highly provocative but not clearly in line with broader Chinese messaging.

Another type of unofficial spokesperson is the Chinese military’s propagandists.²⁵² Nominally senior Chinese military officials, they have grown their profile over the last ten years and appear not only in Chinese media but also engage with Western counterparts, even occasionally publishing in Western media.²⁵³ The best known are PLAA Major General Luo Yuan, PLAN Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo, and PLAAF Senior Colonel Dai Xu. Ultimately, however, they are propaganda workers. Although they occasionally issue provocative statements, their voices should better be understood as reflecting the guardrails of acceptable debate, instead of specific signals. Their hawkish messages in a crisis are more likely to amplify existing deterrence messages than to create their own. In one well-known exception, PLA Major General Zhu Chenghu said at a formal press briefing in 2005 during U.S.-China tensions over Taiwan that ‘if the Americans draw their missiles and position-guided ammunition on to the target zone on China’s territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons’.²⁵⁴ Although he claimed to only be relaying his personal views, the comment was widely seen as escalatory. He was never publicly reprimanded but was reportedly punished and was withheld from foreign engagements for years apparently in

²⁴⁸ Lijian Zhao [@zlj517], ‘CDC was caught on the spot’, Twitter post, March 12, 2020; Jason Scott and Iain Marlow, ‘Chinese Official Pushes Conspiracy Theory U.S. Spread Virus’, Bloomberg, March 12, 2020; Sarah Zheng, ‘Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Tweets Claim US Military Brought Coronavirus to Wuhan’, *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2020.

²⁴⁹ Jonathan Swan and Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, ‘Top Chinese Official Disowns U.S. Military Lab Coronavirus Conspiracy’, *Axios*, March 22, 2020; Tsukasa Hadano, ‘Chinese Diplomat Backpedals on Blaming US for Coronavirus’, *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 8, 2020.

²⁵⁰ The broader MFA’s disapproval of Zhao’s messaging was generally based on his lack of appearance at MFA press conferences for several days, subsequent nonprovocative Twitter posts and Cui’s statement of disapproval.

²⁵¹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, ‘China Takes a Page from Russia’s Disinformation Playbook’, *Axios*, March 25, 2020.

²⁵² Andrew Chubb, ‘Propaganda, Not Policy: Explaining the PLA’s “Hawkish Faction” (Part One)’, *China Brief*, July 25, 2013; Andrew Chubb, ‘Propaganda as Policy? Explaining the PLA’s “Hawkish Faction” (Part Two)’, *China Brief*, August 9, 2013; Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Deciphering PLA Media Commentaries on North Korea: Going Rogue or Staying on Script*, Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute of America, July 22, 2015.

²⁵³ Zhou Bo, ‘China and America Can Compete and Coexist’, *New York Times*, February 3, 2020.

²⁵⁴ Joseph Kahn, ‘Chinese General Threatens Use of A-Bombs if U.S. Intrudes’, *New York Times*, July 15, 2005.

reaction to the statement.²⁵⁵ Under Godwin and Miller’s framework, Zhao’s and Zhu’s statements would not be sufficiently authoritative.

The last complicating factor is the use of intermediaries as channels to communicate deterrence messages. The Party has at times used trusted intermediaries with ties to both governments for a range of issues. During the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, Chas Freeman and John Lewis, a former senior U.S. official and a senior academic, respectively, both with long-standing relations in China, carried messages from Beijing back to Washington.²⁵⁶ Freeman and others clearly understood these messages were framed within a ‘deterrent context’.²⁵⁷ More recently, Steve Wynn, a U.S. businessman with extensive investments in Macao casinos and ties to Beijing, reportedly facilitated Beijing’s private communication with the Trump administration on the sensitive issue of a fugitive businessman living in the United States.²⁵⁸ The difficulty of assessing these interactions is determining who in China originated this signal and the reliability of the messenger. In addition, it is important to note how such messages align with the ones China sends to the target country directly through official diplomatic or military channels (i.e., direct communications from the MFA, Chinese embassies, other PRC government agencies, and the PLA).

Factor 5: Scope

China has many tools and channels for communicating its deterrence signals, so its choices of how many of these to employ is another indicator of its seriousness, or willingness to consider the use of force. This is the last factor and serves as a way to validate the broader message China is sending, weeding out eye-catching but nonauthoritative unofficial statements.

Questions to Ask

- How broadly is China pushing out its message?
- Is the message consistent across different channels?

In most instances of deterrence signalling, Beijing will likely adopt a broad communications strategy that blankets the airwaves. The same message—for example, Taiwan’s leadership should not proceed with a referendum on independence—would be found not only in authoritative Party-state media, such as *People’s Daily*, but also more popular media, such as *Global Times*, and foreign propaganda outlets, such as *People’s Daily Overseas Edition* and

²⁵⁵ ‘China Punishes General for Talk of Strike at U.S.’, *New York Times*, December 22, 2005.

²⁵⁶ Patrick E. Tyler, ‘As China Threatens Taiwan, It Makes Sure U.S. Listens’, *New York Times*, January 24, 1996.

²⁵⁷ Chas Freeman, ‘China: Avoiding a Self-fulfilling Prophecy’, presentation to the Carnegie Endowment, April 30, 1999.

²⁵⁸ Kate O’Keeffe, Aruna Viswanatha, and Cezary Podkul, ‘China’s Pursuit of Fugitive Businessman Guo Wengui Kicks Off Manhattan Caper Worthy of Spy Thriller’, *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2017.

Table 3.2. Summary of Analytic Framework for Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signals

Factor	Relevant Questions
Strategic context	Is China reacting to an action (however small) by another country, and/or is it proactively seizing a perceived opportunity to advance its interests? What does China view as threatening? What actions by others have altered Chinese threat perceptions? What are China's preexisting red lines on this issue? Does Beijing intend this as general deterrence (peacetime) or immediate deterrence (crisis/wartime)? Is this domestically motivated or the result of external factors?
Content	What is China saying? What action is Beijing warning against taking? What red lines is Beijing setting for warranting a further response? What is China threatening to do in response? What propaganda narratives are being sent via state-run media? What diplomatic messages are being sent via nonpublic channels? How clear and specific is Chinese rhetoric? What military actions is China undertaking? What nonmilitary actions is China undertaking? Are these new actions or revealing new capabilities? What scale are these actions? Is this likely a preplanned or rapid response to an event? Is there a potential gap or nonalignment between what China is saying and what it is doing?
Intended audience	Where is the activity located? What propaganda channels are being used to send the message? What language(s) are the message(s) being conveyed in? Are the messages the same across different audiences? Has China revealed or amplified the signal publicly?
Authoritativeness	What is the source of the deterrence signal? What level of Party, government, or military bureaucracy does it represent? How is this message being communicated/transmitted?
Scope	How broadly is China pushing out its message? Is the message consistent across different channels?

China Daily. It would appear in print, on TV and on social media. Although each will have its own slight nuance and spin, the core message is indeed intended to be repetitive and clear. The challenge is when the message is not painfully obvious.

A Six-Point Scale for Understanding China's Resolve

Combining the above analytic framework's five factors and applying them to past Chinese action on Taiwan, its most important object of deterrence (coercion), this section proposes a six-point scale for understanding Chinese resolve in a moment of crisis.

This six-point scale is intended as a way to gauge Chinese seriousness, or willingness to consider the use of force, for the issue at hand. Assuming China will seek both to signal in multiple ways and to communicate these signals via multiple channels for maximum effect, the exact details of the signalling and communication are less important than the scope of the

activity. Thus, this scale should be viewed as a starting point for consideration, but it is certainly not a comprehensive prescription for all important Chinese deterrence behaviour:

1. Has China issued a statement at the MFA/MND level or above criticising foreign action and warning against further provocations?
2. Has China relayed consistent messages through trusted intermediaries, especially former officials?
3. Has China engaged in multiple rounds of nonmilitary signalling via economic coercion, among other means?
4. Has China conducted military redeployments or mobilisation to move forces closer to the area of tension?
5. Has China conducted military exercises, especially joint exercises, near the area of tension to demonstrate its ability to prosecute the necessary operations?
6. Has China conducted any tests of military capabilities relevant to its likely war plan for this scenario?

Enduring Principles, Evolving Details

This chapter's framework is intended as a useful analytic tool based on what we assess to be enduring principles guiding Chinese deterrence behaviour. The core questions asked should be applicable to most, if not all, situations of deterrence and help guide analysts to understand the signals Beijing is trying to convey. However, the details of Chinese deterrence behaviour are likely to evolve over time. This includes both the specific capabilities employed by Beijing and the specific communication channels used, but also the red lines and previous baselines China will set in the coming years as various crises arise for its key security concerns. Analysts will have to be prepared to update the structure of the framework as necessary, though hopefully rarely, and be prepared to update the details of Chinese deterrence behaviour often.

4. Recent Chinese Deterrence Signalling: Peacetime Case Studies

Chapters 4 and 5 present case studies of recent episodes of Chinese deterrence signalling. These cases were selected to cover a wide range of scenarios and instances of deterrence signalling, including ones related to general deterrence, Chinese core interests, and disputed territories. Chapter 4 analyses Chinese deterrence signalling in peacetime and Chapter 5 assesses Chinese deterrence signalling under crisis conditions. Each case study includes an overview of the event, a discussion of Chinese signalling, analysis of this signalling from Chinese and international perspectives, and key takeaways. We have focussed these on the military components of China's deterrence signalling, while also attempting to at least note where broader, whole-of-government nonmilitary means, especially economic and information tools, have been employed. We have also not focussed on other parts of the PLA, namely the Coast Guard and People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, through which it pursues nontraditional 'grey zone' coercion.

Some important caveats apply to all of the peacetime and crisis case studies. Of note, these case studies present the episodes of deterrence signalling based on the public record. Since these are all recent examples, there may well be nonpublic signalling that occurred to further clarify—or muddy—messages that were observable to the public. This is especially true of signalling in new domains, namely space and cyber, that are much more difficult to observe publicly and are often known only to governments. Moreover, since the Party-state is not an open or transparent system, we do not know what signals were sent but missed or debated internally but never communicated. Finally, we also do not understand well how foreign actions during these cases were actually perceived by the Chinese leadership. Indeed, it was only after the fall of the Soviet Union and the declassification of U.S. records that a better picture emerged about key instances of deterrence signalling during the Cold War.²⁵⁹

We next turn to our peacetime case studies: military parades, Chinese bomber flights, and cross-Strait tensions since President Tsai Ing-wen's election in 2016. These cases illustrate the application of our framework to China's approach to signalling as it relates to general deterrence—and intimidation—in peacetime.

Peacetime Case Study No. 1: Military Parades

Military parades have always been a part of the CCP's use of military power for political purposes. These parades are targeted at two core audiences: domestic audiences, to reinforce the Party's leading role, construct a sense of national identity, highlight the achievements of

²⁵⁹ One example is the Able Archer NATO exercise in 1983. See Jones, *Able Archer* 83; 'The Soviet Side of the 1983 War Scare', National Security Archives, November 5, 2018.

modernisation and inspire awe in the military; and foreign audiences, to demonstrate Chinese military power, specifically unveiling new capabilities to bolster deterrence. Xi Jinping has made parades a central motif in his ‘Strong Army Dream’, hosting parades in 2015, 2017, and 2019 instead of the past practice of once a decade, indicating their importance to him. In order to communicate the signals within these military parades, China undertakes a concerted messaging campaign utilising many channels—leadership speeches, propaganda broadcasts on all mediums, and personal attendance of foreign officials and military attachés. These various channels also reveal some nuance to this messaging—Chinese state-run social media accounts on foreign platforms, for example, essentially completely ignore the military aspect to the parade and instead refer to it as a ‘grand celebration’.

Event Details

On October 1, 2019, Xi Jinping stood on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in front of Tiananmen Square watching a military parade celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC as over 15,000 troops and over 740 pieces of military hardware passed through the Square for over 80 minutes.²⁶⁰ Once a rare spectacle in the PRC, held roughly every ten years, military parades have become more frequent under Xi as he seeks to broadcast China’s growing military power to domestic and foreign audiences. Against this backdrop, Xi reiterated his message of strength, saying, ‘There is no force that can shake the status of this great nation. No force can stop the Chinese people and the Chinese nation forging ahead’.²⁶¹

A Short History of PRC Military Parades

The PRC’s first military parade was held as part of the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949, as part of Mao’s celebration for winning the Chinese civil war.²⁶² After yearly parades from 1949 to 1959, Mao’s last parade was in 1969 but another was not held again until 1984, when Deng Xiaoping commemorated the country’s 35th anniversary. Although precedence in PRC does not count for as much as it used in in Xi’s ‘new era’, his predecessors held only one parade each—Jiang Zemin in 1999 and Hu Jintao in 2009.

Under Xi, parades have become more frequent and expanded beyond commemorating just the traditional October 1 national founding day every ten years, highlighting their multifaceted uses. In September 2015, Xi held a parade in Tiananmen to commemorate the

²⁶⁰ For an overview of the military hardware, see Marcus Clay, ‘“Flying Twice” No More: Assessing the Aerospace Component of the PLA Military Parade’, Washington, D.C.: China Aerospace Studies Institute, National Defense University, 2019. For a comprehensive timeline of the parade, see SCMP Reporters, ‘China’s National Day Parade, as It Happened’, *South China Morning Post*, October 1, 2019.

²⁶¹ ‘Xi Says No Force Can Ever Undermine China’s Status’, State Council, People’s Republic of China, October 1, 2019. For the official translation, see Xi Jinping, ‘Speech by Xi Jinping at the Reception in Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 30, 2019.

²⁶² For a general overview of PRC military parades, see Sang Ye and Geremie R. Barmé, ‘Thirteen National Days, a Retrospective’, *China Heritage Quarterly*, Vol. 17, March 2009; Zhao Hong and Hu Yiwei, ‘China’s Historical National Day Military Parades’, September 30, 2019; ‘China’s Military Parades: A Look Back’, *New York Times*, September 2, 2015; ‘Chinese Military Parades’, *Global Security*, undated.

70th anniversary of the end of World War II.²⁶³ This was in the context of worsening China-Japan relations and brought together ROK president Park Geun-hye, Russian president Vladimir Putin and former ROC vice president Lien Chan, projecting the image of a united front of Asian victims of Tokyo's wartime aggression. In July 2017, Xi held a parade at the PLA's premier training facility, Zhurihe, making it the first parade in the field, highlighting the PLA's modernisation and improved operational combat ability.²⁶⁴ Beyond these formal parades, Xi also oversaw two naval parades in the South China Sea in April 2018 and April 2019, which included China's aircraft carrier and other new high-end destroyers, submarines, and aircraft as a way of demonstrating Chinese military power in the exact location where it may be used one day.

China is certainly not the only country to host military parades and it pays attention to these signals from other countries.²⁶⁵ France has hosted an annual military parade on Bastille Day in Paris since 1880. Russia has hosted an annual military parade in Red Square to commemorate World War II victory in Europe since 1995. Vietnam hosts similar parades, even one just the day before Beijing's own in 2015.²⁶⁶ The United States also used to host military parades on occasion, but has not done so since 1991.²⁶⁷

New Capabilities Lead the Show

The 2019 parade showcased a wide variety of hardware publicly for the first time, reflecting the parades' function as key moments for China to officially reveal new military capabilities. Among the most high-profile were the DF-41 ICBM, China's newest mobile ICBM and the first of its mobile ICBMs reportedly capable of carrying MIRVs; the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV), the world's first 'fielded' HGV; the H-6N, China's first nuclear-capable bomber since the PLAAF was reassigned a nuclear mission; and the WZ-8, GJ-2, and GJ-11, China's first stealth drones. Highlights from the 2017 parade included the J-20, China's first stealth fighter; the Y-20, China's first indigenously developed transport aircraft; and the DF-31AG ICBM, China's first MIRV'd missile.²⁶⁸ In 2015, China debuted a number of new missiles, including the DF-21D ASBM, intended to sink U.S. aircraft carriers; the DF-26, able to strike Guam with a conventional warhead; and the DF-16, capable of striking U.S. military bases in Japan.²⁶⁹ Going back to the first military parade in

²⁶³ Chris Buckley, 'Military Parade in China Gives Xi Jinping a Platform to Show Grip on Power', *New York Times*, September 3, 2015.

²⁶⁴ Liu Zhen, 'From Stealth Fighters to Ballistic Missiles, China Shows the World Its Weapons of War', *South China Morning Post*, July 30, 2017; Michael Martina and Ben Blanchard, 'China's Xi Calls for Building Elite Forces During Massive Military Parade', *Reuters*, July 29, 2017.

²⁶⁵ For one PLA researcher's analysis, see Li Ruijing [李瑞景], 'What Type of Signals Does Russia's Big Military Parades Send?' ['俄罗斯大阅兵释放何种信号?'], *World News* [世界报], May 15, 2013.

²⁶⁶ Tran Tri Minh Ha, 'Vietnam Marks 40 Years Since Fall of Saigon', *Business Insider*, April 30, 2015.

²⁶⁷ Marissa Fessenden, 'The History of Military Parades in the U.S.', *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 7, 2018.

²⁶⁸ Steven Jiang, 'China Shows Off Newest Weapons in Huge Military Parade', *CNN*, July 30, 2017.

²⁶⁹ Andrew Erickson, 'Missile March: China Parade Projects Patriotism at Home, Aims for Awe Abroad', *Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2015.

the post-Mao era, the 1984 parade under Deng was the first public appearance of the DF-5 ICBM, which ‘displayed for the first time to show the world that China possessed a nuclear retaliatory capability’.²⁷⁰ Overall, according to state-run media, 40 per cent of the hardware paraded in 2019 was new; similarly, almost half of the hardware in 2017 was new, and even dating back to 1999, 95 per cent of the ‘large equipment’ was new.²⁷¹ Clearly, the parades provide an excellent opportunity to awe domestic and foreign audiences with impressive military hardware, though most of it had been widely known by foreign analysts years beforehand, revealing it more as spectacle than truly about revealing new capabilities.²⁷²

Signalling Details

Parades are a good example of pre-scripted signalling that are intended to send clear messages tailored to the targeted audiences. Reflecting this serious preparation, the PLA constructed a mock-up of downtown Beijing in 2015 for such training, with rehearsals in 2019 starting there over three months before the parade and then moving to Tiananmen two weeks out.²⁷³ State-run media planned their coverage to hit the right tones far ahead, down to the headlines and camera locations for interviews.²⁷⁴ Control was so intense that whole neighbourhoods in Beijing were locked down with curfews and police weeks before the parade, public activities were severely curtailed, and internet censorship was stepped up to such a point that the editor of a state-run newspaper complained.²⁷⁵ This approach dates back to the earliest days under Mao, when the 1949 parade ‘was carefully orchestrated and meticulously planned by the [CCP]’, with even the ‘route [selected] to generate the most dramatic and symbolic effect’.²⁷⁶

China sometimes appears to go to considerable lengths to ensure that international audiences will focus on the specific capabilities it wants to draw to their attention during a

²⁷⁰ Taylor Fravel, ‘What Is China’s Big Parade All About?’, *China File*, September 2, 2015.

²⁷¹ ‘New Military Aircraft Displayed at the National-Day Grand Military Parade’, *Liaowang*, November 8, 1999; ‘1999 National Day Military Parade’, CCTV, August 27, 2009.

²⁷² For example, the U.S. Department of Defense said the DF-41 ICBM has been in development since before the first DoD China military power report in 2002. See *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People’s Republic of China*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2002, pp. 3, 27.

²⁷³ Antoine Bondaz and Stéphane Delory, ‘The Military Parade for the 70th Anniversary of the PRC: A Revealing Example of Chinese Strategic Power’, Foundation for Strategic Research and Geospatial for Intelligence, September 24, 2019; Javier Hernández, ‘Closing My Curtains for Xi Jinping and His Grand Parade’, *New York Times*, September 23, 2019.

²⁷⁴ For a review of PLA propaganda preparations for the parade, see the November 2019 edition of *Military Correspondent* [军事记者].

²⁷⁵ Hernández, ‘Closing My Curtains’; Nicola Smith, ‘Top Chinese State Media Editor Calls Out “Excessive” Propaganda Ahead of 70th Anniversary’, *Telegraph*, September 19, 2019; Simina Mistreanu, ‘China Prepares Giant Military Parade for October 1 Celebrations’, *Aljazeera*, September 24, 2019.

²⁷⁶ Chang-tai Hung, ‘Mao’s Parades: State Spectacles in China in the 1950s’, *China Quarterly*, Vol. 190, June 2007, pp. 411–431.

military parade. The lead-up to the unveiling of the DF-41 ICBM at the October 2019 parade provides an instructive example. Chinese sources offered a series of hints that the DF-41 ICBM would be unveiled during the October 2019 parade, with some appearing more than a year in advance. These hints became more numerous—and less subtle—as the date of the parade drew closer. For instance, in January 2019, *Global Times* cited remarks by a PRC military commentator, who stated that ‘the DF-41, China’s mysterious and most advanced ICBM, might make its public debut on October 1, the 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China’s founding, as a military parade is expected to be held in Beijing on that day’.²⁷⁷ In April–May 2019, commercial satellite imagery spotted a total of 18 DF-41 ICBM launchers, along with several other types of missiles, at a PLARF training facility near Jilantai.²⁷⁸ In July, commercial satellite imagery located the same number of DF-41 launchers at a military facility in Yangfang, about 35 km northwest of Beijing, where it appeared they were preparing for the upcoming military parade, according to an assessment by the Federation of American Scientists.²⁷⁹ Then, in late September, a week ahead of the military parade, *Global Times* published an article spotlighting a PLA press conference about the parade preparations. The article was titled ‘DF-41 ICBM to Debut at Parade? You Won’t Be Disappointed: PLA’.²⁸⁰ On the day of the parade, Chinese official media highlighted the participation of a formation of 16 DF-41 launchers, referring to the DF-41 as ‘the country’s most advanced and powerful deterrent’.²⁸¹

Beyond the actual hardware on display in the October 2019 parade, the Chinese government clearly framed the message with a speech by Xi and briefings by other senior officials. Weeks before the parade, senior Chinese government and military held separate public press conferences to explain the core themes, making the parade’s message explicit.²⁸² The leader’s speech then provided the official message and narrative for the parade—Xi in 2019 harkened back to Mao’s founding words that ‘the Chinese people had stood up’, and added his own signature rhetoric, that since that time China had ‘embarked on the path of realizing national rejuvenation’.²⁸³ Turning to the PLA before the parade began, he highlighted its mission to ‘resolutely safeguard China’s sovereignty, security and development interests’.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁷ Liu Xuanzun, ‘China’s Rocket Force Conducts Mock ICBM Strike Exercise’, *Global Times*, January 22, 2019.

²⁷⁸ Hans Kristensen, ‘New Missile Silo and DF-41 Launchers Seen in Chinese Nuclear Missile Training Area’, Federation of American Scientists, September 3, 2019.

²⁷⁹ Kristensen, ‘New Missile Silo and DF-41 Launchers Seen’.

²⁸⁰ ‘DF-41 ICBM to Debut at Parade? You Won’t Be Disappointed: PLA’, *Global Times*, September 26, 2019.

²⁸¹ ‘China Unveils Most Advanced Dongfeng-41 International Strategic Nuclear Missiles’, Xinhua, October 1, 2019.

²⁸² ‘SCIO Briefing on the Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC’, State Council Information Office via China.org, August 30, 2019; ‘Group Interview on the National Day Military Parade’, Chinese State Council Information Office via China.org, September 25, 2019.

²⁸³ ‘Xi Says No Force Can Ever Undermine China’s Status’.

²⁸⁴ ‘Xi Says No Force Can Ever Undermine China’s Status’.

For domestic audiences, the parade reinforces the Party's central authority and power, fostering a sense of national pride.²⁸⁵ As the SCIO put it, 'The theme of the parade is to firmly uphold the leadership core, to reflect the characteristics of the times, to highlight national and military prestige, and to develop patriotism'.²⁸⁶ The 2019 parade followed the traditional choreography, with the leader, now Xi Jinping, kicking off the event with a speech and then reviewing the assembled troops in a car before returning to the square to observe the parade as it passed. The parade began with China's three flags—the Party's flag, the national flag, and the military's flag, demonstrating the symbolic leadership of the Party.²⁸⁷ The military parade was then followed by a civilian parade, with over 100,000 people, which included floats for each of the provinces touting modernisation achievements, showing public support for the CCP across the whole nation.

Foreign audiences, however, received a two-level message: the parade demonstrates to foreign governments and analysts the PLA's growing military capabilities, but average observers abroad heard more about China's peaceful rise (and any military power is in service of global peace).²⁸⁸ The SCIO balanced this by insisting that the parade 'does not target any country or region or any particular situation. China's armed forces have always been a staunch force for world peace and regional stability'. It added, however, that 'we have the determination and ability to resolutely safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests, as well as safeguard and promote world peace and stability'.²⁸⁹ Illustrating the message for attentive analysts, Andrew Erickson points out that since the 2015 parade, 'all the major missiles were labeled with their English abbreviations in big white letters, likely to help guarantee that their presence isn't lost on foreigners'; the DF-21D ASBM was specifically referred to as an 'assassin's mace' and paraded in an 'Anti-ship Ballistic Missile Formation'—leaving little space for misinterpretation for the main audience—the United States.²⁹⁰ However, the broader CCP messaging to foreign audiences showed the lighter side of the parade, with articles and social media highlighting

²⁸⁵ For research on Chinese military parades, see Yiben Liu and Shuhua Zhou, 'Evolving Chinese Nationalism: Using the 2015 Military Parade as a Case', *East Asia* 36, June 29, 2019, pp. 255–270; Jie Gong, 'Asserting an Ancient, Emergent Superpower: The 2009 Beijing Military Parade, Public Memory, and National Identity', *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 7, 2013, pp. 1003–1025. For a U.S. government view of the parades, see Francesca Regalado, 'China Used Military Parade to Cover Economic Woes: Pentagon Official', *Nikkei Asian Review*, October 25, 2019.

²⁸⁶ 'SCIO Briefing'.

²⁸⁷ 'Military Parade Starts with Flag-Guarding Echelon Flying over Tian'anmen Square', Xinhua, October 1, 2019; 'Military Parade Held to Mark PLA 90th Birthday', Xinhua, July 30, 2017.

²⁸⁸ Edward Wong, 'China's Global Message: We Are Tough but Not Threatening', *New York Times*, October 2, 2019.

²⁸⁹ 'SCIO Briefing on the Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC'.

²⁹⁰ The 1984 parade ICBMs had 'DF' painted on the side but not the numbers. The 1999 parade ICBMs had their serial number (X003, etc.) painted on but not the name of the missile. The 2009 parade ICBMs were not painted with the name of the missile, but the television coverage added text to label it. Erickson, 'Missile March'.

the troops' strenuous preparation and occasionally their cool side.²⁹¹ The parade itself for the first time include a formation of Chinese peacekeepers, intended to 'demonstrate China's resolve and capabilities in maintaining world peace and regional stability'.²⁹²

On social media, CCTV/CGTN provides a good case study of how different messages were sent to different audiences.²⁹³ On Twitter, CGTN's main account in English (@CGTNOfficial) covered the parade the most, including explicitly mentioning SLBMs, UAVs, and ICBMs.²⁹⁴ However, none of CGTN's regional accounts posted any pictures of the military parade. CGTN's Spanish-language account did not mention the parade at all, and CGTN's Africa account posted several tweets about African governments commending Chinese development, just once referring to it as a 'grand celebration' with photos of soldiers—notably peacekeeping troops not in PLA uniforms—goose-stepping.²⁹⁵ CGTN's Arabic account posted about China's modernisation progress and nonmilitary (arts) celebrations for the anniversary in China, and just once posted a picture of helicopters flying in formation to form the number 70.²⁹⁶ One outlier to this model was Xinhua, since its Spanish account was the most direct about the parade's strategic assets, with tweets explicitly about the DF-41 ICBM and DF-26 IRBM, though most coverage focussed on Xi and the nonmilitary aspects.²⁹⁷ Xinhua's main account did tweet about the parade, even calling the

²⁹¹ Chen Zhuo, 'Chinese Troops Train for Spectacular National Day Parade', *Global Times*, September 26, 2019; People's Daily, China [@PDChina], 'Work hard, play hard!', Twitter post, September 27, 2019.

²⁹² 'Group Interview'.

²⁹³ For a textual analysis of domestic vs international response to previous parades, see Xu Min, 'Peaceful Power? Or China Threat? Interpreting the "Symbolic Reality" of Chinese Military Parade', *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 2018, pp. 1–7. For an overview of Chinese accounts on foreign social media, see Mareike Ohlberg, 'Propaganda Beyond the Great Firewall: Chinese Party-State Media on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube', Mercator Institute for China Studies, May 12, 2019.

²⁹⁴ CGTN [@CGTNOfficial]: 'China unveils newest submarine-launched missiles in parade', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; 'China exhibits advanced drones, unmanned underwater vehicles in military parade', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; 'Dongfeng-5B nuclear missile formation reviewed at National Day parade', Twitter post, October 1, 2019. The DF-41 was mentioned: CGTN [@CGTNOfficial], 'Here's a quick wrap-up of the star weapons', Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

A lot of coverage was also with a personal angle: CGTN [@CGTNOfficial], 'Vlog: Behind the scenes of the Oct. 1 military parade', Twitter post, October 2, 2019.

²⁹⁵ CGTN Africa [@cgtnafrica]: 'China holds grand celebration at Tian'anmen Square', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; 'Chinese in #Morocco celebrate 70th anniversary of PRC founding', Twitter post, October 2, 2019; '#Madagascar's president commends #China on development', Twitter post, October 2, 2019.

This propaganda narrative aligns with foreign governments congratulating Xi's speech: 'World Lauds Xi's National Day Speech', Xinhua, October 3, 2019.

²⁹⁶ CGTN Arabic [@cgtnarabic], Twitter posts, September 29 and 30, 2019.

²⁹⁷ China Xinhua Español [@Hespanol]: '#China desvela misiles nucleares estratégicos intercontinentales', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; '(Día Nacional) Misiles convencionales y nucleares Dongfeng-26', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; '#XiJinping, presidente de la Comisión Militar Central de la República Popular #China (RPCh)', Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

Xinhua's Romania account similarly tweeted DF-41 photos; XinhuaRomania [@XHRomania]: 'Toate armamentele prezentate în parada Zilei Naționale au fost realizate în China', Twitter post, October 1, 2019; 'O paradă militară a avut loc în centrul Beijingului', Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

Xinhua's Italy account tweeted UAVs: XHItalia [@XinhuaItalia], 'Falangi di aeromobili a pilotaggio remoto (APR)', Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

PLARF a ‘strategic force’, but the accompanying photo was of troops marching, not the PLARF’s actual showpieces, the DF-41 and DF-17 missiles.²⁹⁸ Following the same model as in other accounts of downplaying it, Xinhua’s North America account posted about the NYC Empire State building’s famous lights going red for the anniversary.²⁹⁹ Within the region, the only parade-related posts by *People’s Daily*’s Japan account were of female Chinese soldiers goose-stepping and an empty parade grounds, notably omitting the MRBM and IRBMs that are targeted at Japan.³⁰⁰ Although it is difficult to assess comprehensively, it does appear Chinese state-run media accounts in English generally have more explicit military content than those targeting other regions in the world.

The public reach of these parades, both domestic and foreign, continues to grow. The 1984 parade was the first to be broadcast on TV, including by satellite around the world, and the 2009 parade was the first to be streamed online. The 2015 parade was watched by 500 million people online, including 47 million people watching via CCTV’s website (up 240 per cent from 2009) and 49 million people watched live video (up 234 per cent from 2009).³⁰¹ It was watched by 9.6 million on foreign social media and received 71,000 likes. In Japan, one of the 2015 parade’s primary target audience, the parade was streamed on Niconico, Japan’s most popular video streaming site, reaching 80,000 people.

According to the deputy director of Xinhua’s PLA branch, the 2019 military parade set another record for viewership and Xinhua reported on the parade in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, and Japanese.³⁰² This reveals their intended international audiences—the English-speaking Western world (especially the United States), Africa, and Latin America. Xinhua claimed this broad coverage, including its live streaming on social media, ‘significantly led AP, Reuters, AFP and other mainstream Western news’.³⁰³ Asia, however, was largely left out and only Japan had dedicated language reporting. This suggests China was intentionally avoiding broadcasting its military might to its neighbours who might be more sensitive to messages of Chinese power—South Korea and Vietnam, for example.

Foreign governments, the other core target audience, are given a much better view of the parade. Foreign officials and military attachés are invited to attend the parade, allowing them

²⁹⁸ China Xinhua News [@XHNews], ‘PLA Rocket Force reviewed during a grand parade’, Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

²⁹⁹ Xinhua North America [@XHNNorthAmerica], ‘New York City’s landmark Empire State Building shines’, Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

³⁰⁰ People Daily [人民網日本] [@peopledailyJP]: ‘#新中国成立 70 周年’, Twitter post, September 30, 2019; ‘#新中国成立 70 周年’, Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

³⁰¹ ‘Online Streaming Numbers for 9.3 Military Parade Hits Record High’ [“9.3” 阅兵网络直播数据创历史新高], *China Online* via CCTV, September 8, 2015.

³⁰² Li Xuanliang [李宣良], ‘Sing the Song of the Times—Revelation from the Parade Report of the People’s Liberation Army Branch of Xinhua News Agency Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China’ [‘唱响时代壮歌 凝聚奋进力量: 新华社解放军分社庆祝中华人民共和国成立 70 周年阅兵报道的启示’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], November 2019.

³⁰³ Li Xuanliang, ‘Sing the Song of the Times’.

to witness firsthand these new Chinese capabilities.³⁰⁴ In 2009, 102 foreign military attachés plus 63 senior foreign military officials were invited for the 60th anniversary parade, according to a PLA propaganda study.³⁰⁵ In 2019, the MND claimed even greater participation with ‘188 military attaches from 97 countries in China . . . invited’.³⁰⁶ Favoured foreign leaders were even invited to personally attend in 2015 and given prime spots next to Xi on top of Tiananmen, including the leaders of Russia, South Korea, Pakistan, and the Czech Republic.³⁰⁷ Though no foreign leaders attended the 2019 parade, foreign troops from favoured nations were included to show China’s broad base of international support, including Russia, Cuba, Cambodia, and Venezuela.³⁰⁸

Chinese Explanation and Analysis

Military parades have always been a component of Chinese deterrence signalling, generally by demonstrating the credibility of Chinese capabilities.³⁰⁹ As early as 2001, the *Science Military Strategy* framed parades as one way to reveal capabilities that would ‘clearly show one’s own deterrence capability, creating psychological pressure and fear against the opponent, thereby forcing them to yield’.³¹⁰ Similarly, the 2015 NDU *Science of Military Strategy* includes parades as one way to ‘display advanced weapons’, with the goal of ‘making the other side realise we already have advanced defence and counterattack methods, creating a psychological fear of our retaliation’.³¹¹

Although the parade showcases all services and domains, perhaps the true stars of the show are the missiles: rarely displayed publicly, and never in such numbers, they are saved until the end and explained in vivid detail. Reflecting the Chinese missile forces’ thinking on the topic, the 2004 *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns* asserts that parades are the ‘best time to show military strength’ and argues militaries should ‘fully make use of this [parade] opportunity to fully display new missiles and equipment, especially new ICBMs as an

³⁰⁴ This is in line with the 2004 *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, which calls for foreign military attachés to visit missile launch sites as a way to display missile capabilities. See Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 287.

³⁰⁵ Zhang Fang [张芳], ‘Military External Communication in China’s Military Diplomacy’ [‘中国军事外交中的军事对外传播’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], January 2014.

³⁰⁶ ‘Group Interview’.

³⁰⁷ Minnie Chan, ‘Only China’s “True Friends” Attending 70th Anniversary Parade as Key Western Leaders and Kim Jong-un Won’t Be There’, *South China Morning Post*, August 25, 2019.

³⁰⁸ Bertil Lintner, ‘China Parades Its Own Coalition of the Willing’, *Asia Times*, October 8, 2019.

³⁰⁹ For an early 1996 reference to military parades in the context of psychological warfare and deterrence, see Zhang Tian [张天] and Deng Hongmei [邓红梅], ‘Deterrence Methods in Psychological Warfare’ [‘心理战中的威慑方法’], *Political Work Journal* [政工学刊], October 1996, pp. 38–39; Sun Yijun [孙一军], ‘Pay Attention to Psychological Hegemony in Preparation for Military Struggle’ [‘重视军事斗争准备中的心理霸’], *Political Work Journal* [政工学刊], January 2001, pp. 33–34.

³¹⁰ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 2nd ed., p. 239.

³¹¹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 129.

assassin's mace'.³¹² The purpose of these missile parades is to use 'partial or full exposure to the world to give potential opponents a huge psychological shock'. Such actions can be proactive or in response to enemy displays of nuclear forces, and should use the media to release relevant information on nuclear force posture to 'cause a psychological shock to the enemy and make it restrain its deterrence actions'.³¹³ Exemplifying the PLA's idea of tailored deterrence, it argues that the missiles paraded can be selected 'according to deterrence requirements', either by range (MRBM, IRBM, ICBM), fuel type (solid, liquid), mobility (fixed, mobile), launch type (ground-launched, sea-launched, air-launched), or missile type (ballistic, cruise).

Although these parades are all during peacetime, PLA texts note the value of wartime parades as well. The 2001 AMS *Science of Military Strategy* specifically recounts that during World War II, the Soviet Union held a military parade in Red Square, 'which not only inspired the morale of all Soviet soldiers and civilians, but also caused a great shock to German fascists'.³¹⁴ Demonstrating the pervasiveness of this understanding, and making it simply more explicit, two Nanjing Political Institute graduate students wrote in 2011 that military parades were one of several ways to establish 'wartime public opinion deterrence' (战时舆论威慑, *zhanshi yulun weishe*), arguing that 'in preparation for military struggle, showing capabilities can shape the situation, and can transmit deterrence information to the other side, winning the initiative in military diplomacy to contain crises and reduce the goals of conflict'.³¹⁵

In general, the military parades are intended to convey a clear message to potential adversaries: China's military power is growing, and there should be no doubt about China's increasing capabilities—or its will to use them. With respect to the October 2019 military parade, China did attempt to clearly explain its message through public briefings, though in practice they reflected the Party's propaganda messaging in a way that may have somewhat obfuscated the actual deterrence signals they were trying to send. The SCIO explained that 'the military parade . . . will show that the people's armed forces always obey the Party's command, reflect the reform and achievements in building a strong armed forces, demonstrate the war preparedness and fighting capability of the people's armed forces, as well as our confidence to achieve the Party's goal of building a strong military and to transform our people's armed forces into world-class forces'.³¹⁶ Senior PLA officials in charge of the parade explained that it was intended to 'demonstrate the comprehensive capability of the PLA to carry out its assigned mission and tasks for the new era . . . [show] our confidence to achieve

³¹² Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, p. 287.

³¹³ Yu Jixun and Li Tilin, *Science of Second Artillery Campaigns*, pp. 287–288.

³¹⁴ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 2nd ed., p. 239.

³¹⁵ Liu Yi [刘轶] and Lou Jing [楼静], 'High-Profile Show Off of Martial Arts: Strategies of Deterrence in Wartime Public Opinion' [‘高调炫武：战时舆论威慑的谋略’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], October 2011, pp. 32–33.

³¹⁶ 'SCIO Briefing'.

the goal of transforming the people's armed forces into a world-class entity, and reflect our firm resolve to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests, as well as safeguard and promote world peace and regional stability'.³¹⁷ Responding to a question by CNN about the parade signalling to the United States, senior PLA official rejected the 'flawed logic that China's armed forces exhibiting weaponry is "flexing its muscles", but if [we] do not exhibit it, [we] would be blamed for lacking transparency'. Instead, 'the stronger we become, the more contributions we can make to world peace'.³¹⁸

Any necessary additional clarity was provided by Chinese retired military officers and academics speaking to Western media. Retired PLA colonel Yue Gang told the *Financial Times*, 'We want to use this big killer to contain America. . . . Although we have no way to compete with you, we are now developing some unique equipment so that America does not dare to go first against us'.³¹⁹ Cheng Xiaohe of Renmin University said, 'If China has to engage in war, China is prepared. China is not afraid to fight a war against anyone who dares to challenge China's sovereignty and territorial integrity'.³²⁰ Accompanying a picture of DF-41s, the editor of *Global Times* wrote on Twitter, 'Message from them: Don't mess up with the Chinese people or intimidate them. The Chinese people won't provoke you anyway'.³²¹ Some, however, thought there was not much to explain, as Tong Zhao of Carnegie Tsinghua said, 'I think it's a little surprising that China was so straightforward'.³²²

These core messages are mirrored in PLA after-action analyses of propaganda results for the parades. A PLA article on the 2015 parade argued that it served four purposes: improving military morale, deterring adversaries by demonstrating military discipline and new equipment, creating a good public image for the PLA, and instilling values and propaganda into the military.³²³ Looking at the messaging of the April 2019 naval parade, researchers at the NDU Political Academy had three main takeaways: the importance of actively setting the narrative agenda ahead of time, being clear about the target audience, and making good use of the media.³²⁴ The analysts called for better military-civil fusion for the PLA to make sure Chinese state-run media 'expand the international influence and popularity of China's media', while

³¹⁷ 'Group Interview'.

³¹⁸ 'Group Interview'.

³¹⁹ Kathrin Hille and Qianer Liu, 'China Displays Military Advances in Show of Strength to Rivals', *Financial Times*, September 30, 2019.

³²⁰ Wong, 'China's Global Message: We Are Tough but Not Threatening'.

³²¹ Hu Xijin [@HuXijin_GT], 'Message from them: Don't mess up with the Chinese people or intimidate them', Twitter post, October 1, 2019.

³²² Anna Fifield, 'China Rolls Out Its Military Firepower with Emphasis on "Cold War-Style" Nuclear Might', *Washington Post*, October 1, 2019.

³²³ Xu Xuwei [谯旭伟], 'Ritual Propagation and Function Analysis in the Internet Age' [互联网时代仪式传播与功能解析], *Observe* [观察], October 2015, pp. 91–93.

³²⁴ Wang Hongwei [汪红伟] and Sun Yan [孙彦], 'Be a Good Speaker of "Chinese Stories" in the New Era' [当好新时代'中国故事'的宣讲员], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], November 2019. They were previously at Xi'an and PAP political academies based on affiliation information on past publications.

also ‘making foreign media useful to us [China]’, by leveraging the power of friendly organisations, media, and people to ‘carry out external propaganda work and improve the effectiveness of external communications’. For targeting foreign audiences, the article argued that propaganda messages must differentiate between domestic and foreign audiences, and not treat all foreign audiences all the same—‘This requires accurately grasping the cross-border, cross-cultural, and cross-lingual characteristics of international communication’.³²⁵ This aligns with the approach on foreign social media and reflects an emphasis on tailored messaging to targeted audiences.

International Interpretation

The signal of a strong, modernised military with a mission to safeguard China’s national interests was received loud and clear by foreign media and analysts. The *Washington Post* described the parade as an ‘astonishing array of new weapons systems’ that had darker tones against the backdrop of Hong Kong protests and the U.S.-China trade war: ‘With goose-stepping soldiers, a convoy of missiles and portraits of the party chairmen carried on floats, it was a display that would have been recognizable to Mao—or to Joseph Stalin’.³²⁶ The message was interpreted the same around the world—from South Korea and Japan to France and Germany.³²⁷

Analysts understood the message meant for potential adversaries and noted some significant achievements. Bonnie Glaser of CSIS said, ‘He’s sending a signal to Hong Kong and Taiwan, to all of China’s neighbors and to the West, that China is making great strides toward becoming a first-tier military power’.³²⁸ Similarly in 2015, Taylor Fravel of MIT noted, ‘Amid a worsening security environment, Beijing may feel that it needs to show strength and resolve’.³²⁹ Andrew Erickson summed up well Xi’s ‘clear message’ to Asian nations from the 2015 parade: ‘China has arrived as a great military power, and its interests must be taken seriously. . . . The PLA has ways to strike military bases and ships in the region that it finds menacing . . . [so p]lease therefore keep China’s interests in mind so that these weapons need never be used’.³³⁰

³²⁵ Wang Hongwei and Sun Yan, ‘Be a Good Speaker of “Chinese Stories” in the New Era’.

³²⁶ Fifield, ‘China Rolls Out Its Military Firepower’.

³²⁷ For global perspectives from South Korea, Japan, France, and Germany, respectively, see Wan-Jun Yun, ‘Patriotism Prevails in China on 70th Anniversary of Foundation’, *The Dong-A Ilbo*, October 7, 2019; Tetsuro Kosaka, ‘China’s Military Parade Heralds “War Plan” for US and Taiwan’, *Nikkei Asian*, October 5, 2019; Mathieu Duchâtel, ‘China’s Two Birthday Wishes: Strategic Stability and Disruptive Innovation’, *Institut Montaigne*, October 1, 2019; ‘The People’s Republic Celebrates Its 70th Anniversary: China Update 14/2019’, *Mercator Institute for China Studies*, October 2019.

³²⁸ Fifield, ‘China Rolls Out Its Military Firepower’.

³²⁹ Fravel, ‘What Is China’s Big Parade All About?’

³³⁰ Erickson, ‘Missile March’.

Australian analysts also understood the rapid military progress and implications for Canberra. Sam Roggeveen of the Lowy Institute in Australia acknowledged new systems were in some cases world-leading, such as the DF-17 HGV: ‘There’s simply nothing like it in any Western military force. . . . China is now, in some spheres of military technology, ahead of any Western nation’, while the DF-41 is ‘China’s most powerful and advanced nuclear weapons system . . . [and] has clearly been designed and deployed with deterring the United States in mind’.³³¹ Turning to these capabilities’ significance for Australia, Malcolm Davis of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) asserted that ‘the new capabilities on display can’t be dismissed as inconsequential for the US and its allies. It’s important that Australia, along with the US and its strategic partners, begins to consider how to contend with some of these advanced military capabilities’.³³² Specifically, he recommended that ‘those planning the future structure of the Australian Defence Force should take on board the key systems that were on show in Beijing. In particular, it’s clear that China is seeking to enhance and extend its A2/AD capability in a manner that will make it more difficult for the US and its allies, including Australia, to project power throughout the Indo-Pacific’.³³³

Analysts also pointed out the conflicting narratives of strength and upholding world peace. Evan Medeiros, a former U.S. National Security Council (NSC) official under U.S. President Barack Obama, said that ‘China’s diplomacy is a constant balancing act between multiple and often competing objectives, and it does a bad job of finding the right balance’.³³⁴ Similarly, Fravel added, ‘Yet if the [2015] military purpose of the parade is to enhance China’s strategic deterrence, displays of strength may easily backfire—especially because of existing tensions. Rather than deter others from challenging China, the parade is more likely to underscore the military threat that China poses and affirm increasingly negative perceptions of Beijing’s intentions’.³³⁵ Chinese sources did not address this outright, but Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei referred to the PLA’s public diplomacy supporting both messages of ‘China walking the road of peace’ and ‘resolutely safeguarding China’s core interests’ as ‘dialectical utility’ (辩证统一)—namely, touting irreconcilable things at the same time.³³⁶

Although little is known about how foreign intelligence organisations interpret Chinese military parades, the 1984 parade provides some insight since it is long enough ago for U.S. declassification. A CIA report said it ‘underlined the impressive progress made in defense modernization since the mid-1970s’, and ‘underscore[d] Beijing’s determination to

³³¹ Jeremy Page, ‘China Brings Out the Big Guns for National Day’, *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2019.

³³² Malcolm Davis, ‘Beijing’s Show of Military Might Is a Wake-Up Call for Australia’, *The Interpreter*, October 3, 2019.

³³³ Davis, ‘Beijing’s Show of Military Might’.

³³⁴ Wong, ‘China’s Global Message’.

³³⁵ Fravel, ‘What Is China’s Big Parade All About?’

³³⁶ He Yafei [何亚非], ‘How to Firmly Push Forward China’s Military Public Diplomacy’ [‘如何扎实推进中国军事公共外交’], *Public Diplomacy Quarterly* [公共外交季刊], Vol. 2, 2015, pp. 14–21.

improve its defense’, and ultimately ‘if produced and deployed in quantity, the weapons unveiled will go far to redress some, but certainly not all, of the critical deficiencies in China’s defense’.³³⁷ However, expert CIA analysts were also able to see through some of Beijing’s propaganda spin: ‘China’s dependence on foreign technology was apparent . . . despite Chinese statements emphasizing self-reliance in the development and production of these new systems’. The high-profile propaganda coverage ‘demonstrated the importance China’s leaders place on displaying increasingly capable military force to both domestic and foreign audiences’. Similarly, an American attendee to the 1945 parade described it as ‘probably the greatest demonstration of Chinese military might in history’, making it ‘enormously impressive’.³³⁸ The CIA analysts in 1985, however, knew something likely secret from outside observers: ‘China’s newest fighter was not even displayed’ because it ‘has been troubled by’ a host of problems.³³⁹

Key Takeaways

Military parades are likely to be a continuing feature of Xi’s rule and the CCP’s approach to deterrence signalling for the long term. These events provide several lessons learned. First, China can undertake a concerted campaign with well-scripted messaging to send a clear signal. This includes tailored messages for targeted audiences, such as a softer tone towards the general public despite clear threatening capabilities for adversary governments. Second, China uses a variety of means to send this message: leadership speeches, Chinese media coverage, outreach to foreign governments, and briefings to foreign media, among others. Third, the actual deterrent message—China has these capabilities—should not be lost in the propaganda narrative, which asserts that China is contributing to world peace.

Table 4.1 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of military parades.

Table 4.1. Applying the Framework to Military Parades

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Demonstrating improvements in capabilities to deter or intimidate potential adversaries	Displaying new weaponry and equipment during highly choreographed military parade	Potential adversaries, such as the United States	Party, government, and military, plus unofficial sources	Widely disseminated
Appealing to nationalism, bolstering Party legitimacy		Chinese public	Leadership participation	Coordinated propaganda rollout

³³⁷ ‘China: Defense Modernisation on Parade’, Central Intelligence Agency Directorate of Intelligence, November 23, 1984, declassified April 12, 2010, CIA-RDP04T00367R000302400001-4.

³³⁸ Chang-tai Hung, ‘Mao’s Parades’.

³³⁹ ‘China: Defense Modernisation on Parade’.

Peacetime Case Study No. 2: People's Liberation Army Air Force Bomber Flights

Since 2015, the Chinese Air Force has been conducting flights past the First Island Chain with its H-6K medium-range bomber.³⁴⁰ The flights have been one of the most visible ways the PLA has demonstrated its capability and resolve to defend its territorial claims against those of rivals in the South China Sea, as well as its ability to prosecute an air campaign against Taiwan and hold the main Japanese islands at risk over the Senkakus. China has broadcast these flights mainly through the state-run media, especially on social media, and has tailored this messaging most effectively against Taiwan. As China develops more advanced power projection platforms, such as the H-20 strategic bomber but also next-generation carriers and submarines, it is learning how to leverage the physical presence of its military far from its shores for maximum deterrent effect and as psychological warfare against target populations to undermine their will to fight. Of note, the PLAN also conducts similar flights with its H-6 bombers, but these flights have been leveraged less for signalling and are not examined here.

Event Details

In July 2016, when an international tribunal in The Hague invalidated China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, the Chinese MFA denounced the ruling as 'null and void and [having] no binding force'.³⁴¹ However, the PLAAF showed the world how China really felt courtesy of an H-6K bomber flight over Scarborough Shoal, which was the root cause of the tribunal's case, being disputed territory claimed by both China and the Philippines. It did so not with a normal statement or CCTV announcement, but it released the information—and a photo for proof—on the PLAAF's social media account on Weibo, China's version of Twitter.³⁴² The message was clear: China claims this territory and has the military might to enforce its claims, lest any other claimants believe they can stand up to China.

Overall, the PLAAF has conducted at least 42 H-6 bomber flights throughout Asia since the first one in March 2015.³⁴³ H-6Ks initially flew through the Miyako Strait, between Taiwan and Japan, and the Bashi Channel, between Taiwan and the Philippines, but then expanded to fly into the South China Sea and circumnavigate Taiwan in 2016. The bombers then flew through the Tsushima Strait, between South Korea and Japan, and close to Japan's east coast in 2017. The pace of flights has ebbed and flowed over the last five years, but so far, they have occurred exclusively in East Asia.

³⁴⁰ This section continues earlier research done in Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights*; Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

³⁴¹ 'Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines', Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 12, 2016.

³⁴² PLAAF on Weibo, July 15, 2016.

³⁴³ Defined as unique flight paths with one or more H-6s. As of February 1, 2020, based on flight data compiled by the authors.

These flights have several motivations, according to a recent RAND report exploring the PLAAF's growing employment of bombers in the region.³⁴⁴ Beyond the flights' value for deterrence, these flights have operational value by providing training for the PLAAF's wartime mission of strikes on Taiwan, Guam, Japan and other locations. Decades of modernisation investments by the PLAAF created a set of modern aircraft—the J-20 stealth fighter, Y-20 transport aircraft, and H-6K bomber—to support the service's transition from a homeland air defence force that mitigated concerns over its pilots defecting with anti-ejection measures through the late 1980s to a modern air force embracing a power projection mission.³⁴⁵ In order to operationalise this new hardware, however, pilots and crews require flight hours to acclimatise to flying over water beyond the country's borders. As H-6K pilots have gained more experience, the flights have incorporated other support aircraft—fighters, early warning aircraft, reconnaissance aircraft, and aerial refuelling tankers—to create bomber strike packages. These bomber strike packages represent more realistic options for how the PLAAF would actually conduct strikes in wartime, reflecting operational gains from these flights. These flights also boost the PLAAF's bureaucratic standing, giving it a stake in the maritime domain that has traditionally been dominated by the PLA Navy, and provide one more way for China to pressure Taiwan's government. The operational value and pressure on Taiwan reinforce the core message of capability and resolve for the larger goal of deterring undesired Taiwanese political actions, such as declaring independence.

Signalling Details

These flights demonstrate China's operational capability to conduct missile strikes against regional countries in a very direct manner. Unlike parades, however, the bombers are not easily observed nor broadcast in real time on their flights into the Pacific or the South China Sea. This is especially true because some of the intended targets, such as the Philippines or Vietnam, very likely do not have the technical means to actually even know Chinese bombers are flying near their territory.³⁴⁶ This means the PLA had to consider how to message these flights and what information to release publicly for maximum intended effect. The PLA's approach has utilised state-run and social media and has employed PLA commentators to amplify messaging as necessary, plus it has shown an ability to leverage selective transparency and foreign government information to its advantage.

³⁴⁴ Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights*. For other work on Chinese bomber flights in Asia, see Mark Cozad and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *People's Liberation Army Air Force Operations over Water: Maintaining Relevance in China's Changing Security Environment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2057-AF, 2017; Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson, *Selling a Maritime Air Force: The PLAAF's Campaign for a Bigger Maritime Role*, Washington, D.C.: China Aerospace Studies Institute, April 2019.

³⁴⁵ *PLA Aerospace Power: A Primer on Trends in China's Military Air, Space, and Missile Forces*, Washington, D.C.: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2017.

³⁴⁶ Frances Mangosing, 'PH Can't Confirm Chinese Bomber Flight over Scarborough', *Inquirer*, July 19, 2016.

The public deterrence value is less from the actual flights themselves than from the way they are communicated, especially when compared with similar flights by PLAN Aviation. PLAN Aviation H-6 bombers began flying past the First Island Chain in 2013, before the PLAAF, on similar training for their assigned wartime mission, antiship strikes on adversary ships and carriers.³⁴⁷ However, the PLAN has been much quieter about its training, announcing few details about the flights, and they have not received high-profile coverage by Chinese state-run media. The PLAAF's decision to broadcast the flights boldly and widely reveals the PLA's desire to use these as deterrence signalling, meaning the way they are communicated is very important. At the same time, however, some alternative explanations or other contributing factors should also be taken into account. Notably, the PLAAF appears to be competing within the PLA to gain as much of an overwater mission as possible vis-à-vis PLAN bombers.³⁴⁸ Additionally, the PLAAF could be leveraging these materials to improve pilot recruitment, bolster its status to gain additional support from top leaders, or boost nationalism at home more generally.³⁴⁹ While many if not all of the bomber flights have deterrence implications, and some of the flights around Taiwan and in the South China Sea in particular appear to have been heavily amplified as deterrence signals, it is worth noting that the flights and even the associated messaging could support other objectives or serve multiple purposes in some instances.

The PLAAF has been preparing for the flights for years, strongly suggesting the messaging strategy has been well considered. In *Strategic Air Force*, a 2009 PLAAF book outlining the service's long-term modernisation strategy, the authors argue China 'must build strong offensive air power, bring the First and Second Island Chains into the range of our striking force, and force the U.S. military to retract its defense line'.³⁵⁰ In the 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy*, the PLAAF is called to 'realise some breakthroughs in terms of blue-water training and strategic cruising', which is the term used to describe bomber flights for deterrence purposes.³⁵¹ When the flights began in 2015, a PLA commentator correctly predicted what was to come: flying with support aircraft, flying new routes near Japan and flying more frequently.³⁵² Moreover, the PLA immediately rolled out its propaganda line to justify that these flights did not target any specific countries nor violate international norms.³⁵³

³⁴⁷ Peter Wood, 'China-Japan Relations Worsen as Chinese Naval Aviation Flies Through "First Island Chain"', *China Brief*, November 7, 2013.

³⁴⁸ McCaslin and Erickson, *Selling a Maritime Air Force*.

³⁴⁹ The authors would like to thank a reviewer for raising this point.

³⁵⁰ Zhu Hui [朱晖], ed., *Strategic Air Force* [战略空军论], Beijing: Blue Sky Press, 2009.

³⁵¹ AMS Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy*, 3rd ed., p. 227.

³⁵² Qiu Yue [邱越], 'Chinese Air Force Distant Sea Training Must Be Regularised, Don't Rule Out Possibility of Foreign Military Surveillance' ['中国空军远海训练必将常态化 不排除遭外军监视可能'], *People's Daily Online*, March 31, 2015.

³⁵³ Guo Renjie, 'PLA Air Force's Flying over Miyako Strait for Training: Legitimate and Reasonable', China Military Online, May 22, 2015. For further discussion of the propaganda for the legal justification, see Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights*, pp. 14–15.

This is all to say, significant evidence exists that these flights and the accompanying messages were well planned ahead of time.

The locations of the flights have been very intentional but the timing appears to be less important. The operational value of the flights serves as the foundation for their value as deterrence and thus the flights near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands disputed with Japan, Scarborough Shoal disputed with the Philippines, or Allison Reef and Woody Island disputed with Vietnam all are physical manifestations of the PLA's capability to deliver firepower to these remote islands—even if these distances are not required during actual combat. However, the flights often lack a clear political provocation and instead are more likely to be mostly driven by training cycles, flight time availability, and weather. Even the PLA's landing of an H-6 bomber on Woody Island in 2018, and likely again in August 2020, does not send obvious political messages. Rather, the PLA mostly seems to have been practising landing these heavy military aircraft in new places that may serve critical roles in future conflicts. Certainly, at times, the flights have had an immediate political relevance, such as the July 2016 flights into the South China Sea. However, much like North Korean nuclear tests, the flights appear to be leveraged for maximum deterrent effect whenever they occur, not the other way around, making them dual-use deterrence actions.

Beyond the bombers' mere presence themselves, the flights have been announced by the PLAAF and broadcast widely on traditional and social media by Chinese state-run media. Most, but not all, of the flights were announced by PLAAF spokesperson Shen Jinke. These statements were then broadcast via Chinese state-run media, with varying degrees of emphasis and coverage. Spurring domestic support, the PLAAF leverage these flights into propaganda blitz for CCTV specials, *People's Daily* front pages and eye-catching promotional videos on social media.³⁵⁴ This attention was also translated abroad, as state-run media targeting foreign audiences, such as *China Daily*, covered the flights in traditional and social media.³⁵⁵

The core message by the PLAAF on these flights has been consistent, if perhaps contradictory. As repeated in Shen Jinke's statements, the flights are normal behaviour for all militaries, routine training that complies with international law, and they do not target any third country.³⁵⁶ However, Shen always highlights the PLAAF's capability and resolve to fulfil its mission to safeguard Chinese territory. This two-track messaging dismisses any concerns and couches the flights in a defensive narrative, but nevertheless cannot obscure the actual signalling involved.

³⁵⁴ CCTV, 'My Story with the God of War', video, YouTube, May 6, 2016; 'Air Force Multiple Types of Combat Aircraft Form a System on Island Encirclement Patrol' ['空军多型战机成体系绕岛巡航'], *People's Daily* [人民日报], December 13, 2017, p. 1; 'The Chinese Air Force's Film *South China Sea Combat Patrol* Has Arrived! Accompanying Piece: I Love the Motherland's Blue Skies' ['中国空军大片《南海战巡》来了! 配乐: 我爱祖国的蓝天'], China Military Online, November 26, 2017.

³⁵⁵ 'China Sends Su-35 Fighter Jets for Island Patrol Training', Xinhua via *China Daily*, May 12, 2018; China Daily [@ChinaDaily], 'China's air force says it sent multiple aircraft, including the H-6K #bomber, to patrol around Taiwan island on Thursday. #airforce', Twitter post, April 26, 2018.

³⁵⁶ For example, see Lifang, 'Chinese Air Force Conducts High-Sea Training', Xinhua, March 25, 2018.

In order to amplify the messaging for added effect, PLA propagandists routinely accentuate the messaging when necessary on a semideniable basis. For example, the PLAAF undertook a concerted pressure campaign for bomber flights around Taiwan in April and May 2018, totalling seven flights. At the same time, as a 2018 RAND report found, ‘these flights came with much more explicit deterrence signalling’, including that ‘the rhetoric by military commentators also ramped up, as one said that the H-6K’s missiles are intended for “destroying Taiwan’s key military facilities or decapitate important human targets like Tsai and [prime minister William] Lai”’.³⁵⁷ Although these statements are not official government statements, the PLAAF sometimes reposts them on social media in a show of support for these comments, reflecting the fact that the propagandist serve to reinforce intended messages.³⁵⁸

To expand the reach of its messaging and exploit its potential for psychological warfare, the PLAAF has also released short videos on social media that have been reposted on Western social media as ‘external propaganda products’.³⁵⁹ During the spring 2018 pressure campaign on Taiwan, the PLAAF released several promotional videos on Weibo narrated in Mandarin Chinese, but it dubbed at least some of the videos into English, Southern Min (close to Taiwanese Hokkein), and Japanese—not coincidentally the exact languages of the most targeted countries.³⁶⁰ These videos were posted widely by state-run media on Twitter and YouTube. This is a good example of how PLA propaganda also serves a deterrent message and how the PLA is adapting to social media, and how state-run media deliver Chinese deterrence messages abroad for a wider global audience.³⁶¹ It should be noted, however, that the PLAAF’s videos are not actually very popular with foreign audiences, with few garnering more than a couple of hundred views.³⁶²

The PLAAF also learned how to embrace the power of transparency for its advantage. When the flights began, the PLAAF was slow releasing information, with the Japanese Ministry of Defence’s (MOD) reports on the flights often being released first. Over time,

³⁵⁷ Minnie Chan, ‘Navy and Ground Troops to Join Air Force in Drills Around Taiwan as China Increases Pressure on President Tsai Ing-wen’, *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2018.

³⁵⁸ For an example of the PLAAF promoting PLA commentary, see PLAAF on Weibo, November 26, 2017; PLAAF on Weibo, December 14, 2017.

³⁵⁹ Shen Jinke [申进科], ‘Optimise Information Provision to Lead Online Public Opinion’ [‘优化信息供给引领网络舆论’], *Xinhua* [新华], December 8, 2017.

³⁶⁰ For Taiwanese versions, see PLAAF on Weibo, April 19, 2018; PLAAF on Weibo, April 21, 2018. For English version, see PLAAF on Weibo, April 19, 2018. For PLAAF claim to Japanese version, see PLAAF on Weibo, April 28, 2018.

It was also dubbed in Cantonese for Hong Kong and overseas Chinese audiences. See PLAAF on Weibo, April 28, 2018; Zhao Yun [赵运], ‘Looking at Using Language for External Communication Through Air Force Island Encirclement Flight Propaganda Videos’ [‘从空军绕岛巡航宣传片看对外传播的语言运用’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], December 25, 2018, quoted in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

³⁶¹ For another example of PLAAF propaganda videos, see Tracey Shelton and Peter Pei, ‘Thinly Veiled Military Threats via Social Media Kick Off China-Taiwan Tensions on Lunar New Year’, ABC News (Australia), February 5, 2019; Ben Westcott and Nanlin Fang, ‘China and Taiwan Clash in Lunar New Year Military Propaganda Videos’, CNN, February 6, 2019.

³⁶² Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

however, the PLAAF began releasing more details about the flights quicker via social media, including photos from its flights—notably flying over Scarborough Shoal in July 2016 and (allegedly) flying past Taiwan’s Jade Mountain in December 2016—to win the public opinion battle.³⁶³ During its pressure campaign against Taiwan in spring 2018, the PLAAF mimicked the Japanese MOD reports by promoting the bombers’ flight path on its own and finally clarified that the ‘treasured island’ it had been flying around for a year was indeed Taiwan.³⁶⁴ This transparency was likely intended to bolster the credibility of its capabilities and the message clarity was meant to slightly increase the pressure, but perhaps even more so it served as a form of psychological warfare to undermine Taiwanese resolve.

Beyond direct messaging, the PLAAF also appears to have adopted some psychological warfare tactics for these flights targeting the Taiwanese public. The Taiwanese MND claimed the photo of Jade Mountain was manipulated, though the PLAAF continues to use the photo regardless.³⁶⁵ Chinese pilots have also interacted with Taiwanese aircraft, intercepting them, at times appealing to a shared identity, a nod to China’s claims to the island, and at other times threatening consequences.³⁶⁶ This aligns well with PLA writings on psychological warfare, including manipulated information (in this case, pictures) for deterrence. The focus on Taiwan is apparent by the absence of similar public emphasis on another clear target of the flights—U.S. forces in Guam. Although the PLAAF bomber flights into the Pacific have targeted Guam since the beginning, the PLA never openly characterises them as such, and has left any discussion by PLA commentators only in Chinese—suggesting the PLA does not seek the same psychological warfare approach vis-à-vis Guam, and a further indication the PLA assumes the United States will correctly interpret the signal without public explanation.

Chinese state-run media’s coverage of the flights on foreign social media generally reflects this focus on U.S. audiences. In a review of state-run media accounts since January 2017, *People’s Daily’s* main Twitter account was the most prolific tweeter of bomber flights, mentioning at least ten, plus other general PLAAF training stories. Although the content is sometimes ambiguous about the real purpose, other times it is rather direct: ‘Chinese H-6K strategic bombers and fighter jets conducting island encirclement patrols near an island that is reportedly Taiwan’.³⁶⁷ Xinhua, by contrast, had its main account mention the flights only once in December 2017 and obfuscated by describing it as ‘cruising around island’.³⁶⁸ Xinhua’s Indonesia account, however, was quite attentive to the bomber flights, mentioning at least

³⁶³ Shen Jinke, ‘Optimise Information Provision to Lead Online Public Opinion’.

³⁶⁴ PLAAF on Weibo, April 22, 2018; PLAAF on Weibo, April 23, 2018; Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, p. 25.

³⁶⁵ Matthew Strong, ‘Military Denies Yushan in China Bomber Picture’, *Taiwan News*, December 17, 2016.

³⁶⁶ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Derek Grossman, and Logan Ma, ‘Chinese Bomber Flights Around Taiwan: For What Purpose?’, *War on the Rocks*, September 13, 2017; Matthew Strong, ‘Taiwan F-16s Chase away Chinese Bomber’, *Taipei News*, December 7, 2017.

³⁶⁷ People’s Daily, China [@PDChina], ‘People’s Liberation Army Air Force released a video’, Twitter post, December 18, 2017.

³⁶⁸ China Xinhua News [@XHNews], ‘Chinese #AirForce cruising around island’, Twitter post, December 19, 2017.

four flights and more general training.³⁶⁹ Suggesting there may be a messaging strategy in place for Indonesian audiences, none of these flights are placed in the context of the South China Sea and the May 2018 H-6K landing on Woody Island was completely ignored. The only other regional Xinhua account observed to mention the flights was one tweet by Xinhua's Spanish account, and otherwise the most popular PLAAF-related news story was China's participation in the International Army Games in July 2018.³⁷⁰ This is not to say all PLA propaganda is closely coordinated across accounts, however, since the PLAAF's Weibo has publicly lobbied for other accounts to amplify its posts and the PLAAF may have accidentally released extra footage in a recent video.³⁷¹

Signalling Explanation

The PLAAF has long seen itself as a service that could provide deterrence signalling in the tradition of other great power air forces in the United States and Russia. The PLAAF has set out to become a 'strategic air force', namely a modern air force premised on the ability to safeguard national interests and support China's status as a major power.³⁷² Signalling serves both of these core missions since it can communicate red lines on Chinese interests and broadly reflect China's great power status by flexing its muscles. The 2009 book that outlined this vision, *Strategic Air Force*, addresses the value of bombers for deterrence at length.³⁷³ It asserts that 'in modern informatised warfare, long-range offensive air power has strong destructive power and therefore can play a vital role in deterring the potential enemy. With this deterrence role, we could conquer the enemy without fighting a war, or could effectively contain war escalation in the course of a war'. Authoritative PLAAF texts since at least 1995 make similar references to using airpower as deterrence, list deterrence actions such as 'organising air patrols', 'deploying air forces near borders', 'visible deployments', and 'large-scale exercises'.³⁷⁴ Understanding that China's bomber force is currently weaker than the United States, PLAAF analysts have looked to Russia to observe how a qualitatively

³⁶⁹ Xinhua Indonesia [@XHIndonesia], 'Dua jet tempur J-11 dan pesawat pembom H-6K', Twitter post, May 13, 2018.

³⁷⁰ China Xinhua Español [@XHespanol], 'La fuerza aérea del Ejército Popular de Liberación de #China', Twitter post, May 11, 2018; China Xinhua Deutsch [@XHdeutsch], 'BVA-Luftwaffe schickt H-6K Bo', Twitter post, July 13, 2018.

³⁷¹ For one example of PLAAF call for propaganda cooperation, see 'The Chinese Air Force Released the English Version of the "God of War" Promo' ['中国空军发布英文版“战神”宣传片'], People's Liberation Army Air Force [中国人民解放军空军 (空军发布)], Weibo [微博], April 19, 2018. For more details on PLA social media coordination, see Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*.

³⁷² Michael S. Chase and Cristina L. Garafola, 'China's Search for a Strategic Air Force', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2016, pp. 4–28.

³⁷³ Zhu Hui, *Strategic Air Force*. For more on this, see Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights*, pp. 27–35.

³⁷⁴ *The Science of Air Force Strategy* [空军战略学], Beijing: National Defence University Press, July 1995; Min Zengfu [闵增富], ed., *An Introduction to Air Force Military Thought* [空军军事思想概论], Beijing: PLA Publishing House, 2005. See Grossman et al., *China's Long-Range Bomber Flights*, pp. 27–35.

inferior force can still be used to challenge U.S. power by garnering media attention and forcing a reaction from the affected countries.³⁷⁵

China has at times specifically pointed to its flights as deterrence signals. This is first and foremost found in the language PLAAF spokesperson Shen Jinke uses to announce the flights, which often revolves around capability and resolve.³⁷⁶ For example, announcing the July 2016 flights into the South China Sea, Shen said they were intended to ‘improve combat abilities against various security threats’, and that ‘the PLA Air Force will firmly defend national sovereignty, security and maritime interests, safeguard regional peace and stability, and cope with various threats and challenges’.³⁷⁷ Similarly, during the PLA’s broader spring 2018 pressure campaign against Taiwan and the peak of H-6K flights around the island, the PLAAF explained the H-6K ‘shoulders an important mission of delivering the nation’s power and will’ and that the flights into the Pacific ‘declared the strength of the Chinese Air Force’.³⁷⁸ The videos distributed on social media in multiple languages, in the PLAAF’s own words, ‘transmitted [its] resolve and will to safeguard national unity’ and ‘allows the people of all ethnicities across the country and the compatriots in Taiwan and overseas to understand and see more clearly . . . [that] every inch of territory of our great motherland cannot and absolutely must not be separated from China’.³⁷⁹ Reflecting upon the spring 2018 pressure campaign of flight around Taiwan, Shen Jinke wrote that the international reaction to the flights ‘indicated that the information transmitted by “Air Force Release” [the PLAAF’s Weibo account] was the correct signal for foreign communication’.³⁸⁰ A spokesperson for China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) made this point even more bluntly around the same time, saying the PLA drills show ‘we have the resolve, the confidence and the ability to defeat secessionist attempts in any form, to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity’.³⁸¹ A month later, in May 2018, when an H-6K landed on Woody Island, a Chinese

³⁷⁵ Min Zengfu [闵增富], ed., *An Introduction to Air Force Military Thought* [空军军事思想概论], Beijing: PLA Publishing House, 2005.

³⁷⁶ For more of Shen’s views on PLAAF propaganda, see Shen Jinke [申进科], ‘Military Spokespersons Need an “Air of Masculinity”’ [‘军事新闻发言人要有“阳刚之气”’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], April 2015; Shen Jinke [申进科], ‘News and Public Opinion Work Must Adhere to Seeking Truth from Facts’ [‘新闻舆论工作要坚持实事求是’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], June 2017; Shen Jinke, ‘Optimise Information Provision to Lead Online Public Opinion’; Shen Jinke [申进科], ‘Military Press Releases Are Dedicated to Enhancing the International Influence of Chinese Discourse’ [‘军事新闻发布要致力提升中国话语的国际影响力’] *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], September 2018.

³⁷⁷ Dong Zhaohui, ‘PLA Air Force Conducts Combat Air Patrol in South China Sea’, Xinhua, July 19, 2016. For an article reviewing how foreign media interpreted the deterrence signalling, see ‘Chinese Air Force Cruises Near Scarborough Shoal Will Become Normalised, Philippine Media—China Shows Muscle’ [‘中国空军巡航黄岩岛将成常态 菲媒：中国秀肌肉’], *Global Times* [环球时报], July 19, 2016.

³⁷⁸ PLAAF on Weibo, March 31, 2018.

³⁷⁹ PLAAF on Weibo, April 28, 2018.

³⁸⁰ Shen Jinke, ‘Military Press Releases’.

³⁸¹ Yao Jianing, ‘Military Drills a Show of Force to Taiwan’, China Military Online, April 26, 2018. For broader messaging, see Brad Lendon and Susannah Cullinane, ‘China’s Release of Images Reinforces Vow to Keep Taiwan as a Territory’, CNN, April 30, 2018.

analyst explained that their deployment to the South China Sea would ‘[add] to [the PLAAF’s] existing prowess to deter any plots to compromise China’s territorial integrity from the sea’.³⁸² These comments all revolve around the same core components of Chinese deterrence—capability, resolve and communication. By contrast, when a PLAN Aviation H-6J was reported to have landed on Woody Island in August 2020, the PLAN did not release the information directly and it was not covered widely in Party-state foreign language media, continuing the broader trend of the PLAN generally downplaying its bomber flights.³⁸³

PLAAF Command College professor Wang Mingliang has been one of the leading thinkers on how bombers support deterrence. In the 2009 *Strategic Air Force*, he noted the option for ‘the time-appropriate implementation of cruising flights in sensitive regions during military struggle to demonstrate power’.³⁸⁴ Explaining the first flights in 2015, he said, ‘In displaying the H-6K to the world, the message being sent is our conviction and capability to use more active methods in much wider spaces to protect national sovereignty, security, and development’.³⁸⁵ In 2018, as the flights continued, he expanded on the symbolism of the flights: ‘It is undeniable that this is also a special language for China’s security communication on the international stage. The information transmitted is that the PLAAF is determined to be able to maintain the sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the country in a broader space. It also [says that China] has the resolve and capability to show the PLAAF’s legal existence in international public airspace. This helps maintain regional stability and peace’.³⁸⁶

International Understanding

Most foreign governments and analysts understand these flights constitute deterrence signals, but the nature of the flights has allowed some countries to downplay their significance.³⁸⁷ The United States understands these flights are targeted in part on

³⁸² Zhao Lei, ‘Air Force Bombers Land on Island Airport for First Time’, *China Daily*, May 19, 2018. Quoted in Beauchamp-Mustafaga and Chase, *Borrowing a Boat out to Sea*, 2019.

For PLA analysis of role of think tank in clarifying deterrence comments, see Liu Liming [刘力铭], ‘An Analysis of the External Communication Effect of the Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense: Taking Taiwan Media’s Reporting on the Air Force’s “Circumnavigation of Taiwan” as an Example’ [‘国防部记者会对外传播效果浅析: 以台湾媒体对空军“绕台”报道为例’], *Military Correspondent* [军事记者], August 2018.

³⁸³ Thomas Newdick, ‘China Deployed Bombers to One of Its South China Sea Islands for the First Time According to Photo’, *The Warzone*, August 12, 2020. For one PRC media report, see Liu Xuanzun, ‘Chinese H-6J Bomber’s S. China Sea Deployment “to Suppress US Provocations”’, *Global Times*, August 13, 2020.

³⁸⁴ Zhu Hui, *Strategic Air Force*.

³⁸⁵ Wei Yiping [魏一平], ‘The New Missions of the Strategic Air Force—An Exclusive Interview with PLAAF Command Academy Professor Wang Mingliang’ [‘战略空军的新使命—专访空军指挥学院教授王明亮’], *Life Weekly* [三联生活周刊], August 31, 2015, quoted in Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, p. 32.

³⁸⁶ Qiu Yue [邱越], ‘Experts: Air Force Training Elevates Training Level—Can Form Combat System Outside First Island Chain’ [‘专家: 空军训练水平提高 可在第一岛链外形成空战体系’], People’s Daily Online, May 16, 2018, quoted in Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, p. 43.

³⁸⁷ Drawn from Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, pp. 44–49.

U.S. forces in Asia, but does not explicitly frame them as deterrence signalling.³⁸⁸ For example, the 2018 U.S. DoD report to Congress acknowledged that flights ‘[demonstrate] the capability to strike U.S. and allied forces and military bases in the western Pacific Ocean, including Guam’, and adds that ‘such flights could potentially be used as a strategic signal to regional states’.³⁸⁹ However, it notes that ‘the PLA has thus far not been clear what messages such flights communicate beyond a demonstration of improved capabilities’.

Taiwan has criticised China for the flights and refused to pay them too much attention. In response to a February 2020 flight around Taiwan, the Taiwanese MND said, ‘The Chinese Communist’s long-range far-out-at-sea missions have impacted regional security and stability and endanger the peace and welfare shared by all parties in the region’.³⁹⁰ The Taiwanese MND initially decided against providing much public information about the flights, other than calling for calm and occasionally releasing a statement on the flight details, ‘because the Ministry will not dance to China’s tune as it tries to use psychological warfare against Taiwan’.³⁹¹ However, one retired Taiwanese military official, according to a 2018 RAND report, ‘assessed that the bomber flights were far more focused on training than anything else because of the need to ensure that the PLAAF can overcome challenging weather and other operational conditions in a real combat scenario’.³⁹²

Japan similarly views these flights as bolstering Chinese deterrence against Tokyo. This is assumed to be focussed on the most likely cause for a China-Japan crisis, the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands near Taiwan. According to a 2018 RAND report, ‘Japanese interlocutors generally assess that bomber flights represent the next step in China’s attempts to assert sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and gain leverage in its dispute with Japan’, with the goal of ‘chang[ing] the status quo and perhaps even to goad[ing] Japan into an incident that could render Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Alliance nonapplicable’.³⁹³ Like other Chinese neighbours, Japanese analysts understand the bomber flights are only one component of Chinese military and paramilitary pressure—China has used PLAAF, PLAN and PLAN Aviation, as well as the Coast Guard and People’s Maritime Militia to press its territorial claims to the Senkakus. Interestingly enough, PLAAF social media has not taunted Japan in the same way it has clearly sought to provoke and undermine the Taiwanese government on social media.

³⁸⁸ Tara Copp, ‘China Has Practiced Bombing Runs Targeting Guam, US Says’, *Military Times*, October 31, 2017.

³⁸⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 16, 2018, p. 118.

³⁹⁰ Ben Blanchard, ‘Update 3: Taiwan Scrambles Armed Jets as Chinese Air Force Flies Around Island’, Reuters, February 9, 2020.

³⁹¹ Taiwan MND has since started releasing more information about PLA flights near Taiwan, including on its own Twitter account. For initial comment, see ‘Defense Ministry to Cease Reporting PLA Maneuvers’, *Taipei Times*, December 22, 2017.

³⁹² Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, p. 47.

³⁹³ Grossman et al., *China’s Long-Range Bomber Flights*, p. 46.

Other regional countries have voiced criticism when the flights were clearly targeted at them but have otherwise been much more circumspect in their interpretation, likely out of diplomatic sensitivities. For example, Vietnam has been largely quiet on Chinese flights into the South China Sea, but in May 2018, when the H-6K landed on Woody Island, which is also claimed by Vietnam, its foreign ministry said China should ‘put an end to these activities immediately, stop militarisation, [and] seriously respect Vietnam’s sovereignty over the Hoang Sa Islands’.³⁹⁴ Vietnam similarly criticised the August 2020 news of an H-6J landing on Woody Island.³⁹⁵ The Philippines, which does not claim Woody Island but disputes the Spratly Islands with China, did not criticise China for the May 2018 H-6K landing, likely to avoid diplomatic tension.³⁹⁶ Away from direct claimants to the South China Sea, analysts in Australia, which is nominally within H-6K range from Chinese bases there, interpreted previous bomber flight into the South China Sea as ‘China’s trying to send a signal that, if Australia gets involved directly or indirectly in joint patrols in the South China Sea, Australia shouldn’t assume that its distance protects it’.³⁹⁷ Overall, regional countries clearly understand the deterrence signals being sent.

One good example of an instance in which there was some debate—and evidently some misunderstanding—over the intended message associated with PLAAF bomber activity occurred following then-President-Elect Trump’s phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in December 2016. As the first phone call between a U.S. president-elect and Taiwan’s leader since diplomatic ties were ended in 1979, there was an expectation that Beijing would respond in some fashion. Shortly thereafter, a U.S. official revealed to Fox News that a ‘nuclear-capable bomber’ flight had occurred, which Fox summarised as saying, ‘The dramatic show of force was meant to send a message to the new administration’.³⁹⁸ However, the flight route does not support the interpretation that it was a signal in response to the Trump-Tsai phone call. First, the flight as described by the U.S. official was into the South China Sea, along the nine-dash line, not around Taiwan, suggesting that if it was intended to send a message it was likely one related to the maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Moreover, the H-6K bomber was not nuclear capable at the time, according to an assessment by DoD.³⁹⁹ Finally, bomber flights can serve a number of other purposes beyond international signalling, such as crew training and messaging aimed at impressing a domestic

³⁹⁴ Vu Hoang, ‘Vietnam Asks China to End Bombers Drills in Paracels’, *VN Express International*, May 21, 2018.

³⁹⁵ Phuong Nguyen and Khanh Vu, ‘Vietnam Says Chinese Bomber on Disputed Islands “Jeopardises Peace”’, Reuters, August 20, 2020.

³⁹⁶ Guillaume Lavallée, ‘Unlike Philippines, Vietnam Condemns Chinese Bombers’, Rappler, May 22, 2018.

³⁹⁷ David Wroe, ‘Chinese Bomber Planes from South China Sea and Future Missiles Could Threaten Australia’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 3, 2016.

³⁹⁸ Lucas Y. Tomlinson, ‘China Flies Nuclear-Capable Bomber in South China Sea after Trump Taiwan Call, US Officials Say’, Fox News, December 10, 2016.

³⁹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2017*, Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, May 15, 2017, pp. 28, 54.

audience with the PLAAF's growing capabilities and the willingness of Party leaders to display them in pursuit of Chinese goals. As one analyst said, 'While the flight might be intended as a signal, it needs to be viewed in the context of increasing Chinese air force patrols in the region generally, and not exclusively in response to the Taiwan call. The greater danger may not be China's signal to President Trump but the U.S. reading more into the signal than China intended'.⁴⁰⁰ Although the bomber activity may have been intended at least in part as a signal of some sort, the U.S. official's explanation to Fox News did not make much sense given that the flight took place in the South China Sea, and the part of the news report about the bomber being nuclear-capable appears to have been incorrect. This example illustrates some of the difficulties involved in sending and interpreting signals: there is a possibility that the sender could be overestimating the likelihood of correct interpretation by the target audience (which can sometimes be the case even when the target audience is inside government and should have access to the best available information); and there is a risk of observers linking possibly unrelated events, which can lead to misinterpretation of activities that were likely intended to serve other purposes.

Key Takeaways

These PLAAF bomber flights are a good example of how China is using the physical presence of new military hardware to demonstrate increased capability and signal resolve to defend its territorial claims against rival claimants. Furthermore, the PLAAF's use of social media is a good example of how China is leveraging a new communication channel to increase the reach of its deterrence signals to a broader global audience. Yet the PLAAF's use of tailored deterrence messaging is evident in the public emphasis on flights around Taiwan, compared with only some public messaging on flights targeted at the Philippines, and no public discussion of flights targeted at Guam (for U.S. forces).

The PLA's heavy emphasis on the psychological nature of deterrence is evident in these flights as well. The very public approach to deterrence signalling against Taiwan reflects a form of psychological warfare for deterrence purposes, and the PLAAF's use of reportedly manipulated images reinforces PLA writings about value of disinformation for deterrence purposes.

These flights also show some divergence in how countries, at least publicly, interpret and react to Chinese deterrence signals. Although regional countries clearly understand deterrence signalling, some do not want to publicly admit this, challenging Australian and U.S. coordination with them on this Chinese behaviour that all agree is unwelcome. Part of this reflects the fact that relying completely on open-source intelligence for analysis of Chinese deterrence signalling is challenging, especially if affected countries do not have the same capabilities even just to receive directly China's signals, such as the Philippines lacking maritime domain awareness of its South China Sea claims.

⁴⁰⁰ Steven Stashwick, 'US Media Over-Hypes Chinese Bomber "Warning" in South China Sea', *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2016.

Lastly, the PLAAF's adoption of a nuclear mission in the near future means that these bomber flights will have an added layer of complexity, and ambiguity, especially in a crisis.⁴⁰¹ China's no-first-use nuclear policy ostensibly should mean that Beijing would use nuclear-equipped aircraft only against other nuclear powers (the United States and India), but since the H-6N and China's future strategic bomber will be dual-capable, there will be room for confusion.

Table 4.2 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of Chinese bomber flights.

Table 4.2. Applying the Framework to Chinese Bomber Flights

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Intimidation of Taiwan, rival claimants in maritime disputes	Bomber patrols and exercises	Taiwan's government and public; rival claimants	High-level Party, government, military, and unofficial sources	Coordinated propaganda campaign, including social media
Deterrence of the United States	Xi Jinping visit to bomber base; bomber patrols	United States	High-level Party and military	Mostly nonpublic government-to-government

Peacetime Case Study No. 3: Cross-Strait Tensions Since the 2016 Taiwanese Presidential Election

Since the election of President Tsai Ing-wen in January 2016, China has engaged in a range of diplomatic, economic, military, and psychological pressure tactics against the Tsai administration and the Taiwanese people.⁴⁰² The purpose of Beijing's pressure campaign has been to coerce Tsai into accepting the '1992 Consensus'—an agreement that there is only 'One China' and that Taiwan is a part of it—and, ultimately, to entice Taipei to participate in 'one country, two systems', in which Taiwan would allegedly maintain autonomous political and economic systems after acknowledging One China and accepting CCP rule. Following Tsai's landslide reelection in January 2020, Beijing is very likely to ramp up its pressure tactics even further in the absence of any acceptable concessions from Tsai to Beijing's vision for cross-Strait relations. And this may be particularly acute in the military dimension.

Event Details

In the air domain, beyond the PLAAF bomber flights around the island discussed above in Case Study No. 2, another aspect of China's military coercion against Taiwan includes PLAAF fighter jet patrols that routinely approach the cross-Strait median line, which was originally drawn by the United States in 1954. Although China officially rejects the median

⁴⁰¹ Roderick Lee, 'China's Air Force Might Be Back in the Nuclear Business', *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2020.

⁴⁰² For more on the nature of Chinese threats, see, for example, Derek Grossman, 'Beijing's Threats Against Taiwan Are Deadly Serious', *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2018.

line, the PLA has largely observed this demarcation, which it appears to find useful both for the reducing the risks of unintended incidents and as a signalling mechanism—it is a boundary PLA aircraft can cross when China wants to send a pointed message to Taiwan. Notably, the PLAAF intentionally crossed the median line in 1999 to indicate displeasure with Lee Teng-hui’s conceptualisation of cross-Strait relations, but largely avoided such crossings afterwards.⁴⁰³ The PLAAF has returned to using this symbolic separation between the two sides for signalling purposes in recent years. In a major departure from past practice, the PLAAF in March 2019 flew two J-11 fighters over the median line and loitered in Taiwan’s airspace for ten minutes, making it clear to Taiwan that its crossing of the median line was intentional.⁴⁰⁴ In 2020, Beijing ratcheted up the pressure by sending H-6 bombers and escort aircraft across the median line, with crossings in February and September.⁴⁰⁵ Following the crossing in September 2020, a PRC MFA spokesperson underscored China’s official position: ‘The Taiwan region is an inalienable part of China’s territory. The so-called “median line” is non-existent’.⁴⁰⁶ Overall in 2020, PRC aircraft reportedly set a record for incursions into Taiwanese airspace—more than 380 flights over 91 days (through November 2020), and the most crossings of the median line since 1990, according to Taiwanese figures—reflecting Beijing’s increased pressure.⁴⁰⁷

In the maritime domain, the PLAN has sailed its first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, through the Strait three times—in 2017, 2018, and 2019. While the timing aligns perfectly with Tsai’s entry into office, it is also the case that the *Liaoning* began exercising only in 2016, four years after officially entering service. Additionally, the *Liaoning* is stationed in the north, so if the PLAN plans to transit to the south for operational or training reasons, geography dictates they either sail through the Taiwan Strait or transit to the east of Taiwan, which would take more time and potentially appear to be ‘encircling’ Taiwan. Sailing through the Taiwan Strait could simply appear to the PLAN to be the most logical choice when transiting south.⁴⁰⁸ Regardless, China appears to amplify some *Liaoning* operations for deterrent value, and China’s responses to Taiwan Strait transits by the United States

⁴⁰³ For an early review of the median line’s importance, see Bonnie Glaser, ‘Military Confidence-Building Measures: Averting Accidents and Building Trust in the Taiwan Strait’, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, Vol. 27, 2005, pp. 91–104.

⁴⁰⁴ For details on the incident, see, for example, ‘Taiwan Blasts China for ‘Reckless and Provocative’ Fighter Jet Incursion’, *South China Morning Post*, April 1, 2019.

⁴⁰⁵ J. Michael Cole, ‘China Ends “Median Line” in the Taiwan Strait: The Start of a Crisis?’, *National Interest*, September 22, 2020; Chen Yun-lu, Miu Tsung-han, and Joseph Yeh, ‘Chinese Military Planes Cross Median Line of Taiwan Strait’, *Focus Taiwan*, February 10, 2020; Brad Lendon, ‘Almost 40 Chinese Warplanes Breach Taiwan Strait Median Line: Taiwan President Calls It a “Threat of Force”’, CNN, September 21, 2020.

⁴⁰⁶ ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on September 21, 2020’, September 21, 2020.

⁴⁰⁷ Aaron Tu and William Hetherington, ‘Air Force Costs Up amid Intrusions’, *Taipei Times*, November 25, 2020; William Langley, ‘PLA Warplanes Made a Record 380 Incursions into Taiwan’s Airspace in 2020, Report Says’, *South China Morning Post*, January 6, 2021.

⁴⁰⁸ The authors would like to thank a reviewer for raising this point about PLAN carrier operations.

and other countries indicate that they view them as conveying a message of support for Taiwan. This suggests China is aware that a Chinese aircraft carrier transit through the Taiwan Strait is something Taiwan and the United States will view as a signal, particularly at a time of broader tensions in the cross-Strait relationship and growing friction in U.S.-China ties.

Military exercises near the island are another Chinese deterrence action targeted at Taiwan, and the messaging has generally been clear and pointed on this front. The PLA has regularly conducted exercises in a high-profile manner, even if it has sometimes exaggerated the scale and importance of these exercises for deterrent effect.

A final point related to China's military intimidation of Taiwan is that at times Beijing has leaked information, apparently intentionally, to deter (coerce) Taiwan. A good example of this occurred in January 2020 shortly after Tsai's landslide reelection. The PLA posted a photo on Weibo that showed troops sitting next to a topographical map of southern Taiwan, suggesting the actual plan for invasion would involve taking the Penghus first before landing in southern Taiwan.⁴⁰⁹ What is particularly jarring about this photo is that it runs counter to the more logical assumption that the PLA would land on Taiwan's northwest and northern areas since these beaches are much closer to and thus more easily accessible from the mainland. It is unclear whether this photo was meant to serve as disinformation. This was not the first time the PLA had 'leaked' preparations for a Taiwan contingency to the media. In 2015, CCTV included a video clip of PLA soldiers training to storm a replica of Taiwan's Presidential Palace during a major exercise, Stride 2015 Zhurihe C.⁴¹⁰ Similar psychological pressure tactics with military application should be expected from the PLA in the future.

Signalling Details

For the PLA's violation of the median line in March 2019, the PLA made clear that it did not respect the division of China and Taiwan, symbolically represented by the line. According to a *PLA Daily* commentary on the incident, the authors noted that 'both sides of the Taiwan Strait belong to one China' and that the "'median line of the Taiwan Strait' is a pseudo-proposition".⁴¹¹ Citing an unnamed analyst, the commentary argues that Beijing took this extreme measure to express its dissatisfaction with the combination of two scenarios detrimental to One China. The first was 'when the Taiwan authorities made big moves on "Taiwan independence"; another is when other countries took major actions to interfere in China's internal affairs'. The anonymous source concludes, 'This time, there is no doubt that

⁴⁰⁹ Keoni Everington, 'Leaked Map Shows China Plans to Invade S. Taiwan After Taking Kinmen and Penghu', *Taiwan News*, January 20, 2020.

⁴¹⁰ J. Michael Cole, 'Chinese PLA Simulates "Attack" on Taiwan's Presidential Office', *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2015.

⁴¹¹ Cui Mingxuan, Guo Yuandan, and Wu Zhiwei, 'Both Sides of Taiwan Strait Are Chinese Territories', *China Military Online*, April 3, 2019.

these two situations are combined'. For the PLAAF bomber violation of the median line in February 2020, the PLA Eastern TC spokesperson, Senior Colonel Zhang Chunhui, said:

'Taiwan independence' forces ignore the overall national interests and continue to step up 'independence' efforts, which is against the trend and unpopular. The troops of the PLA Eastern Theatre Command will always stay on high alert, keep a close watch on the situation, and resolutely perform their duties and missions.⁴¹²

The PLA's messaging was amplified by Party-state media. The *Global Times* opined about the 2019 violation that the 'alleged' incursion 'could be a strong response to "Taiwan independence" forces and the United States, who increasingly plays the card of the island to provoke the mainland'.⁴¹³ The commentary went on to state that 'if the US and the island of Taiwan upgrade their provocative actions, the mainland's fly-through could become routine and the "middle line" could become history'. The authors also called into question the well-established median line, quoting alleged Chinese netizens as saying, 'Middle line? What Middle line? We are all in Chinese territory, we come and go as we want'. But perhaps most interestingly, the commentary dwelled on Washington being the target of the PLAAF activity, rather than Taiwan itself: 'As a matter of fact, Taiwan is not worth targeting anymore. All of our military strength [shown] is used to tell the U.S. to stop where it should stop. The island of Taiwan causes trouble because the U.S. supports it. When the U.S. calms down, it will calm down'.

Compared with PLAAF explanations for air patrols near or around Taiwan, the PLAN is significantly more circumspect about the message it seeks to convey to Taiwan through aircraft carrier transits through the Strait. Few Chinese officials or commentators explicitly made the connection between these transits and coercing Taiwan. According to one analyst interviewed for a *China Daily* article, the *Liaoning* transit in 2017 was simply part of 'regular exercises both along the coast and in the western Pacific during this time of year to boost capabilities . . . the training is safe and won't affect security in the region or other countries'.⁴¹⁴ Another observer agreed, noting that 'China would take military action . . . [only] if the Taiwan authorities were to go against the will of 1.3 billion people and declare independence'. But a third analyst interviewed for the article departed from this message, arguing that 'the voyage was a strategic but reserved warning to Tsai, telling her not to push her separatist agenda overseas, and to expect to see more PLA training in the future'. The *Liaoning* transit in 2018 resulted in a *Global Times* commentary originally in Chinese and later translated into English by China Military Online. This piece questioned why the transit was even news—'This is too normal. Is it really news?'—to underscore that Beijing believed

⁴¹² Liu Peijun and Cheng Yongliang, 'Chinese Military Conducts Joint Air-Sea Drill Near Taiwan Island', China Military Online, February 11, 2020.

⁴¹³ Zhang Hui and Liu Xuanzun, 'U.S. Playing Taiwan Card Risky', *Global Times*, April 1, 2019.

⁴¹⁴ Zhang Zhihao, 'CNS Liaoning Carrier Passing by Taiwan "Won't Affect" Cross-Strait Ties', *China Daily*, January 12, 2017.

the Strait belonged to it and, besides, the *Liaoning* was on its way to exercises elsewhere.⁴¹⁵ Another expert, however, argued it should be ‘a shock to the forces of “Taiwan independence”’. In 2019, the *Liaoning* transit resulted in additional subdued messaging, with the PLAN spokesman stating that it was ‘not aimed at any specific target and has nothing to do with the current situation’.⁴¹⁶

China has been perhaps most up front about its military exercises around Taiwan. After PLA drills in 2018, for example, the TAO spokesman, Ma Xiaoguang, said, ‘The recent live-fire drills carried out by the PLA have sent an explicit and clear message—we aim to pursue peaceful reunification with sincerity and great efforts, but we have the resolve, the confidence, and the ability to defeat secessionist attempts in any form, to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity’.⁴¹⁷ Ma went on to say that the drills targeted a ‘Taiwan independence’ force. The PRC MND reiterated later that the PLA drills were, in fact, ‘directed at separatist elements advocating “Taiwan independence”’.⁴¹⁸ In a *Global Times* piece republished by China Military Online in 2018, the author comments on PLA drills near Taiwan at the time. He cites an expert who said that ‘military actions . . . are always an option if the island of Taiwan continues to “play with fire”’.⁴¹⁹

But not all messages have been so direct and unambiguous. For instance, in the run-up to PLA drills in the summer of 2019, an editorial in the *Global Times* reasoned that the Chinese MND statements were unique because phrases such as ‘the drills are not aimed at any specific target’ or ‘there is no need for over-interpretation’ were noticeably absent, suggesting Taiwan could be the target.⁴²⁰ Another *Global Times* piece was circumspect as well, noting that while the PLA exercises began following a U.S. arms sale to Taiwan, the drills may have been scheduled earlier.⁴²¹

This is certainly not to say Beijing softened its messaging to Taiwan in 2019. In one *China Daily* article, for example, the author quotes a PLA senior colonel at PLA NDU as stating the drills would ‘increase the PLA’s ability to protect national sovereignty, and warn those who are trying to undermine it to abandon their illusions . . . similar drills will be more common in the future, with increasingly sophisticated equipment and training methods’.⁴²² The same piece quotes a Chinese think tank analyst making a strong link between PLA exercises and impacting events on Taiwan: ‘Recent drills serves to warn the U.S. and

⁴¹⁵ Cui Mingxuan, Guo Yuandan, and Fan Lingzhi, ‘Liaoning Aircraft Carrier Enters Taiwan Strait, “Too Normal. Is It Really News?”’, China Military Online, March 23, 2018.

⁴¹⁶ ‘China’s Aircraft Carrier Passes Through the Taiwan Strait’, Xinhua, November 18, 2019.

⁴¹⁷ Luo Wangshu, ‘Military Drills a Show of Force to Taiwan’, *China Daily*, April 26, 2018.

⁴¹⁸ ‘PLA Actions Targeted at “Taiwan Independence” Elements: Spokesperson’, Xinhua, June 28, 2018.

⁴¹⁹ Huang Panyue, ‘PLA Conducts Island Encirclement Exercise Around Taiwan’, China Military Online, June 27, 2018.

⁴²⁰ Guo Yuandan, ‘PLA Drills off SE Coast Could Involve All Branches, a “Warning” to Taiwan Secessionists: Insider’, *Global Times*, July 15, 2019.

⁴²¹ Liu Xuanzun, ‘Military Exercises Conducted in Waters Near Taiwan’, *Global Times*, July 29, 2019.

⁴²² Zhang Zhihao, ‘Military Drill Near Taiwan “Necessary”’, *China Daily*, April 17, 2019.

separatists in Taiwan not to infringe on China's core interests by pursuing Taiwan secession'. These relatively nonauthoritative messages in PRC media draw greater public attention and add colour to the main Chinese signals in the form of the actual deterrence actions and high-level statements.

Signalling Explanation

For at least some of the PLA exercises, the public messaging is calibrated for high impact with a political objective. As documented by J. Michael Cole, at least twice since Tsai's first election in 2016 the PLA has exaggerated the scale and importance of military exercises targeted at Taiwan, likely for psychological warfare purposes.⁴²³ First, in April 2018, Chinese high-profile but nonauthoritative commentators 'turned a relatively small and scheduled series of exercises in waters off Quanzhou, Fujian Province, into "the first live-fire exercise in the Strait" since the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis', whereas in reality, 'claims of exercises simulating "long-distance attacks and amphibious landing operations" in April 2018 were not supported by imagery on the official PLA website'. Similarly, when U.S. Secretary for Health and Human Services Alex Azar visited Taiwan in August 2020, the PLA announced it had 'recently' conducted live exercises in the Strait as a 'necessary action' to 'safeguard national sovereignty'.⁴²⁴ This was reported widely by international media.⁴²⁵ However, it appears that in reality, 'no imagery stemming from the August 2020 exercises has surfaced. Certainly, no evidence has emerged that supports the notion that the operations were "unprecedented" massive military drills in the Taiwan Straits'.⁴²⁶

For a September 2020 exercise, the PLA did not exaggerate the scale but spun the purpose of the exercise. As a senior U.S. Department of State official, Keith Krach, visited Taipei that month, the PLA also conducted major exercises.⁴²⁷ However, they were in fact part of the PLA's annual exercise program and thus long planned. As the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China specifically explained, while the exercise itself wasn't a surprise, 'What's a surprise is the strategic choice that the Chinese have made, which is to continue to do these in a manner which is obviously provocative. The region itself feels that these are coercive acts that the Chinese undertake that's probably unnecessary to do so in this manner, and that's why we watch them very closely'.⁴²⁸

⁴²³ J. Michael Cole, 'Propaganda Drives "Massive" PLA Exercises in the Taiwan Strait', *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol. 5, No. 17, August 26, 2020, pp. 8–12.

⁴²⁴ GT Staff Reporters, 'PLA's "Unprecedented Drills" in Taiwan Straits for Deterrence, Actual Combat: Observers', *Global Times*, August 13, 2020.

⁴²⁵ For example, see Kathrin Hille, 'China Holds Military Exercises Near Taiwan in Warning to US', *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020.

⁴²⁶ Cole, 'Propaganda Drives "Massive" PLA Exercises'.

⁴²⁷ 'China Holds Military Drill as US Envoy Visits Taiwan', BBC News, September 18, 2020.

⁴²⁸ Chad Sbragia, 'Chad Sbragia, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Press Briefing on the 2020 China Military Power Report', U.S. Department of Defense, August 31, 2020.

International Understanding

Much of China's signalling towards Taiwan leaves little to interpretation, and Taipei has taken these signals very seriously. For example, in response to September 2020 exercises targeted at Taiwan, senior Taiwan defence officials provided public briefings on PLA activities and criticised them as destabilising.⁴²⁹ Speaking in the language of deterrence, Taiwan's deputy defence ministry said, 'We once again say, do not underestimate the military's determination to defend our home. We are confident and capable of defending the country'.⁴³⁰ The Taiwan military also increased readiness and conducted its own annual exercise, Han Kuang; although it should be noted that the Han Kuang exercises are planned well in advance and should not be viewed as undertaken in response to Chinese activities, Taiwan can of course choose what to publicise about the exercises to send a message to China or other audiences.⁴³¹ Taiwanese analysts also saw PLA flights across the median line as a signal to the United States: 'At the same time, [the PLA's] denial that there even is a median line is a way to air their displeasure over the warming US-Taiwan ties'.⁴³²

The United States also criticised the exercises. DoD said, 'The PLA activities in question are merely the latest in a string of destabilising PLA actions aimed at both Taiwan and the broader region intended to intimidate and which increase the risk of miscalculation'. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China also said, 'Symbolic of the People's Republic of China's aim to coerce its neighbors and prepare for high-end combat, the PLA live-fire drills earlier this week . . . included the provocative firing of ballistic missiles under simulated wartime conditions into the South China Sea, but it also included things like offensive naval maneuvers in the East China Sea'.⁴³³ Needless to say, there was broad and common understanding that the exercises were specifically conducted with at least the message of deterrence against Taiwan.

Key Takeaways

Since Tsai won Taiwan's presidential election in 2016, Chinese military intimidation has ramped up against the island. Beijing has instructed the PLAAF to conduct patrols near and around Taiwan as well as across the Strait's median line. Beijing has further deployed the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier through the Strait in an ambiguous signalling event that was likely designed, at least to some extent, to intimidate Taiwan. The PLA has also conducted numerous exercises near the Strait, some of which Beijing directly tied to signalling resolve towards Taiwan, while others were left unstated. Finally, the PLA's psychological emphasis

⁴²⁹ Yimou Lee and Ben Blanchard, 'Taiwan Denounces Large-Scale Chinese Drills Near Island', Reuters, September 10, 2020.

⁴³⁰ Lee and Blanchard, 'Taiwan Denounces Large-Scale Chinese Drills Near Island'.

⁴³¹ Lawrence Chung, 'Taiwan's Computer War Games Simulate Invasion by People's Liberation Army', *South China Morning Post*, September 14, 2020.

⁴³² Lawrence Chung, 'Taiwan Under Psychological Attack as Chinese Warplanes Cross Median Line, Analysts Say', *South China Morning Post*, October 3, 2020.

⁴³³ Sbragia, 'Press Briefing'.

is illustrated by at least one recent occasion of leaked information related to Chinese attack plans that was probably meant to sow fear and confusion in Taiwan to undermine public support for independence (or anything that would elicit a Chinese attack). Taken together, these events demonstrate that Beijing has and likely will continue to employ PLAAF, PLAN, and other PLA assets as part of its comprehensive strategy—including, in addition to military, both diplomatic and economic components of broader Party-state coercion—to convince Taiwan that resistance to ‘One China’ is futile.

China’s day-to-day military deterrence (coercion) of Taiwan reflects the island’s status as a core interest of Beijing and thus likely represents the high-water mark for how it would approach other countries in peacetime. The PLA’s concept of integrated deterrence is reflected in how this military activity fits within the broader CCP coercion, alongside economic and diplomatic pressure. This also illustrates the emphasis China places on the psychological aspect of deterrence (coercion), evident in its focus on Taiwanese public opinion and clear desire to undermine public support for independence. Beijing’s approach of a gradual but steady increase in military pressure raises the question of how China will continue to find new ways of signalling in the future.

Table 4.3 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of China’s use of military signalling to intimidate Taiwan since 2016.

Table 4.3. Applying the Framework to Chinese Coercion of Taiwan Since 2016

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Intimidation of Taiwan	PLAAF flights around Taiwan	Taiwan’s government and public	High-level Party, government, military, and unofficial sources	Widely disseminated, including social media
Deterrence of U.S. support for Taiwan	Aircraft crossing Strait centre line; military exercises PLAN aircraft carrier transits through Taiwan Strait Leaking information about military plans	United States U.S. allies and partners (Japan, Australia, etc.)		Part of broader PRC approach also featuring economic coercion, diplomatic isolation, social media disinformation

Common Themes and Lessons for Australia

As the above case studies demonstrate, Beijing is capable of conducting a sophisticated and coordinated signalling campaign, tailored to multiple audiences, when it has time to prepare and is in the driver’s seat. Officially, Beijing often describes these peacetime deterrent actions as ‘normal’ and ‘routine’, but the unofficial messaging through the media and selective employment makes clear they are frequently intended as calibrated signals. Yet there is a challenge in assuming all of these similar activities are signals, since some of the bomber flights and some of the military activities are likely simply necessary training, without a specific signalling purpose.

For Australia, there are several lessons to be learned. Most directly, Canberra has not been the target of significant Chinese military deterrence signalling because no issues in the

bilateral relationship warrant, from Beijing's perspective, an escalation to military means. Instead, as discussed in Chapter 6, most of Chinese signalling towards Canberra has utilised other parts of China's whole-of-government toolkit, especially economic coercion. While the military parades and bombers flights have so far not yet explicitly targeted Australia, it would be a simple—if extremely clear and provocative—change for Beijing to employ these as signals to Canberra by having PLA commentators or others in Party-state media say these capabilities can be used against Australia.

5. Recent Chinese Deterrence Signalling: Crisis Case Studies

This chapter presents our crisis case studies: the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (which serves as a baseline for showing how China’s approach to deterrence signalling in a crisis has changed in recent years along with more ambitious goals, growing military capabilities, and new communication channels); the China-India (and Bhutan) border dispute in 2017; demonstrations in Hong Kong in 2019; and recent tensions on the Korean Peninsula. These cases illustrate the application of our framework to China’s approach to signalling as it relates to more immediate and pointed instances of deterrence signalling under crisis conditions.

Emergency Case Study No. 1: 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

The Taiwan Strait missile crisis occurred between July 1995 and March 1996, during which China conducted a series of military exercises and missile tests near the Taiwan Strait aimed at intimidating the island and influencing U.S. policy in the months preceding Taiwan’s first democratic presidential election (held on March 23, 1996). American, Chinese, and Taiwanese scholars, and former officials who have written about the crisis generally agree on China’s overarching objectives throughout the crisis. In brief, they were to

- coerce the United States into ending its tacit support for Taiwan independence by forcing the Clinton administration to reassess its relationship with the Taiwan leadership
- coerce Taiwan into abandoning its effort to redefine the ‘One China’ policy and enhance Taiwan’s status in international politics
- erode support for President Lee Teng-hui and pro-independence forces in Taiwan.⁴³⁴

According to declassified U.S. intelligence reports, the decision by Beijing’s leadership to use military force to send a message to Taiwan was carefully considered. The DF-15 missile tests were selected from a ‘series of options’, and were not the most aggressive choice presented by the PLA to the Chinese leadership. The PLA first presented its report to the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) in mid-June 1995. It was reviewed by a small group that included Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, Liu Huaqing, and Zhang Zhen, who then presented the options to the Taiwan Affairs Leading Small Group (TALSG). The TALSG then voted to stage military exercises against Taiwan, though apparently the decision to undertake the missile firing exercises was not unanimously agreed.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ Robert S. Ross, ‘The 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation: Coercion, Credibility, and the Use of Force’, *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Fall 2000, p. 89; Andrew Scobell, ‘Show of Force: Chinese Soldiers, Statesmen, and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 155, No. 2, 2000, p. 232; Arthur S. Ding, ‘The Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis: Developing a New Strategy Toward the United States and Taiwan’, in *Lessons of History: The Chinese People’s Liberation Army at 75*, Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, 2003, pp. 380–383.

⁴³⁵ Declassified Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, September 11, 1995; John W. Garver, *Face Off: China, the United States, and Taiwan’s Democratization*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997, pp. 61–62.

Throughout the crisis, China used various channels to signal to Taiwan and the United States. These included military exercises and missile tests, diplomatic signalling and messaging through informal channels, and use of Chinese Party-state media.

PLA Missile Tests and Exercises

On July 18, 1995, China announced a closure area 80 miles northeast of Taiwan where it would conduct missile tests, which the PLA code-named ‘Blue Whale 5’.⁴³⁶ From July 21 to 28, the PLA fired six missiles. The launches were conducted with relatively little warning and no direct communication with Washington or Taipei.⁴³⁷ In August, after five days’ advance notice, PLA naval vessels and aircraft conducted live-fire tests off the coast of Fujian from August 15 to 25. The exercises included maritime offensive and defensive manoeuvres, at least 59 naval ships, and 192 air sorties.⁴³⁸

Beyond the broad goals discussed earlier, the July 21–28 missile firings and August exercises pointed to some additional tactical goals for China. Specifically, at this point in the crisis China intended to

- ensure the United States understood the importance of the Taiwan issue to China, and seek assurances that the U.S. ‘One China’ policy remained unchanged⁴³⁹
- pressure the Kuomintang (KMT) party to choose another, less pro-independence–leaning candidate⁴⁴⁰
- erode pro-independence public support in Taiwan.⁴⁴¹

Between September 15 and October 20, the PLA again conducted exercises—this time focussed on amphibious landing manoeuvres—in the Yellow Sea. The PLA named these exercises ‘Invincible Might’ and they were aimed at demonstrating the PLA’s naval prowess.⁴⁴² Additional military exercises code-named by the PLA as ‘Success’ were conducted from October 31 to November 23 and were intended to influence Taiwan’s December legislative elections.

⁴³⁶ A blue whale in the shape of Taiwan was the symbol of Taiwan’s pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Beijing used Xinhua, the CCP’s official mouthpiece, to announce that the PLA would conduct ‘a training for launching a surface-to-surface guided missile into the open sea’. Beijing warned foreign vessels and aircraft to avoid the area. ‘PLA Announces Missile Launch Training on East China Sea’, Xinhua, July 18, 1995. See also Garver, *Face Off*, p. 74.

⁴³⁷ Declassified DIA report, September 11, 1995.

⁴³⁸ Yuan Le Yi [元樂義], *Defensive Action: A Record of the 1996 Taiwan Strait Missile Crisis* [捍衛行動: 1996 台海飛彈危機風雲錄], Taiwan: Li Ming Cultural Enterprise Co., Ltd, 2006.

⁴³⁹ As a Chinese spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated during the July 18 announcement of the upcoming missile tests, ‘What we are going to do is make the U.S. realise the importance of U.S.-China relations to prompt it to take the right track’. Xinhua Commentary on Sino-U.S. Ties, July 18, 1995.

⁴⁴⁰ Ding, ‘Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis’, p. 383.

⁴⁴¹ Ding, ‘Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis’, pp. 380–383.

⁴⁴² Garver, *Face Off*, p. 92.

The exercises were conducted to the south of the Strait and included simulating an amphibious landing on Dongshan Island, with two PLAAF divisions, 300 Navy vessels, and 17,000 troops.⁴⁴³ Beijing explicitly declared that these exercises were aimed at Taiwan and designed to maintain the ‘unity’ of China and to resist the ‘splittist’ activities of pro-independence forces on Taiwan. They were observed by Jiang Zemin and Liu Huaqing, together with six other CMC members, and Chinese authorities released photographs of the exercises to Japanese newspapers.⁴⁴⁴ The PLA also established a ‘Headquarters for Operations Targeting Taiwan’ and declared that the Nanjing War Zone was responsible for conducting the exercises, suggesting movement to a war footing.⁴⁴⁵

On March 5, 1996, Beijing announced that it would begin another round of missile tests and exercises between March 8 and March 25, code-named ‘Strait 961’ by the PLA. This was the largest of the PLA’s exercises and was a simulation of a contingency scenario for the invasion of Taiwan. In fact, the PLA had already been deploying troops to Fujian Province by early February.⁴⁴⁶ This set of exercises occurred in three phases:⁴⁴⁷

- *Phase I* (March 8): The PLA fired three DF-15 SRBMs into two closure areas (previously announced by China) less than 50 miles from the ports of Keelung and Kaohsiung. Two missiles landed in the northern closure area near Kaohsiung and one landed inside the target area near Keelung. A fourth missile was launched on March 13.⁴⁴⁸
- *Phase II* (March 12): The PLA practised scenarios related to command of the air and sea with live-fire exercises and surface attack activities at the southern end of the Taiwan Strait, near Dongshan and Nan’ao Islands.
- *Phase III* (March 18–25): These exercises focussed on landing and invasion manoeuvres, and were conducted near the city of Pingtan on Haitan Island at the northern end of the Strait. Adverse weather limited the exercise to small-scale amphibious rehearsals and simulated operations. Troop insertions by helicopters, artillery firing, flights by IL-76 transport aircraft, and amphibious assault drills also occurred, though on a smaller scale than originally intended due to bad weather. According to intelligence reporting, the PLA marshalled approximately 150,000 troops and 300 aircraft and navy vessels, though not all of these assets wound up participating in the exercise.⁴⁴⁹ The PLA finished its military exercises and stood down after Taiwan’s presidential election on March 23.

⁴⁴³ Yuan Le Yi, *Defensive Action*.

⁴⁴⁴ Garver, *Face Off*, p. 93.

⁴⁴⁵ Ross, ‘1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation’, pp. 102–103; Robert L. Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen: The Politics of U.S.-China Relations, 1989–2000*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003, p. 243.

⁴⁴⁶ Office of Naval Intelligence, ‘Chinese Exercise Strait 961: 8–25 March 1996’, declassified report, available from the National Archives.

⁴⁴⁷ Office of Naval Intelligence, ‘Chinese Exercise Strait 961’.

⁴⁴⁸ Office of Naval Intelligence, ‘Chinese Exercise Strait 961’. Garver, *Face Off*, p. 101.

⁴⁴⁹ Office of Naval Intelligence, ‘Chinese Exercise Strait 961’.

China's final set of exercises were clearly meant to further intimidate Taiwan and send a message to the U.S. and Taiwanese political leadership that independence would not be tolerated. Beijing's objectives for the final month of the crisis included

- influencing the presidential election in Taiwan and its aftermath; specifically, China's efforts aimed to frighten pro-independence forces and to force Lee to be more circumspect in his behaviour after the election
- coercing Washington into a public stance against Taiwan independence
- providing the PLA with an opportunity to train in a realistic environment, demonstrate the PLA's blockading capability, and test its joint operations abilities.

Two points are worth mentioning here. First, Beijing was fully aware that the missile exercises could have a counterproductive effect and actually bolster support for Lee, but that 'there was too much at stake not to take a strong stand'.⁴⁵⁰ An interview with a Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) researcher emphasised that Chinese leaders believed 'that they had no other choice'.⁴⁵¹ This illustrates the domestic origins of some Chinese deterrence (coercion) episodes. Second, while political tension determined the timing and location of Strait 961, it is likely that China would have conducted some type of large-scale, tri-service exercise in the first half of 1996 to evaluate the PLA's capability to operate in a joint environment.⁴⁵² This illustrates the dual-use nature of some PLA military exercises, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Diplomatic Signalling

China's coercive actions did not occur in a vacuum: diplomatic signalling on all sides was also taking place. Early in the crisis (June to July 1995), China cancelled a planned visit to the United States by Defence Minister Chi Haotian and State Counsellor Li Huixian, and recalled Li Daoyu, its ambassador to the United States. Beijing also cut short a visit by the PLAAF chief of staff, detained U.S. citizen and human rights activist Harry Wu, reopened factories that produced pirated CDs, and conducted other actions intended to convey its annoyance at the United States.⁴⁵³

China did not completely shut down bilateral talks with the United States. Beijing still allowed Peter Tarnoff, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, to visit China to meet with Chinese leaders in early August. Secretary of State Warren Christopher met with Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen in Brunei in late August for a high-level summit. At that meeting, Christopher gave Qian a letter reaffirming the U.S. stance on the One China policy and reiterating that there was no change to U.S. policy on Taiwan. Christopher refused Chinese requests for a 'fourth Communiqué', stating that there was no need as there had been no change to U.S. China policy. Christopher reassured Qian that future visas to Taiwan officials would be reviewed on a 'case by case basis' and would be 'unofficial, private, and

⁴⁵⁰ DIA declassified report, March 1996.

⁴⁵¹ DIA declassified report, March 1996.

⁴⁵² Office of Naval Intelligence, 'Chinese Exercise Strait 961'.

⁴⁵³ Ross, '1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation', p. 94.

rare'.⁴⁵⁴ In a move designed to appease the United States, Beijing also released and expelled Harry Wu from China in late August, after sentencing him to 15 years in prison.⁴⁵⁵

In October 1995, Jiang Zemin and President Clinton conducted a working summit in New York in lieu of the official visit to Washington that the Chinese side had wanted. In early March, immediately before the PLA's March 8 exercises, Vice Foreign Minister Liu Huaqiu was invited to Washington to discuss U.S.-China relations, including the tensions over Taiwan. Over dinner, Secretary Perry warned that any military action against Taiwan would have 'grave consequences'. Liu assured U.S. leaders that China had no intention of using force against Taiwan.⁴⁵⁶ However, by this point, discussions were heated and U.S. officials were unsure whether to believe Liu's message.⁴⁵⁷

During this middle part of the crisis China pursued a 'dual track' approach, using diplomacy to reassure Washington that Beijing still wanted a cooperative relationship while engaging in large-scale military exercises to coerce Taiwan. China's goals for this time period can be summarised as

- reassuring the United States by making concessions on some issues it cared about, such as suspending nuclear assistance to Iran, and probing Washington's intentions on Taiwan⁴⁵⁸
- signalling to Washington that Beijing wanted specific assurances on the Taiwan issue (e.g., a public statement of no support for Taiwan independence, no more visas issued to senior Taiwan officials)⁴⁵⁹
- intimidating pro-independence forces in Taiwan and influencing Taiwan's December 1995 legislative elections.⁴⁶⁰

Media Signalling Efforts

During the cross-Strait missile crisis, Beijing was clear in its use of Party-state media that it was unhappy with U.S. decisionmaking in regard to Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University. In *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, Godwin and Miller provide an authoritative examination of Chinese signalling in various circumstances, to include during the cross-Strait missile crisis.⁴⁶¹ In this event, they found several Chinese state-run media commentaries of particular interest. Starting on May 26, 1995, they note that a *People's Daily* article titled

⁴⁵⁴ Ross, '1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Confrontation', p. 96.

⁴⁵⁵ Andrea Koppel and Claire Shipman, 'Human Rights Activist Convicted in China', CNN, August 24, 1995.

⁴⁵⁶ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*, New York: Random House, 2000, p. 336.

⁴⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion on Liu's visit and discussions with U.S. leaders, see Suettinger, *Beyond Tiananmen*, pp. 253–254.

⁴⁵⁸ Garver, *Face Off*, pp. 75–88.

⁴⁵⁹ Mann, *About Face*, pp. 329–330.

⁴⁶⁰ Ding, 'Lessons of the 1995–1996 Military Taiwan Strait Crisis', p. 384.

⁴⁶¹ For an authoritative accounting of Chinese media statements during the cross-Strait missile crisis, see Godwin and Miller, *China's Forbearance Has Limits*, pp. 41, 73–78.

‘A Serious and Dangerous Retrogression’ warned that China ‘absolutely would not tolerate’ violation of its sovereignty. In what Godwin and Miller characterise as a ‘nonauthoritative editorial’, Beijing in *Ta Kung Pao* (unofficial CCP newspaper in Hong Kong) implored Washington ‘not to turn a deaf ear’ and ‘miscalculate’ in the Strait as Beijing would have to ‘react further’.

Godwin and Miller also identified several other important deterrence messages conveyed via state-run media as events continued to unfold in the Strait. For instance, on June 8, 1995, Xinhua published an article stating Beijing would ‘adopt all necessary measures’ to defend sovereignty. The next day, on June 9, 1995, *People’s Daily* noted that Washington had ‘brought serious consequences’ to relations and will ‘pay a price’. And then the next day, on June 10, 1995, another *People’s Daily* article was headlined ‘U.S. Is Playing with Fire’ and warned that the Taiwan issue is a ‘powder keg’—‘be careful!’ Finally, on June 17, 1995, Xinhua ran a commentary that argued U.S.-China relations were ‘at a crossroad’ and ‘we will wait and see’ which way the United States wants to go.

Key Takeaways

This episode represents almost the full suite of Chinese signalling tools and sets the benchmark against which to measure all future signalling. China used all the signalling tools at its disposal at the time: exercises, missile tests, diplomatic (formal and informal), and media strategies. The pattern consisted of threats such as missile tests and exercises, retaliatory statements via the media, and diplomatic channels to reinforce escalation control and deterrence. PLA and non-PLA channels were coordinated, and perhaps integrated, to signal and deter Taiwan election results and keep the United States from interfering. The signalling efforts throughout the crisis sent the diplomatic message that China did not want to use force but would use force if necessary, as communicated through its conducting exercises and testing missiles.

Table 5.1 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of China’s use of military signalling during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.

Table 5.1. Applying the Framework to the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Coerce political leaders and public in Taiwan ahead of first democratic presidential election	Multiple, large-scale military exercises	Political leaders, military, and general public in Taiwan	Party, government, military	Widely disseminated official media push
Deter U.S. support for Taiwan or intervention on behalf of Taiwan	Missile launches near Taiwan	U.S. government	Clear, high-profile statements	Private intermediaries

Emergency Case Study No. 2: 2017 Doklam Crisis with India

In 2017, China squared off with India (and Bhutan) over a territorial dispute, known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC), that had simmered for decades, this time at Doklam. This case study examines China’s use of deterrence signalling on a rival that Beijing considers to

be a growing geostrategic competitor but an inferior military adversary.⁴⁶² It is also noteworthy as a case where the primary conflict is a territorial dispute. The Doklam case also represents a recent example of China's approach to immediate deterrence in a crisis situation, as opposed to the activities China routinely conducts in peacetime for general deterrence purposes. This case study does not cover the most recent China-India border crisis in 2020 in eastern Ladakh, but provides some relevant examples drawn from 2020 within this 2017 case study.⁴⁶³

Event Details

Doklam lies at a junction between China, the northeastern Indian state of Sikkim, and the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. It is disputed between China and Bhutan, with India supporting Bhutan's claim. The crisis occurred June–August 2017 when Indian soldiers deployed to prevent the PLA from building a road into territory claimed by Bhutan. On August 28, after a two-month standoff, China and India announced they had reached an agreement, with India disengaging its troops first and China withdrawing its military forces in response. Since the crisis, however, China has continued to deploy troops and build new infrastructure in the area, unobstructed by India or Bhutan.⁴⁶⁴ India has also continued to improve its border infrastructure and capabilities.

Signalling Details

China used a variety of deterrence signalling mechanisms during the Doklam crisis, including use of media, military exercises and demonstrations of capabilities, and economic measures.

Military Exercises

Chinese news outlets and official press briefings also publicised PLA activities and exercises, reporting on the PLA conducting live-fire exercises near the area of the dispute and the PLA's preparations to 'defend' every inch of Chinese sovereignty, and that it was 'easier to move a mountain than the PLA'.⁴⁶⁵ For example, a PLA senior colonel with the Chinese MND stated, 'We will preserve our sovereign territory and security interests at any cost', and that the PLA would 'further intensify targeted operations and trainings' around the Doklam area.⁴⁶⁶ *China Daily* published an article detailing PLA mobilisation for the exercises, stating

⁴⁶² As one of the reviewers points out, this is particularly significant in that, as a result of the progress China has made in modernising the PLA over the past two decades, almost all of China's potential adversaries are militarily inferior. The only exceptions are the United States, and perhaps Japan or Russia in some scenarios.

⁴⁶³ For Chinese analysis on the 2020 standoff, see Mathieu Duchâtel, 'The Border Clashes with India: In the Shadow of the US', in Mathieu Duchâtel, ed., *China Trends #8: Military Options for Xi's Strategic Ambitions*, Paris: Institute Montaigne, 2021.

⁴⁶⁴ Vishnu Som, 'Satellite Images Hint at Renewed China Threat in Doklam', NDTV, November 22, 2020; Steven Lee Myers, 'Beijing Takes Its South China Sea Strategy to the Himalayas', *New York Times*, November 27, 2020.

⁴⁶⁵ James Griffiths, '"Easier to Move a Mountain": China Vows New Military Drills amid Spat with India', CNN, August 24, 2017.

⁴⁶⁶ Wang Qingyun, 'India Warned to Withdraw Trespassing Troops', *China Daily*, July 30, 2017.

that the ‘PLA brigade mobilized all of its members and equipment and took six hours to transport them from the barracks to the drill zone at an altitude of 5,000 meters on the plateau’.⁴⁶⁷ CCTV and its overseas media channel, CGTN, covered PLA live-fire exercises on the Tibetan plateau. The video clips showed PLA infantry armed with assault rifles, machine guns, and rocket launchers advancing across open terrain under covering fire provided by PLA, mortars, rocket artillery, and towed and self-propelled 155-millimeter howitzers. It also showed antitank missiles being used to strike bunkers and twin-barrel antiaircraft guns for air defence.⁴⁶⁸ These articles and video clips were likely meant to send a strong signal to the Indian leadership and the military that the PLA was ready and deploying to the region should the conflict escalate.

However, there also appears to have been an aspect of deception to this signalling. As an Indian academic noted, ‘In mid-July, the Chinese state broadcaster CCTV telecast a video of live-fire military exercises in Tibet by a mountain brigade deployed against India. It later came to light that this was a routine annual drill conducted in early June before the crisis began. Shortly after the CCTV report, the Chinese military’s official newspaper, PLA Daily, said tens of thousands of tons of military hardware had been moved to Tibet in response to the troop standoff. This report too turned out to be part of China’s psywar, with Indian intelligence still finding no evidence of a Chinese military buildup in Tibet’.⁴⁶⁹

Media

The PRC media, including print, television, and social media elevated its rhetoric during the crisis to demand Indian capitulation. Media outlets meant to reach a broad international audience, such as the *People’s Daily*, Xinhua, China Military Online, and the *Global Times*, published nearly daily warnings about not underestimating Chinese resolve and the Chinese people’s determination to protect their sovereignty just because Beijing has restrained itself so far.⁴⁷⁰ The messages were fairly consistent across outlets, but some were more aggressive than others, reflecting the different goals of the media outlets. For example, *People’s Daily*, following China’s traditional deterrence script, published an op-ed that warned India not to ‘play with fire’ lest it ‘get burned’.⁴⁷¹ One *Global Times* article, leveraging its unofficial and nationalistic tone as a cover for clarity, stated that ‘China is trying its best to use historical lessons to reason with India and show sincerity in peacefully solving the problem, but if India refuses to listen, then China would have no other choice than to use a military way of solving the problem’.⁴⁷²

⁴⁶⁷ Zhao Lei, ‘Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Site of PLA War Games’, *China Daily*, July 18, 2017.

⁴⁶⁸ CGTN, ‘Chinese Army Carries Out Exercises on the Tibetan Plateau’, video, YouTube, July 15, 2017.

⁴⁶⁹ Brahma Chellaney, ‘What China’s Himalayan Warmongering Reveals’, *Japan Times*, July 24, 2017.

⁴⁷⁰ ‘Social Commentary: The Indian Army Will Only Provoke Insults in the Wrong Place’ [‘社评：印军在错误地点挑衅只会自取其辱’], *Global Times*, June 20, 2017.

⁴⁷¹ ‘Op-Ed: India Is Playing with Fire, and It Could Get Burned’, *People’s Daily Online*, August 10, 2017.

⁴⁷² Guo Fang and Yang Sheng, ‘India Provoked China During Modi’s US Visit to Win Favour: Expert’, *Global Times*, July 17, 2017.

The messages from these media outlets coincided with warnings to the Indian government by the Chinese MFA at official press conferences that were televised and published in the media. For example, at a press conference during the crisis, the MFA cautioned the Indian government not to be driven by nationalism and arrogance, to avoid miscalculation and repeating the mistakes of the 1962 war.⁴⁷³

Undermining enemy leadership, the *Global Times* also attacked Prime Minister Modi, stating that his ‘Hindu nationalism could trigger another war’, suggesting attempts to undermine Modi’s popularity in India.⁴⁷⁴

In addition to warnings directed at India, Chinese news outlets also published distorted reports (disinformation) about the standoff that attempted to bolster China’s territorial claims. For example, *People’s Daily* published an article based on a report in the Indian media citing a Chinese official who said that a Bhutanese official considered Doklam to be Chinese territory. However, the article neglected to state that the source of the statement was a Chinese official, making it sound like Bhutan supported China’s claim.⁴⁷⁵ Meanwhile, *Global Times* appeared to aim to incite anti-Indian sentiment in China’s population. On August 9, after an earthquake struck China’s southwest, *Global Times* published an article claiming that ‘some Indian netizens said God sent earthquake to punish China’ by quoting several posts on Twitter.⁴⁷⁶ The veracity of the Twitter accounts was never independently verified. Some social media platforms were similarly used to incite the Chinese public’s nationalism: Xinhua’s Weibo account published an article to ‘educate’ its readers titled, ‘India Illegally Crosses the Border and Engages in Sophistry. These Are the Real Facts and Crucial Points to Know’. The article claimed that the Chinese MFA had decided to tell the ‘truth’ about Indian incursion in Chinese territory, which focussed on how the Indian military had violated the law.⁴⁷⁷

Nonmilitary Actions

Beyond military and media signalling, Beijing also employed a whole-of-government integrated deterrence approach to the crisis through economic reprisals and incentives to deter India. For example, during the incident China disregarded a water-use agreement with India that provided critical flood control information, which would have had disastrous economic and humanitarian impact should the lack of information lead to widespread flooding.⁴⁷⁸ Furthermore, during the standoff China reportedly offered financial inducements in the form of loans (presumably from a state-owned bank) to cleave Bhutan away from its

⁴⁷³ China Ministry of Foreign Affairs press conference, July 6, 2017.

⁴⁷⁴ ‘Modi’s Hindu Nationalism Could Trigger Another War, Global Times Says’, *Asia News*, July 20, 2017.

⁴⁷⁵ ‘A Slap in the Face! Bhutan Acknowledges That Doklam Is a Chinese Area and Finds It Strange That the Indian Troops Are on the Chinese Soil’ [‘被打脸!不丹称洞朗非其领土 奇怪印为何进入中国领土’], *China Daily*, August 9, 2017.

⁴⁷⁶ ‘Some [Indian] Netizens in the Jiuzhaigou Earthquake Commented That It Was “the Punishment of God”’ [‘九寨沟地震 部分印度网民评论称’神的惩罚’], *Global Times*, August 9, 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ An, ‘Commentary: India Must Understand Borderline Is Bottom Line’, Xinhua, July 10, 2017.

⁴⁷⁸ Navin Singh Khadka, ‘The China-India Row That Spells Disaster for Flood Victims’, BBC News, December 18, 2017.

traditional relationship with India, including a US\$10 billion assistance package of grants, direct investment, and low-interest loans.⁴⁷⁹ These economic incentives served to convey to Bhutan China's economic strength and commitment to a partnership, while undermining India's regional influence.

Signalling Explanation

The PLA exercises on the Tibetan Plateau were a demonstration of its capabilities, mobilisation, and readiness, and they were meant to show China's military superiority, weaken the Indian military's morale, and deter India's further aggression.⁴⁸⁰ According to the PLA, the drill intended to improve the troops' combat capabilities and involved the assault on enemy positions and the destruction of stationary targets such as bunkers. 'The exercise effectively tested the brigade's joint strike capability on plateaus', a *China Daily* article stated.⁴⁸¹ It should be noted that the exercise involved PLA ground forces, but there were no reports of the PLAAF or other services being involved. This could mean that the PLA wanted to keep the exercise limited for signalling purposes by solely deploying ground forces. Beyond these publicised exercises, the PLA deployed troops to the border to provide visible presence during the crisis.⁴⁸² Although after the crisis the PLA withdrew most of its troops from the direct location of the standoff, it has continued to station hundreds of troops nearby, build infrastructure, and conduct visible PLA patrols along the border.⁴⁸³

Although Chinese literature does not specifically state what Beijing's objectives were for deterrence signalling at Doklam, we can extrapolate several likely objectives given the signalling mechanisms Beijing used and the messages it sent during the crisis.⁴⁸⁴ These include

- *Maintaining or expanding regional influence.* China used deterrence signalling through media messaging and economic incentives to Bhutan to support the narrative of the PRC as a strong power with growing influence in South Asia.⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁷⁹ Annie Gowan, 'As China-India Feud Ebbs, Tiny Bhutan Reexamines Its Place in the World', *Washington Post*, August 29, 2017; Olivia Shen, 'Time for Bhutan to Speak Up', *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), September 11, 2017; Yuji Kuronuma, 'China Woos Bhutan with \$10 Billion in Standoff with India', *South Asian Journal*, August 26, 2017.

⁴⁸⁰ Authors' interviews with U.S. and Southeast Asian experts.

⁴⁸¹ Zhao Lei, 'Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Site of PLA War Games', *China Daily*, July 18, 2017.

⁴⁸² Sangeev Miglani and Fayaz Bukhari, 'Indian, China Soldiers Involved in Border Altercation', Reuters, August 15, 2017.

⁴⁸³ Kristin Huang, 'China Builds Up Troop Numbers Close to Indian Border Flashpoint as Soldiers Prepare for First Winter Near Doklam', *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 2017; Ankit Panda, 'Making Sense of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's New Tracks at Doklam', *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2017.

⁴⁸⁴ For one analysis, see Jonah Blank, 'What Were China's Objectives in the Doklam Dispute?', *Foreign Affairs*, September 7, 2017. For a non-PLA perspective on past China-India deterrence signalling, see Liu Huijun [刘会军], 'China-India Border Dispute: A Study from Deterrence Perspective' ['威慑视角下的中印边界争端研究'], *South Asian Studies* [南亚研究], March 2011, pp. 1–28. For a non-PLA view of the 2020 standoff, see Hu Shisheng [胡仕胜] and Wang Jue [王珏], 'Behavioural Logic of India's Tough Diplomacy Toward China' ['印度对华示强外交的行为逻辑'], *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系], July 2020, pp. 25–34, 60.

⁴⁸⁵ Authors' interviews with U.S. and South Asia experts.

- *Countering Indian perceptions that it is at military parity with China and deterring further military actions.* During the Doklam crisis the PRC media consistently brought up ‘memories’ of the 1962 war as a reminder to the Indian public and leadership of the PLA’s military superiority back then while emphasising that it is even stronger now, with pleas for India to ‘give up the delusion of military strength’.⁴⁸⁶ Publicising the PLA’s readiness and capabilities reinforced this narrative while aiming to deter India from further military actions. During the 2020 border crisis, *Global Times* editor-in-chief Hu Xijin made this clear on Twitter, writing, ‘The PLA released latest video of joint land-air drill in Tibet region. Of course its target audience is Indian troops and politicians. I want to tell nationalists in India: Please calm down. Indian military is truly no match for PLA. Don’t force your soldiers to be conceited’.⁴⁸⁷
- *Supporting the rationale for Chinese/PLA presence at the border.* China’s deterrence signalling during and after the crisis underscored Beijing’s rationale for the build-up of Chinese presence along the border.⁴⁸⁸ PRC media messaging supported the narrative of China’s territorial claims and security concerns, justifying continued PLA presence along the border. This signalling dovetailed with Chinese efforts to build infrastructure to support a more entrenched military presence in the area.⁴⁸⁹

Beyond these objectives, China’s deterrence signalling efforts appeared to be aimed at influencing at least five target audiences:

- *The Indian leadership:* China primarily targeted Prime Minister Modi, by seeking to undermine Modi’s domestic support for his China policy and sow doubt in the region about the Indian leadership’s motives.
- *The Indian military:* China’s signalling efforts targeted the Indian military to erode morale and confidence in India’s ability to win a conflict against the PLA and deter further aggression.
- *The Indian public:* China attempted to undermine Modi’s credibility with the domestic populace and erode domestic support for a conflict.
- *The Bhutanese leadership:* Signalling efforts aimed at Bhutan sought to convince the Bhutanese leadership to reject India’s support and choose China as a future partner.
- *Other regional nations:* China’s deterrence signalling also targeted regional nations in the Indo-Pacific to influence those nations to view China as a strong regional power able to deter an aggressor over a territorial dispute.

International Understanding

With Party-state media amplifying reporting on PLA exercises, the exercises were the biggest focus for foreign analysts. One analyst described them as ‘aggressive signals of resolve’.⁴⁹⁰ More broadly, another analyst argued that the crisis reflected Beijing’s whole-of-

⁴⁸⁶ Long Xingchun, ‘India Didn’t Draw Lesson from 1962 Border War’, *Global Times*, July 23, 2017; Yang Sheng, ‘India Urged to Drop Delusion of Military Strength’, *Global Times*, July 6, 2017.

⁴⁸⁷ Hu Xijin [@HuXijin_GT], ‘The PLA released latest video of joint land-air drill in Tibet region’, Twitter post, September 21, 2020.

⁴⁸⁸ Author’s interviews with U.S. and South Asia experts.

⁴⁸⁹ Jonathan Marcus, ‘China-India Border Tension: Satellite Imagery Shows Doklam Plateau Build-Up’, BBC News, January 26, 2018.

⁴⁹⁰ Sameer Lalwani, ‘Signs of a Thaw in India, China Border Dispute’, *Cipher Brief*, July 25, 2017.

government approach, writing, ‘Chinese actions during this standoff showed that it was willing to use a number of instruments—diplomatic, military, economic, legal, infrastructure, communications—in its toolbox to pressure India’.⁴⁹¹ The United States did not comment much on the crisis but tacitly supported India’s position from a distance, likely with New Delhi’s approval.⁴⁹² Post-crisis analysis by Western experts suggested that domestic events important to Xi Jinping—namely the upcoming Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Summit that was held in September 2017 and the 19th Party Congress in October—incentivised Beijing to find a quick solution.⁴⁹³

Key Takeaways

This case study illustrates that China used a combination of traditional and social media, military exercises, and economic measures to bolster its territorial claims, punish adversaries, deter military action, and influence specific target audiences. Official media messaging outlets such as *People’s Daily* and Xinhua focussed on disseminating the Party’s official warnings to the Indian government and military, while semiofficial outlets such as the *Global Times* and social media platforms were more inflammatory in their messaging and also focussed on stories meant to increase nationalism and support for China’s position among the Chinese public. Beijing also combined historical analogies and examples (e.g., the 1962 war) along with demonstrations of current military capabilities to show willpower, commitment, and capability to defeat India and defend China’s territory. It is likely that China would take a similar multilayered approach to conduct deterrence signalling in future border crises with India.

Another takeaway is that although the Doklam crisis occurred during a time of intensifying geostrategic rivalry between China and India, China’s signalling efforts remained narrowly focussed on the crisis as a bilateral issue (or trilateral, including Bhutan) and were generally not aimed at other countries, such as the United States. China might have wanted to keep the crisis contained or it could be that Beijing simply was not worried about U.S. intervention. Either way, it demonstrates how China can tailor deterrence messaging when it wishes to influence specific audiences and outcomes.

Finally, it is worth noting that China did not use all the deterrence signalling mechanisms at its disposal during the Doklam crisis. The PLA’s exercises in the Tibetan Plateau were limited to the ground forces and did not include all the military services, potentially demonstrating that China wanted a show of force that was significant enough to send the message of PLA readiness and combat capabilities to India, but limited in scope to prevent further escalation. Though the PLA stationed troops along the border during the crisis, it could have conducted incursions across the border to demonstrate China’s willingness to pursue its claims and military readiness, as has happened at Ladakh and other areas along the China-India LAC. Beijing might also have considered sending the PAP to conduct incursions

⁴⁹¹ Tanvi Madan, ‘Doklam Standoff: The Takeaways for India’, Live Mint, September 4, 2017.

⁴⁹² Ryan Hass, ‘Navigating the Current China-India Standoff in Bhutan’, Brookings Institution, July 28, 2017; Tanvi Madan, ‘The US and Doklam: Look Beyond Rhetoric’, Brookings Institution, September 26, 2017.

⁴⁹³ Jeffrey Gettleman, ‘China and India Agree to Ease Tensions in Border Dispute’, *New York Times*, August 28, 2017; Author’s interviews with U.S. and South Asia experts.

and patrols rather than the PLA. China has used similar ‘grey zone’ tactics with its quasi-military maritime militia and coast guard in the South China Sea. China likely did not pursue additional signalling mechanisms for several reasons, including that Xi Jinping was focussed on domestic priorities (the BRICS Summit and the 19th Party Congress) and did not want to escalate the situation. Likewise, China may have felt that overt PLA border incursions would inflame the situation and hinder a negotiated deescalation. It is possible, however, that had the standoff gone on longer the PLA would have staged further military exercises involving other services such as the PLAAF to signal a larger show of strength.

Table 5.2 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of China’s use of military signalling during the China-India border crisis.

Table 5.2. Applying the Framework to the 2017 China-India Border Crisis

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Crisis situation requiring immediate deterrence or coercion	Limited ground force mobilisation and exercises	India	Party, government, military, and unofficial sources	Relatively narrowly disseminated
Reinforce Chinese nationalism		Chinese public	Compared with other cases, not high-level participation	

Emergency Case Study No. 3: 2019 Hong Kong Democracy Protests

Beijing’s response to the 2019 Hong Kong democracy protests, the largest and most significant opposition to CCP rule on Chinese territory since the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, reflects how the Party leverages the PLA on extremely rare occasions for domestic stability missions, and illustrates how the Party messages this externally. Although this case differs from the others in important respects, most notably due to its focus on an instance of domestic repression, there is an external signalling element to it that is worth examining and that is amenable to application of the deterrence signalling framework presented earlier in the report. This is in large part due to Chinese leaders reportedly viewing the protests as being orchestrated and supported by the United States, Taiwan, and other democracies as a means of fomenting unrest and undermining the Communist Party.⁴⁹⁴ Consequently, Chinese signals about possible use of force could be interpreted as aimed not only at intimidating people in Hong Kong, but also as having an international messaging element aimed at deterring what China considered to be foreign interference or meddling.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁴ See, for example, Steven Lee Myers, ‘In Hong Kong Protests, China Angrily Connects Dots Back to US’, *New York Times*, September 5, 2019.

⁴⁹⁵ While it is tempting to dismiss such accusations as propaganda or conspiracy theories, we proceed under the assumption that Chinese leaders might believe them to be true, and if so, could be expected to act in accordance with the characterisation of the protests conveyed by the Party’s propaganda apparatus.

Event Details

A draft extradition law introduced by Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam and her government in early 2019 sparked months-long protests and violence throughout the city that ultimately called into question the credibility of China's 'one country, two systems' arrangement with Hong Kong. Since the United Kingdom returned Hong Kong, a formerly colonised territory, to China in 1997, Beijing has promised to rule under 'one country, two systems' to allow Hong Kong to retain its political and economic systems in exchange for recognition of only 'One China'. But because Lam initially refused to withdraw the draft extradition law, which opened the door to extraditing Hong Kong citizens to the mainland to face punishment for political opposition to the central government, protesters concluded that 'one country, two systems' was no longer being carried out faithfully by the Beijing-backed Lam government.

By September 2019, Lam had decided to permanently withdraw the controversial draft extradition bill, but she refused to acquiesce to the protesters' four remaining demands.⁴⁹⁶ These included a full and independent inquiry into allegations of police brutality, unconditional release of imprisoned protesters, genuine universal suffrage, and Lam's own resignation. In addition, Lam showed unwavering support to a police force that resorted to increasingly aggressive measures.⁴⁹⁷ Meanwhile, on the protester side, a small but growing minority of activists decided to break with using purely peaceful means to express their dissatisfaction. For example, students in November 2019 barricaded themselves at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and hurled petrol bombs and shot arrows at police. Protesters also vandalised numerous stores and burned down subway entrances around the city.⁴⁹⁸

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping in November 2019 met with Lam to signal Beijing's support of her as chief executive and her government's response.⁴⁹⁹ This essentially eliminated the possibility that Lam would resign—one of the protesters' four remaining demands. Moreover, Beijing quietly doubled the number of military personnel at its Hong Kong garrison and broadcasted antiterrorism and antiriot training by security personnel across the way in Shenzhen.⁵⁰⁰ China resisted the temptation to deploy troops to crush ongoing political

⁴⁹⁶ SCMP Reporters, 'Hong Kong Leader Carrie Lam Announces Formal Withdrawal of the Extradition Bill and Sets Up a Platform to Look into Key Causes of Protest Crisis', *South China Morning Post*, September 4, 2019.

⁴⁹⁷ Verna Yu, 'Hong Kong's Carrie Lam Vows to Use "Stern Law Enforcement" to Stamp Out Protests', *The Guardian*, September 5, 2019.

⁴⁹⁸ Scott Murdoch and Kate Lamb, 'Hong Kong Campus Protesters Fire Arrows as Anti-Government Unrest Spreads', Reuters, November 16, 2019.

⁴⁹⁹ Keith Bradsher and Chris Buckley, 'Xi Jinping Endorses Carrie Lam, Embattled Hong Kong Leader', *New York Times*, November 4, 2019.

⁵⁰⁰ For China's quiet doubling of troop numbers in Hong Kong, see Greg Torode, James Pomfret, and David Lague, 'China Quietly Doubles Troop Levels in Hong Kong, Envoys Say', Reuters, September 30, 2019. For a link to Chinese propaganda videos showing antiriot and antiterrorism exercises, see South China Morning Post, 'Chinese Army's Hong Kong Garrison Releases Video Showing Anti-Riot Drills, Featuring Tanks', video, YouTube, August 1, 2019.

protests in Hong Kong, and instead adopted a mix of subtle and deliberate military signals to convey Beijing's strength and willingness to intervene if required. Significantly, Beijing also occasionally engaged in reassurance efforts aimed at Hong Kongers to signal that China's position of deferring to local authorities to handle the unrest remains unchanged.

Signalling Details

Beijing further instructed the PLA at times to engage in subtle signalling in response to the Hong Kong crisis. For example, Chinese troops in November 2019 were authorised to exit the Hong Kong garrison in plain clothes to assist in efforts to clean up and remove debris near Hong Kong Baptist University. By ordering the troops not to dress in their uniforms, Beijing likely sought to avoid escalating Hong Kong concerns of PLA intervention, while also conveying the message that China can authorise its troops to roam the streets of Hong Kong without invitation from the local government. In one article from *China Daily*, Beijing argued that 'there are no clauses or articles in the Basic Law or the Garrison Law that state PLA officers are forbidden from volunteering in charitable activities that benefit the city'.⁵⁰¹ Indeed, according to Beijing, PLA troops were acting in the 'public interest'.⁵⁰² To support Beijing's argument, multiple Chinese articles referenced the fact that PLA participation in past disaster relief operations was not without precedent. For example, PLA officers in October 2018 assisted in the clean-up efforts following Typhoon Mangkhut, and troops have participated in tree-planting, blood donations, and visits to local elderly homes and kindergartens to contribute positively to Hong Kong society.⁵⁰³ Nevertheless, Beijing simultaneously reiterated that the primary concern for the PLA in Hong Kong was to 'safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests, and maintain Hong Kong's long-term prosperity and stability'.⁵⁰⁴ A contemporaneous *Global Times* article hammered home this message, highlighting Chinese netizen views of the PLA in Hong Kong, with one saying, 'It's been 22 years. Thank you PLA Hong Kong garrison, for safeguarding Hong Kong'.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰¹ Wang Zhenmin, 'Like Residents, PLA Officers Are Also Stakeholders in Hong Kong', *China Daily*, November 17, 2019.

⁵⁰² Mu Xuequan, 'Roadblock Clearing by PLA Garrison in Hong Kong a Public Interest Activity: Spokesperson', Xinhua, November 28, 2019.

⁵⁰³ See, for example, Zhang Zhouxiang, 'PLA on HK Streets, but Not as Western Media Expected', *China Daily*, November 17, 2019; CGTN, 'PLA Officers and Men Join Clean-Up After Hong Kong Protests', *China Daily*, November 17, 2019; and Jiao Zhe, 'No Need to Over-Interpret Hong Kong PLA's Kindness', *China Daily*, November 17, 2019.

⁵⁰⁴ Huaxia, 'PLA Garrison in Hong Kong Capable of Performing Duties Stipulated by Law', Xinhua, August 29, 2019. Also see Zhao Lei, 'PLA HK Garrison Determined to Protect China's Sovereignty', *China Daily*, November 28, 2019.

⁵⁰⁵ Ji Yuqiao and Zhao Yusha, 'PLA Garrison Lauded for Safeguarding Hong Kong', *Global Times*, November 28, 2019.

Beijing complemented subtle messages with clearer messages that demonstrated Chinese military strength and willingness to intervene in Hong Kong if deemed necessary by the central government. One example can be found in an article posted on *China Daily*, which reads, in part:

If the already ugly situation [in Hong Kong] worsens, with the violence and unrest threatening to spiral out of control under the orchestration of secessionist-minded troublemakers, the armed forces stationed in the SAR [Special Administrative Region] will have no reason to sit on their hands. The PLA garrison in Hong Kong is not merely a symbol of Chinese sovereignty over the city. The troops there are duty-bound to maintain public order and protect the country if required to do so.⁵⁰⁶

By noting that the PLA ‘will have no reason to sit on their hands’, Beijing was suggesting that military action should not be viewed as impossible, especially if the security situation in Hong Kong were to worsen. In a related vein, *Global Times* in August 2019 published a commentary arguing that PLA intervention in the city would not necessarily violate the Basic Law and ‘one country, two systems’ framework.⁵⁰⁷

Separately, the PLA released several propaganda videos. For example, in late July 2019, the PLA garrison’s official Weibo account released a short propaganda video (approximately three minutes long) that showed troops, in part, conducting antiriot exercises and arresting protesters. During the video, the PLA issued messages including ‘All consequences are at your own risk’ (which, significantly, was said in Cantonese—the language spoken in Hong Kong); ‘Warning. Stop charging or we use force’; and violence is ‘absolutely impermissible’.⁵⁰⁸ It also includes English subtitles—uncommon in PLA propaganda videos, underscoring that the intended audience is not just Hong Kong but the West as well. The video ends with the PLA taking mock protesters into custody. Within the same time frame of the first video’s release, the PLA garrison released a second, longer propaganda video (approximately 11 minutes long) with similar themes that was shown at an event hosted by the garrison.⁵⁰⁹ At the event, Major General Chen Daoxiang described the situation in Hong Kong as ‘absolutely intolerable’, suggesting the PLA could rectify it if needed. In January 2020, the PLA garrison in Hong Kong released a third propaganda video that also, in part, showed troop training that could be applied towards antiriot operations.⁵¹⁰

The PLA garrison also participated in at least three distinct exercises since the beginning of unrest in Hong Kong. In late June 2019, the garrison conducted joint patrol exercises

⁵⁰⁶ ‘PLA Presence Will Only Worry Agitators’, *China Daily*, August 29, 2019.

⁵⁰⁷ Bai Yunyi, ‘Potential PLA Deployment in HK Will Not Damage “One Country, Two Systems”’, *Global Times*, August 15, 2019.

⁵⁰⁸ James Pomfret and Greg Torode, ‘China’s Army Garrison in Hong Kong Releases Video with Anti-Riot Scenes’, Reuters, July 31, 2019.

⁵⁰⁹ South China Morning Post, ‘Chinese Army’s Hong Kong Garrison Releases Video’.

⁵¹⁰ CGTN, ‘PLA Hong Kong Garrison Releases Footage of Its First Training Session of 2020’, video, YouTube, January 7, 2020.

featuring both ground, naval, and air forces, according to a *Global Times* article that cited the original *PLA Daily* report on the event.⁵¹¹ The *PLA Daily* article noted:

On June 26, the army, navy and air force of the PLA garrison in Hong Kong took part in a joint naval and air patrol exercise in areas near Hong Kong. . . . The focus [of the exercise] was on reviewing and raising the units' combat abilities in emergency dispatches, ad hoc deployment and joint operations.⁵¹²

In December 2019, the PLA garrison conducted another two exercises. The first involved garrison participation in South China Sea live-fire exercises. Unfortunately, few details on this exercise exist, but it appears that a naval battalion from the garrison met up with the PLAN warship *Qinzhou*, a type 056 corvette, to practice operations that included missile jamming and firing at fixed targets.⁵¹³ And the second exercise that month came just a few days later and featured air, ground, and naval training in Hong Kong's harbor. China's official CCTV offered the following details on the exercise:

The patrol was a joint operation between the ground force, navy and air force focusing on emergency action, troop movements, joint operations and simulated confrontations in accordance with a coherent strategy for actual combat.⁵¹⁴

According to the PLA deputy commander Ye Weibang of the *Qinzhou*, which was also involved in the exercise, 'compared with previous drills, this one was more challenging because it was longer and involved more troops, and it was closer to being like an actual combat situation'.⁵¹⁵ This comment seems to contradict the PLA garrison's official characterisation of the exercise as being 'routine'. Either way, all three exercises uncoincidentally occurred during heightened Hong Kong unrest, and thus were designed to signal the PLA's readiness to intervene if called upon by Beijing.

Outside of the PLA Hong Kong Garrison activities, Beijing in late August 2019 also released a propaganda video showing PAP forces conducting antiriot and exercises in neighbouring Shenzhen.⁵¹⁶ Chinese commentary in the *Global Times* directly linked the exercises to then-ongoing protests in Hong Kong, with an emphasis on the high competence of the PAP to handle the crisis: 'Within a few seconds, the officers held the situation under

⁵¹¹ 'PLA Hong Kong Garrison Conducts Emergency Response Exercises', *Global Times*, July 2, 2019.

⁵¹² Minnie Chan, 'Hong Kong's PLA Garrison Held a Drill Last Week on "Emergency Dispatches"', *South China Morning Post*, July 3, 2019.

⁵¹³ Keegan Elmer, 'South China Sea Live-Fire Drill for PLA's Hong Kong Garrison', *South China Morning Post*, December 25, 2019.

⁵¹⁴ Minnie Chan, 'PLA's Hong Kong Garrison Holds Joint Drill in City's Harbor in "Message to Radical Protesters"', *South China Morning Post*, December 30, 2019. For a video of the exercise, see CGTN, 'PLA's Hong Kong Garrison Holds Air and Sea Exercises', video, YouTube, December 29, 2019. For the official Chinese announcement of the video's release, see 'PLA Hong Kong Garrison Shows Its Patrol in Video', *China Daily*, December 30, 2019.

⁵¹⁵ Chan, 'PLA's Hong Kong Garrison Holds Joint Drill'.

⁵¹⁶ Teddy Ng, 'China's Paramilitary States Anti-Riot Drill Near Hong Kong Border', *South China Morning Post*, August 30, 2019.

control, and rioters began retreating. Some rioters threw petrol bombs, but the officers effectively extinguished them'.⁵¹⁷

Finally, during a time of heightened unrest, Beijing in August 2019 issued apparent statements of reassurance to the Hong Kong people on PLA troop rotations into and out of the military's Hong Kong-based garrison. According to an article in Xinhua, the 22nd such rotation that month was to be considered a 'normal routine annual rotation in line with the Law of the People's Republic of China on Garrisoning in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region'.⁵¹⁸ Beijing's emphasis on the activity being 'routine' is notable as it could have easily described the troop movements as related to preparations for the worsening security environment in Hong Kong. A longer companion piece published in Xinhua on the same day noted that the PLA was confident it could accomplish an intervention mission at current troop levels if called upon, once again suggesting there was no need to increase the number of troops stationed in Hong Kong.⁵¹⁹

Signalling Explanation

Beijing almost certainly sought to convey that the June exercises were designed to handle ongoing protests in Hong Kong by using the term 'emergency dispatches'. What is notable in this case, however, is that the PLA did not publicise the exercise until the day after protesters broke into Hong Kong's Legislative Council and defaced the chamber. All told, Beijing waited six days before publishing the *PLA Daily* article, for reasons that remain unclear.

International Understanding

With the world watching, analysts were focussed on China's signalling and understood Beijing was at least suggesting it was preparing to send the PLA into Hong Kong. However, foreign analysts were generally sceptical that the Chinese leadership would actually send in the PLA on a large scale. As Bonnie Glaser explained, 'If the Chinese Communist Party deems that its immediate national interests require intervening to snuff out opposition that they view as threatening stability on the Chinese mainland, it can't be ruled out', but at a cost: 'It would damage China's economic interests, harm its global reputation, and destroy any possibility of unification with Taiwan for the foreseeable future'.⁵²⁰ Similarly, a U.S. official said, 'If they got to the point where the PLA had to intervene in Hong Kong, it would be a significant admission that they've lost control'.⁵²¹ Nevertheless, the U.S. government

⁵¹⁷ 'Shenzhen Police Stage New Drill Using Water Cannons to Deal with Riots', *Global Times*, August 30, 2019.

⁵¹⁸ Huaxia, 'PLA Garrison in Hong Kong Conducts 22nd Routine Rotation', Xinhua, August 29, 2019.

⁵¹⁹ Huaxia, 'PLA Garrison in Hong Kong Capable of Performing Duties Stipulated by Law: Spokesman', Xinhua, August 29, 2019. It is important to note that, in reality, the PLA was quietly adding troops to its Hong Kong garrison. See, for example, Torode, Pomfret, and Lague, 'China Quietly Doubles Troop Levels'.

⁵²⁰ Alex Ward, 'China Signals Possible Military Intervention to Stop the Hong Kong Protests', *Vox*, August 1, 2019.

⁵²¹ Greg Torode and Phil Stewart, 'China's PLA Signals It Will Keep Hong Kong-Based Troops in Barracks', Reuters, July 9, 2019.

indicated it understood the signal of the build-up across the border in Shenzhen when it said in late July that it was monitoring the situation.⁵²²

Key Takeaways

Throughout the Hong Kong protests in 2019, Beijing attempted to issue both subtle and deliberate signals meant to dissuade protesters from continuing their activities. China also supplemented these messages with ones of reassurance to ease concerns that the PLA was readying to intervene in the crisis. This targeted messaging for tailored deterrence against the Hong Kong public reflects the psychological and coercive views of deterrence for China. It is likely Beijing hoped the combination of differing messages would return Hong Kong to status quo ante. China's apparent belief that hostile foreign forces were involved in organising or supporting the protests, even if it was incorrect, might also suggest that Beijing intended the signalling to deter the United States and other democracies from any further 'interference' in Hong Kong.

Table 5.3 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of China's response to the Hong Kong protests in 2019.

Table 5.3. Applying the Framework to China's Response to the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Escalating protests in Hong Kong, which Party leaders reportedly believed were supported by foreign governments	Troop movements and presence	Hong Kong residents	Party, government, military, and unofficial sources	Widely disseminated, including social media
	Military training activities	United States Taiwan		
		Other democracies		

Emergency Case Study No. 4: Korean Peninsula Tensions

Chinese strategists often describe China as living in a dangerous neighbourhood, with four nuclear powers and several simmering conflicts on its border. Yet North Korea is clearly the neighbour that Beijing worries about the most—in part because it is the one potential conflict zone that might erupt on China's doorstep outside of Beijing's control. By contrast, Beijing is largely in the driver's seat for its other tricky regional relationships—Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and India are not looking to start a war with China, and would generally be happy to improve relations with Beijing if only it would stop coercing them over territorial disputes.

⁵²² Jennifer Jacobs and Glen Carey, 'White House Eyeing Chinese Forces Gathered on Hong Kong Border', Bloomberg, July 30, 2019.

North Korea's status as a potential conflict that is outside China's direct control—but would significantly impact China's own national security—provides another lens to understand how Beijing conducts deterrence signalling for third-party disputes. China's actual tangible interests in a Korea contingency—preserving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) state as a buffer against the U.S.-ROK alliance, avoiding a war on its border, avoiding a rush of refugees coming into China, and avoiding loose weapon of mass destruction (WMD) materials—have generally remained constant over the last 20 years.⁵²³ Beijing's approach to achieving these interests, however, has changed as the PLA has transitioned towards planning for intervention inside North Korea to secure Chinese interests (especially for WMD-E).⁵²⁴ This shift in approach has also been accompanied by more assertive and more transparent Chinese deterrence signalling, to demonstrate Chinese capabilities to safeguard these interests and commitment to do so.

Overall, most of China's military signalling related to Korea is targeted at the United States and South Korea, with the basic goal of deterring U.S.-ROK military action against the North, regardless of what the North has done. This is because Beijing believes Washington and Seoul are the most likely to actually initiate hostilities on the Peninsula, not Pyongyang. The main message to Washington and Seoul is that the PLA is capable and willing to secure China's interests on the Peninsula (by intervention if necessary) in the event of a DPRK collapse. A secondary message is to undercut the U.S.-ROK justification for crossing the 38th Parallel—to secure Kim's WMD and avoid loose nuclear weapons—by demonstrating the PLA's ability to execute this mission.⁵²⁵ However, Beijing does not appear to realise, or be concerned by, the irony that its signalling to the United States and South Korea might actually embolden North Korea further.

By contrast, Beijing appears to favour nonmilitary tools for signalling Pyongyang, including leveraging its party-to-party ties for private direct communication and economic coercion, such as reports of cutting off oil exports to North Korea at key times.⁵²⁶ Nevertheless, Beijing does appear to use its military toolkit to signal Pyongyang at times. The goal vis-à-vis North Korea is likely to restrain DPRK provocations and ensure both the DPRK and U.S.-ROK back down during a crisis, but the underlying logic of military signalling toward North Korea is less clear—it's more likely to emphasise existing Chinese messages of restraint, since a

⁵²³ For one early report, see Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John Park, 'Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor', CSIS, January 3, 2008. For a PLA view of Korea contingencies, see Li Xiaodong, *Study of Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula*.

⁵²⁴ Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons', *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Fall 2018, pp. 84–116.

⁵²⁵ In reality, it is unclear the PLA would be able to execute WMD-E on its own. See Mastro, 'Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula', p. 112. For a PLA discussion of its own shortcomings, by authors from the PLARF Research Academy, see, for example, Yuan Wei [袁伟], Chen Xianbo [陈显波], Zuo Li [左莉], Chen Jun [陈军], and Li Wei [李霄], 'Thoughts and Enlightenment of the Construction of Army Nuclear Accident Emergency Equipment System' ['部队核事故应急装备体系建设的思考与启示'], *China Emergency Rescue* [中国应急救援], March 2017.

⁵²⁶ Jonathan Watts, 'China Cuts Oil Supply to North Korea', *The Guardian*, March 31, 2003.

Chinese invasion of North Korea is certainly not an appealing prospect to Beijing. It is also possible, and even likely, that some of Beijing's signalling efforts related to Korea can also be oriented towards Chinese domestic audiences, especially those who live near the DPRK and are concerned about potential nuclear radiation.⁵²⁷

Event Details

China has long prepared its military for a Korea contingency, despite official claims to the contrary.⁵²⁸ Chinese preparations are often tied to periods of U.S.-DPRK tensions, since China fears the worst outcome of an outbreak of war on its border and generally assumes the United States will start the war.⁵²⁹ Although plans and training for a Korea contingency have very likely always been part of the PLA's mission, the first public evidence of Korea-focussed PLA planning came in 2003. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the inclusion of North Korea into President Bush's 'Axis of Evil', Beijing was very concerned about the possibility of war on its border. This was very likely accentuated when then-President Bush told then-leader Jiang Zemin, 'If we could not solve the [North Korea nuclear] problem diplomatically, I would have to consider a strike against North Korea', which eventually led to Jiang creating the Six Party Talks.⁵³⁰

The 2003 crisis was the tipping point for a host of largely behind-the-scenes PLA preparations for border contingencies. A series of articles by the PLA's Air Defense College explored how to fight a superior adversary on a land border that could fight at night—clearly the United States in Korea.⁵³¹ Fearing the North's upstart nuclear program would end up contaminating Chinese territory, PLA researchers from the Shenyang Military Region's (MR) Center for Disease Control and Prevention as well as researchers at the PLA's hospital along the DPRK border in Dandong researched how to mitigate nuclear spillover from the North

⁵²⁷ Jeremy Page, 'China Fears Radioactive Fallout from North Korea Blast', *Wall Street Journal*, September 6, 2017.

⁵²⁸ See, for example, Justin McCurry and Tania Branigan, 'China Denies Making Preparations for Collapse of North Korea Regime', *The Guardian*, May 6, 2014.

⁵²⁹ Qiao Zhongwei [乔忠伟], Wang Jiasheng [王家胜], and Zou Hao [邹昊], eds., *Border Crises Emergency Response and Control* [边境危机应急控制], Beijing: Academy of Military Science, 2013.

⁵³⁰ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010, p. 424.

⁵³¹ Hao Qiang [郝强], Feng Lidong [冯立东], Gong Xu [龚旭], and Yu Junshan [于军善], 'Evaluation of Air Threat on Group Army's Anti-Air Raid Campaign' ['集团军反空袭战役空中威胁评估'], *Modern Defense Technology* [现代防御技术], January 2005; Hao Qiang [郝强], Feng Lidong [冯立东], and Gong Xuhao [龚旭], 'Evaluation of Air Threat to Motorised Infantry Division's for Anti-Air Raid Operation' ['摩步师(团)反空袭作战空中威胁评估'], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], April 2006; Wang Yanzheng [王艳正], Hao Qiang [郝强], Gong Xu [龚旭], and Feng Lidong [冯立东], 'Research on the Combat Efficiency of Portable Surface-to-Air Missile Against Armed Helicopters' ['便携式地空导弹抗击武装直升机作战效能研究'], *Fire Control and Command Control* [火力与指挥控制], January 2007. The January 2005 article was first noted by Andrew Scobell and Mark Cozad in 'China's North Korea Policy: Rethink or Recharge?', *Parameters*, Spring 2014.

into China and how to deal with refugees fleeing such nuclear contamination.⁵³² Along with this academic research, the PLA's Shenyang MR in 2004 conducted at least one exercise explicitly intended for 'border emergency operations' (边境应急行动).⁵³³ This aligns with DoD's assertion that 'since at least 2004, the PLA has sought to strengthen its ability to conduct joint operations near the Korean Peninsula, placing particular emphasis on border defense'.⁵³⁴

The next major DPRK crisis in 2013 prompted another round of Chinese preparations for a Korea contingency, this time oriented towards intervention across the border into North Korea. By at least 2013, PLA researchers were clearly, if quietly, exploring how to seize

⁵³² Xie Huaijiang [谢怀江], 'Possible Nuclear Effects and Countermeasures of the DPRK Nuclear Issue on Our Border Areas' [‘朝核问题对我边境地区可能的核影响及对策’], conference paper for the 5th China Toxicology Society Radiotoxicology Professional Committee Academic Conference, August 2004; Huo Lijie [霍丽杰], Jin Zhenshun [金贞顺], Li Li [李莉], He Meifang [何梅芳], and Chen Shumin [陈淑敏], 'The Characteristics of Future Nursing and the Problems to Be Solved After Nuclear Attacks in Frontier Regions' [‘边境地区未来核袭击后的护理特点及应解决的问题’], *Journal of Nursing Administration* [护理管理杂志], October 2005; Huo Lijie [霍丽杰], Jin Yushun [金贞顺], Li Li [李莉], He Meifang [何梅芳], and Sun Bing [孙冰], 'Study on the Nursing Countermeasures of the Wounded Under the Conditions of Future Nuclear Attack in the Border Area' [‘边境地区未来核袭击条件下的伤员护理对策研究’], *PLA Journal of Nursing* [解放军护理杂志], November 2005; Li Li [李莉], Huo Lijie [霍丽杰], Jin Zhenshun [金贞顺], He Meifang [何梅芳], and Chen Shumin [陈淑敏], 'The Organisation and Practice of Training in Emergency Nursing for Nuclear Injury in Frontier Areas' [‘边境地区核损伤护理急救培训的组织与实施’], *Journal of Nursing Administration* [护理管理杂志], March 2006; Huo Lijie [霍丽杰], Jin Yushun [金贞顺], Li Li [李莉], He Meifang [何梅芳], and Sun Bing [孙冰], 'Nursing Countermeasures Under the Conditions of Future Nuclear Attack' [‘未来核袭击条件下的护理对策研究’], *PLA Journal of Nursing* [解放军护理杂志], June 2006.

For a second wave of research, see Yuan Mingqing and Jun Ping, 'Main Problems and Countermeasures of Health and Epidemic Prevention in Border Areas' [‘边境地区部队卫生防疫防护存在的主要问题与对策’], *Shenyang Force Medicine*, January 2008, pp. 30–32; Li Yanyi, Bi Yulin, and Wang Hua, 'Several Issues That Should Be Grasped by Border Defense Counterattacks and Security Guards Under the Conditions of Informationisation' [‘信息化条件下边境反击作战卫勤保障应把握的几个问题’], *Shenyang Force Medicine*, January 2008, pp. 44–45; Liao Bangqing, Wang Kaihui, Yu Zhiguo, and Pang Junfeng, 'Characteristics and Countermeasures for Medicine Support of Emergency Seal and Control in Border Areas' [‘边境地区应急封控药材保障的特点和对策’], *Shenyang Force Medicine*, January 2009, pp. 53–54.

⁵³³ Wang Xitai, Zhao Guoli, Jiang Yun, and Liu Zhiguo, 'Honing Skills on a Simulated Battlefield—Military Region Units Showcase a Focus on Construction to Raise Overall Equipment Support Capability in Realistic Combat', *Qianjin Bao*, March 11, 2014, p. 3.

⁵³⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2018*, p. 114. For a series of articles detailing PLA preparations for DPRK contingencies by the chief of staff and then commander of the Jilin Military District, Major General Mu Yufeng, see Miao Yufeng [苗雨丰], 'Problems and Countermeasures in Preparing for Mobilisation for Border Area Emergencies' [‘边境地区应急动员准备存在的问题与对策’], *National Defense*, August 2012, pp. 29–30; Miao Yufeng [苗雨丰], 'Considerations on Building an Integrated Command and Control System for Border Emergency Operations' [‘对构建边境应急行动一体化联合指挥体系的思考’], *National Defense*, February 2014, pp. 17–20; Miao Yufeng [苗雨丰], 'Focus on "Emergency Response": Promoting the Militias' Capacity for Non-War Military Operations' [‘着眼急时应急推进民兵非战争军事行动能力建设’], *National Defense*, January 2015, pp. 45–47; Miao Yufeng [苗雨丰], 'An Exploration into the Mobilisation of Troops in Border Area Emergency Operations' [‘边境地区应急行动兵员动员问题浅探’], *National Defense*, July 2015, pp. 50–53; Miao Yufeng [苗雨丰], 'Three Thoughts on Constructing Maritime Border Militia' [‘建强边海防民兵队伍的三点思考’], *National Defense*, October 2014, pp. 56–57.

DPRK nuclear sites.⁵³⁵ The PLA was also conducting training that was more clearly focussed on a Korea scenario, including what may have been a dry run of the PLA's Korea plan (which appears to have been evaluated as a failure), several follow-on exercise series that sought to improve its performance (most notably Joint-2014E), and verification in large-scale exercises (including Stride-2014 Zhurihe D).⁵³⁶ Moreover, in late 2015 the massive PLA organisational reforms created the new Northern TC, which is oriented towards a Korea scenario and subsumed Shandong Province, across from the Korean Peninsula.⁵³⁷ This decision was understood by some foreign analysts to better enable an amphibious landing inside North Korea as part of a Chinese intervention.⁵³⁸ As DoD summarised in 2018, 'More recent training has sought to improve the Northern Theater's civil-military fusion, night training, and transport of PLA units across the Bo Hai from the Shandong Peninsula to the Liaoning Peninsula'.⁵³⁹ Western media reporting also highlighted broader preparations for a Korea contingency, including improved border security and housing for DPRK refugees.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁵ Liu Xuefeng, Kong Xiangsong, and Hao Hongjun, 'Regional Nuclear Radiation Monitoring and Safety Risk Assessment System' ['区域核辐射监测及安全风险评估系统研究'], *2013 Proceedings of the China Command and Control Conference*, pp. 494–497; Wang Haiyan [王海燕], Zhou Huizhen [周慧贞], Jiang Xiaofeng [姜晓峰], and Wang Xiuhua [王秀华], 'Preliminary Study on Emergency Disposal Equipment Support for Neighbouring Countries' Nuclear Accidents' ['参与处置周边国家核事故行动装备保障初探'], *Journal of Equipment Academy* [装备学院学报], February 2016; Li Xiaoling [李小玲] and Zhang Lei [张雷], 'Discussion on Personnel Group of Nuclear Accident Emergency Medical Rescue Team in Military Hospital' ['军队核应急医学救援队人员编组探讨'], *PLA Journal of Hospital Administration* [解放军医院管理杂志], November 2017; Shen Tongqiang [沈同强] and Zhang Wenyu [张文宇], 'Recognise the Current Nuclear Security Threat Situation and Enhance the Military's Nuclear Emergency Response Capability' ['认清当前核安全威胁形势,提升军队核应急处置能力'], *Nuclear Safety* [核安全], June 2018. For broader discussion of this, see Mastro, 'Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula'.

⁵³⁶ For the 2013 likely dry run by the Shenyang MR's 16th Group Army, see Liu Dewu, Zhu Xiaohu, and Weng Weili, 'How Far Exactly Is Real Combat Oriented Exercise from Real Combat: Record of 16th Group Army Directing Exercise of "Offensive and Defensive Battle of Armoured Brigade in Border Area"', *Qianjin Bao*, November 27, 2013, p. 2. For Joint-2014E as one of the post-2013 exercises, see Lin Tao, Xiang Yong, Wang Renfei, and Zhang Xuhang, 'Eyewitness to Military Region's Live-Forces Exercise Joint Action-2014E', *Qianjin Bao*, November 5, 2014, pp. 1, 3; Fan Jianghuai, Hui Hui, and Li Dayong, 'Integrated Joint Operations Start from "Oneness": Reporters' Notes on Joint Training and Exercise of the Shenyang Theatre of Operations', *PLA Daily*, November 20, 2014, p. 5. For Stride-2014 Zhurihe D as the evaluation exercise, see Liu Dewu, Li Ye, Zhu Xiaohu, and Wang Renfei, 'Advancing over Long Distances to Battle in the Desert—The "Stride 2014: Zhurihe-D" Exercises Participated in by a Certain Mechanised Infantry Brigade of the 16th Group Army Representing the Military Region Get Off to a Start', *Qianjin Bao*, June 24, 2014; Wang Renfei, Zhu Xiaohu, Liu Dewu, and Lin Ye, 'Discovery of Problems Is More Important than Win or Loss: A Record of Thoughts on a Certain Mechanised Infantry Brigade of the 16th Group Army That Took Part in the "Stride-2014: Zhurihe D" Real-Troop Confrontation Drill' ['发现问题比输赢更重要'], *Qianjin Bao*, July 31, 2014, pp. 1–2; 'Military Report', CCTV-7, October 21, 2015.

⁵³⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2018*, p. 114.

⁵³⁸ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, 'China Maintains Contingencies for North Korean Instability', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 25, 2017.

⁵³⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2018*, p. 114.

⁵⁴⁰ Jeremy Page, 'China Prepares for a Crisis Along North Korea Border', *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2017; Jane Perlez, 'Fearing the Worst, China Plans Refugee Camps on North Korean Border', *New York Times*, December 11, 2017.

By the most recent DPRK crisis in 2017, Beijing was likely better prepared for a contingency.

Chinese Signalling

PLA deterrence signalling in Korea has gone through two general phases that align with the evolution of PRC contingency planning and growing PLA capabilities. From roughly 2003 to 2012, the PLA relied on nonpublic communication, including through academic back channels and selective media leaks, to tell others it had plans to intervene in Korea. Although it is impossible to know how seriously foreign governments (especially South Korea and the United States) took these signals, PLA capabilities were such that they were unlikely to pose a serious challenge to U.S.-ROK operations in those years. However, the combination of the 2013 DPRK nuclear crisis and Xi's forceful emphasis on PLA warfighting capabilities led the PLA to a more aggressive strategy to seriously prepare for DPRK intervention to better safeguard Chinese interests, including WMD seizure. Accordingly, PLA signalling on Korea became much more public from 2013 to 2017 with exercises and reports of increased military readiness.

Pre-2013 Signalling

Over the period 2003–2012, Chinese signalling was very limited, relying on foreign academics and foreign journalists to reveal PLA planning and accept PLA assertions of capabilities, with little overt signalling. One semipublic signal was interviews given by PLA researchers to well-known U.S. defence researchers in 2006 and 2007 about PLA planning for Korea, which eventually became public. The PLA researchers communicated that PLA missions for a Korea contingency included '(1) humanitarian missions such as assisting refugees or providing help after a natural disaster; (2) peacekeeping or "order keeping" missions such as serving as civil police; and (3) "environmental control" measures to clean up nuclear contamination resulting from a strike on North Korean nuclear facilities near the Sino-DPRK border and to secure nuclear weapons and fissile materials'.⁵⁴¹ The other main PLA signalling tool at that time was selective media leaks. In January 2012, one month after Kim Jong-il's death and amid foreign concerns over DPRK stability, a well-connected Japanese journalist in Beijing reported the existence of an internal task force on DPRK contingency planning at PLA AMS.⁵⁴² More notably, he quoted a Chinese 'military source' as saying, 'Our forces have enhanced mobility. We will be able to enter Pyongyang in a little more than two hours if necessary'.⁵⁴³ This media strategy extended into the early part of the second phase of Chinese signalling (2013–2017) as in May 2014, another Japanese

⁵⁴¹ Glaser, Snyder, and Park, 'Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor'.

⁵⁴² Kenji Minemura, 'Analysis: Chinese Military on Edge After Death of Kim Jong Il', *Asahi Shimbun*, January 23, 2012. For a secondary news report still available, see 'China Can Enter P'yang in 2 Hours in Case of Contingency', *The Dong-A Ilbo*, January 25, 2012.

⁵⁴³ Minemura, 'Analysis'.

newspaper reported another Chinese military leak that contained specific details on PLA planning for a DPRK contingency, including how to separate DPRK leaders from normal refugees should they flee over the border into China.⁵⁴⁴

In reality, both the 2012 and 2014 leaks were simply reporting the existence of quasi-public PLA academics books. The PLA report mentioned in the 2012 report was actually a book publicly funded by China's National Social Science Foundation (NSSF) in July 2006, the same month of Pyongyang's second ICBM test, and published in May 2010.⁵⁴⁵ The PLA report mentioned in the 2014 news report was actually another book published by AMS in July 2013, which was not publicly funded and technically restricted from public circulation, though it was acquired by researchers outside of China.⁵⁴⁶ Keeping an air of plausible deniability as usual, the PLA denied both reports at the time.⁵⁴⁷ The release of these selective leaks in 2012 and 2014 can be framed in an interesting context. The 2014 case for deterrence signalling is quite clear, since it came as North Korea was conducting missile tests and threatening another nuclear test.⁵⁴⁸ The 2012 case is less clear, however, since it was only a month after Kim Jong-un had died and before Kim Jong-un had signed the Leap Day Agreement. It is possible that China's intention with this leak was to deter Seoul and Washington from any considerations of taking advantage of DPRK leadership transition to topple the DPRK government.

Post-2013 Signalling

Over the period 2013–2017, after the PLA had likely already adopted a more aggressive contingency plan that included WMD seizure inside North Korea, Chinese signalling utilised more public exercises, public and private messaging of increased readiness, and high-level government statements. It also leveraged selective media leaks, but this time relied on PRC media.

During tensions in spring 2013, China reportedly undertook several deterrence signalling actions, including increasing force readiness, military exercises, and unit movements. China's purported actions were not isolated, since North Korea had already announced its missile forces were on the highest alert and the United States had conducted B-2 flights.⁵⁴⁹ Likewise, during the fall 2015 crisis, when the DPRK was suspected of planting a landmine in the

⁵⁴⁴ Julian Ryall, 'China Plans for North Korean Regime Collapse Leaked', *The Telegraph*, May 5, 2014; McCurry and Branigan, 'China Denies Making Preparations'.

⁵⁴⁵ China NSSF grant number is 06BGJ010. Li Xiaodong, *Study of Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula*. For 2006 DPRK missile test, see 'U.S. Officials: North Korea Tests Long-Range Missile', CNN, July 5, 2006.

⁵⁴⁶ Qiao Zhongwei, Wang Jiasheng, and Zou Hao, *Border Crises Emergency Response and Control*.

⁵⁴⁷ Jende Huang, 'Can't Stop, Won't Stop—Recent Activity on the Sino-DPRK Border (Part 2)', SinoNK, February 21, 2012; McCurry and Branigan, 'China Denies Making Preparations'.

⁵⁴⁸ 'China Will Not Allow War or Instability on Korean Peninsula', Xinhua, March 8, 2014.

⁵⁴⁹ 'N. Korean Leader Visits the Front', Associated Press, March 11, 2013.

demilitarised zone that killed two ROK soldiers, reports emerged through Chinese social media that a PLA mechanised unit (with tanks) was mobilising through a Chinese town on the DPRK border, though this was denied.⁵⁵⁰ Of note, while the exercises were generally publicised by China and the troop movements were apparently not censored on Chinese social media, the increased readiness appears to have not been directly released by China. Instead, it was reported by foreign press, perhaps via foreign governments, which could mean it was intended as a private government-to-government signal. Moreover, all of these actions could potentially be ‘dual-use’, as they both actually improved Chinese preparations for a Korea contingency and served as a deterrence signal.

In 2017, the PLA conducted even more visible exercises, and a more transparent discussion of PLA planning.⁵⁵¹ PLA commentators published several articles explaining what China would do in the event of a DPRK contingency, with explicit details aligning to assumed planning, a break from past generalities when addressing potential PRC responses.⁵⁵² As DoD summarised, ‘China’s rhetoric towards North Korea also became more strident [in 2017], including suggestions that the PLA could respond to a crisis on the Korean Peninsula’.⁵⁵³ Moreover, PLA exercises were also more publicised and amplified by PRC media, with several PLAAF and PLAN exercises coming in the fall as tensions heated up catching the attention of foreign press.⁵⁵⁴ Yet not all exercises—even those covered in the Chinese media—were true, as U.S. officials dispelled rumours of a large-scale exercise in early 2017.⁵⁵⁵ U.S. officials also reported, though Beijing denied, that the PLA had temporarily put its bombers ‘on high alert’ as part of preparations for Korea.⁵⁵⁶

There were also likely some nonpublic signals, based on titbits of public reporting. For example, for a successful intervention, the PLA will likely need to be able to erect temporary

⁵⁵⁰ J. H. Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’, NK News, August 24, 2015; Ben Blanchard, ‘China Denies Rushing Forces to Border During Korean Tensions’, Reuters, August 27, 2015.

⁵⁵¹ This began in 2016: Wang Haiyun, ‘China Must Prevent the Outbreak of Any Chaos or War on the Nation’s Doorstep’, *Global Times*, February 16, 2016; English translation from Adam Cathcart, ‘Wang Haiyun and China’s North Korean Contingency Scenarios’, SinoNK, February 23, 2016.

⁵⁵² For example, see Wang Haiyun, ‘Facing the Peninsula Situation, We Must Prepare for War While Opposing War’, *Global Times*, March 21, 2017; Wang Haiyun, ‘The Risks of an Outbreak of a North Korean Nuclear War and China’s Response’, Charhar Institute, May 3, 2017.

⁵⁵³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress, 2018*, p. 114.

⁵⁵⁴ Kristin Huang, ‘Chinese Navy Keeps Firm Focus on Northern Shores as North Korean Tensions Rise’, *South China Morning Post*, September 7, 2017; Kinling Lo, ‘China “Shoots Down Incoming Missiles” During Exercise over Waters Close to North Korea’, *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2017; Minnie Chan, ‘Chinese Air Force Holds Drills in “New Routes and Areas” Near Korean Peninsula’, *South China Morning Post*, December 4, 2017.

⁵⁵⁵ Robert Windrem, ‘Are Chinese Troops Massing at the North Korean Border?’, NBC News, April 12, 2017; Adam Cathcart, ‘Tigers in the Haze: Chinese Troops on the Border with North Korea in the “April Crisis”’, *China Brief*, October 20, 2017.

⁵⁵⁶ Ryan Browne and Elise Labott, ‘US Official: With Eye on North Korea, China Puts Bombers on “High Alert”’, CNN, April 20, 2017.

bridges across the Yalu River, which forms the border between North Korea and China. As *NK News* summarised one ROK researcher in 2015, ‘China’s PLA has repeatedly trained for crossing the Yalu River many times before, meaning that the Chinese Army would not find it hard to cross the river into North Korea should such an action become necessary’.⁵⁵⁷ This training is rarely publicised in a high-profile way, but it does exist, as evident in regional PLA newspaper coverage of bridging as a part of major exercises.⁵⁵⁸ Yet the fact that this specific training component has been generally subdued in national media suggests the PLA assumes other governments are watching carefully enough. One exception was in 2017, when it was featured as part of relevant PLA training on national TV, likely suggesting Beijing’s desire to signal increased preparations.⁵⁵⁹ The challenge for the nongovernment analyst is identifying and understanding what is often intended as government-to-government signalling, and only rarely highlighted publicly.

One good example of PRC media amplifying a routine training event for dual-use deterrence signalling is the ‘Iron Flow-134’ exercise in December 2013, after Jang Song-taek was purged and there was again concern about DPRK stability. ‘Iron Flow-134’ focussed on improving the 39th Group Army’s ability to fight in cold weather, crisis response capability, and ‘border area offensive operations’.⁵⁶⁰ This would appear clearly targeted at a Korea scenario. Around the same time, foreign media reported a now-familiar series of PLA actions, including a quick-reaction exercise (likely ‘Iron Flow-134’), increased border security, and moving the PAP to ‘emergency duty status’.⁵⁶¹ However, ‘Iron Flow-134’ began only one day after ROK media reported Jang Song-taek’s fall.⁵⁶² This means that either the exercise with reportedly 3,000 troops was organised very quickly, China had early knowledge of Jang’s fall, or the exercise was preplanned and simply the media coverage was adapted to focus on Korea. The most likely explanation is that this was a preplanned exercise that was amplified by PRC media. Our interpretation is that this was intended as a private government-to-government signal to the DPRK for several reasons. First, because the PLA’s regional coverage of the exercise included references to wars fought by previous allies in the cold (China–Soviet Union over Zhenbao Island in 1969, Germany–Soviet Union in World War II), and more explicitly, the references to the border operations were all dropped from the much

⁵⁵⁷ Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’.

⁵⁵⁸ ‘China Conducts River-Crossing Drill at N. Korean Border’, *Chosun Ilbo*, June 14, 2012. For an example of regional PLA reporting, see Lin Tao et al., ‘Eyewitness to Military Region’s Live-Forces Exercise’, pp. 1, 3.

⁵⁵⁹ ‘Military Report’, CCTV, September 1, 2017.

⁵⁶⁰ Xiang Yong, Wang Renfei, and Zhang Xuhang, ‘Curtain Opens on Live-Forces Winter Exercise “Iron Flow-134”, Military Region’s First Training Base Test in Recent Years of Unit Winter Combat Operations Capabilities’, *Qianjin Bao*, December 5, 2013, p. 1; Wang Dawei, Shi Jingde, Xian Dai, and Tan Changjun, ‘Break Through Ice and Snow to Drill Troops on Horqin’, *PLA Daily*, January 1, 2014, p. 4.

⁵⁶¹ John G. Grisafi, ‘China Ups Security, Conducts Military Training Near N. Korea’, *NK News*, December 12, 2013.

⁵⁶² ‘North Korean Leader’s Uncle Likely Removed from Power: Spy Agency’, Yonhap News Agency, December 3, 2013.

more staid coverage by national PRC media.⁵⁶³ Also, other ‘Iron Flow’ exercises in later years did not have any of these features and do not appear focussed on Korea.

These actions were occasionally combined with high-profile leadership statements. During the spring 2013 tensions, for example, the PRC Vice Foreign Minister, Zhang Yesui, said, ‘We don’t want to see any warfare or chaos on the Peninsula. We oppose any side making provocative statement or doing anything that undermines peace and stability on the Peninsula and in the region’.⁵⁶⁴ In 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, ‘The Korean peninsula is right on China’s doorstep. We have a red line, that is, we will not allow war or instability on the Korean peninsula’.⁵⁶⁵ Similarly, in autumn 2015, the PRC Foreign Ministry spokesperson said, ‘As a close neighbor to the Korean Peninsula . . . China staunchly safeguards regional peace and stability and opposes any action that may escalate tension. We urge relevant parties to remain calm and restrained’.⁵⁶⁶ And in 2017, Wang Yi said, ‘No one would win and multiple parties will lose if there was a war on the Korean Peninsula’.⁵⁶⁷ These all communicated China’s stance on the issue, with extra seriousness delivered by Wang Yi.

Chinese Explanation

Historically, Chinese analysts have been generally more restrained in explaining Chinese signalling around Korea crises, letting its actions speak for themselves. This could be for several reasons. First, it could reflect a Chinese belief that the intended audiences—the United States, South Korea, and North Korea—will be paying sufficiently close attention to its signalling that it does not need to be explained so bluntly in public, and that there is less desire to use the deterrence actions as another form of psychological warfare to shape adversary public opinion (as in the case of Taiwan). Second, it could be due to the fact that the Party generally avoids discussions of its support (or tolerance) for North Korea, and it may be embarrassing that the risk of radioactive contamination affecting Chinese citizens comes from China’s only ally. Third and relatedly, Korea-related signalling is less likely to serve as a way for the Party to bolster nationalism or make the Party look strong in front of a domestic audience, again reducing the value of explaining these signals publicly.

⁵⁶³ For troubled alliance themes, see Liu Yi, Wang Renfei, and Zhang Xuhang, ‘Are We Capable of Fighting in Winter?’ [‘冬季作战，我们行吗?’], *Qianjin Bao*, January 7, 2014, p. 2. For divergent terminology, see Xiang Yong, Wang Renfei, and Zhang Xuhang, ‘Curtain Opens on Live-Forces Winter Exercise’, p. 1; Wang Dawei et al., ‘Break Through Ice and Snow to Drill Troops on Horqin’, p. 4.

⁵⁶⁴ ‘Zhang Yesui: China Stays Committed to Maintaining Peace and Stability and Achieving Denuclearization on Korean Peninsula’, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Sweden, April 3, 2013.

⁵⁶⁵ ‘China Will Not Allow War or Instability on Korean Peninsula’, Xinhua, March 8, 2014.

⁵⁶⁶ ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on the Situation of the Korean Peninsula’, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 21, 2015.

⁵⁶⁷ Huang Tianchen, ‘Wang Yi: No One Wins if War Breaks Out on Korean Peninsula’, CGTN Live, April 14, 2017.

However, the PLA unsurprisingly does understand the importance of crisis signalling in the Korea context. According to the 2010 AMS book on Korea crisis management, one of the ‘fundamental principles’ is to have clear signalling, and explains:

During a crisis, the amount of information increases sharply, with a large amount exaggerated, distorted or even disinformation mixed in, and sometimes it will even overwhelm the information processing capacity of the parties in the crisis. At this time, in order to reduce the mutual suspicion between the parties in the crisis and avoid misjudgement by both parties, the main parties must send the other party as clear a signal as possible, and make the other party’s decisionmakers correctly understand the exact meaning of the signal. This is especially the case when it involves military operations, as it is even more important to avoid armed conflicts due to misunderstandings and misjudgements. Of course, the principle of signal clarity is not absolute or static. Sometimes the parties involved in a crisis will deliberately send a vague signal to the opponent to test the opponent's bottom line or achieve other strategic intentions, but this usually happens at the tactical level rather than the strategic level. For crisis managers, clear signals at the strategic level are crucial.⁵⁶⁸

Some Chinese analysts, nevertheless, did explain the dual-use nature of the 2017 exercises. As Chinese analyst Ni Lexiong explained, Beijing ‘is now under growing threat from the Korean peninsula, so the Chinese navy must demonstrate and improve its defence and combat abilities’, but added, ‘The exercises are also messages to the United States that Beijing does not want to see a war near China’s coast’.⁵⁶⁹ Another Chinese analyst, Zhou Chenming, disagreed that the exercises were dual-use and instead argued they were simply training: ‘Some exercises were set to train personnel rather than send a specific message to other countries, and many factors, such as tides and maritime conditions, were considered before deciding on a final location’.⁵⁷⁰ In response to a separate PLA exercise, yet another Chinese analyst, Li Jie, explained, ‘This shows China is prepared and able to stop any power that threatens stability in the region. . . . China can only rely on [conducting] more drills to raise its military capability amid an unstable situation’.⁵⁷¹ Zhou Chenming added again, ‘This drill . . . shows that Chinese weapons are ready for use in war’.⁵⁷² After the PLAAF announced it had flown ‘new routes’ in December 2017 as tensions were even higher, Li Jie explained that ‘the timing of this high-profile announcement by the PLA is also a warning to Washington and Seoul not to provoke Pyongyang any further’.⁵⁷³ While not all of these analysts are explicitly PLA-affiliated, they routinely provide commentary to PRC and regional media on sensitive Chinese military issues, suggesting they are trusted to accurately

⁵⁶⁸ Li Xiaodong, *Study of Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula*, p. 101.

⁵⁶⁹ Huang, ‘Chinese Navy Keeps Firm Focus on Northern Shores’.

⁵⁷⁰ Huang, ‘Chinese Navy Keeps Firm Focus on Northern Shores’.

⁵⁷¹ Kinling Lo, ‘China “Shoots down Incoming Missiles”’.

⁵⁷² Kinling Lo, ‘China “Shoots down Incoming Missiles”’.

⁵⁷³ Chan, ‘Chinese Air Force Holds Drills in “New Routes and Areas”’.

communicate PRC talking points within acceptable bounds.⁵⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the PRC MND generally denied, at least officially, that any of these exercises were targeted at the DPRK.⁵⁷⁵

International Interpretation

The troop movements over the years have been generally understood to be dual-use signals, both hedging against the potential outbreak of conflict by mobilising forces and seeking to forestall such a turn of events by signalling Chinese capability and intent. For the signalling component, a U.S. analyst explained, ‘China’s enhanced military posture is meant to convey one simple message: If war breaks out on the peninsula, it won’t be Donald Trump or Kim Jong Un shaping the terms of the conflict, but Beijing’.⁵⁷⁶

South Korean analysts and officials watch for these signals too. An ROK researcher commented on the 2015 reports by saying these were a relatively common PRC reaction to concerns about the DPRK: ‘During the bombardment of Yeonpyeong in 2010 and after the purge of Jang Song Thaek in 2013, Chinese units were quickly sent to the area to prevent any unexpected surprises from the China-North Korea border’, and that their purpose is ‘to quickly resolve the inflamed situation by marching in North Korea, if necessary’.⁵⁷⁷ Yet, he added, ‘China’s message is simple: Their units are focused on quickly invading North Korea as fast as they can, suppressing all opponents with the maximum fire power that Chinese mechanized units can provide’.⁵⁷⁸ A former ROK official similarly said, ‘This is no joke, China is sending a very simple message to North Korea. . . . These movements are certainly not just for enhancing the border defenses between China and North Korea. . . . China’s message is strong and simple: “Yes, we can stop you, if necessary”’.⁵⁷⁹ The former ROK official added that, in his opinion, the use of the PLA Army near the DPRK border meant the signal was solely for North Korea, since ‘if China really wanted to send a message against South Korea and the U.S., they would have used the navy or air force as weapon of choice, as none of the countries mentioned above share a land border with China’.⁵⁸⁰

The selective leaks also were noticed by some analysts for their specific timing. *The Telegraph* summarised one Japanese scholar’s analysis of 2014 leak, saying, ‘The timing of the leak of the study is significant, given that China can have been expected to have similar

⁵⁷⁴ Beauchamp-Mustafaga, *Deciphering PLA Media Commentaries on North Korea*.

⁵⁷⁵ Zhang Tao, ‘China’s Drills Not Aimed at Pressuring N. Korea’, *Global Times*, November 30, 2017.

⁵⁷⁶ Adam Mount, ‘How China Sees North Korea’, *The Atlantic*, August 29, 2017.

⁵⁷⁷ Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’.

⁵⁷⁸ Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’.

⁵⁷⁹ Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’.

⁵⁸⁰ Ahn, ‘Significant Military Movements Spotted Near China–N. Korea Border’.

contingency plans in place for the past two decades that North Korea has been teetering on the edge of implosion'.⁵⁸¹

Foreign observers have also misinterpreted PLA activities during DPRK crises. In January 2014, ROK media reported that 'nearly 100,000 Chinese soldiers and thousands of vehicles from the 16th and 39th Army Groups of the Shenyang Military Region have been mobilised for a winter exercise near the North Korean border to prepare for a potential crisis over the Korean peninsula'.⁵⁸² However, as PLA analyst Dennis Blasko explains, despite the large size of the exercise, its location, and timing, in reality, the exercise was very unlikely to be a signal. Instead, it was a 'direct result of a decision in 2013 to move the PLA's conscription/recruitment dates forward by several months, with major consequences for the annual training schedule', and thus, 'had nothing to do with Korea or any other external situation'.⁵⁸³ Blasko concludes by noting that 'foreign audiences that understand what is routine and what is not will better interpret the messages the Chinese propaganda machine may or may not be sending'.⁵⁸⁴

Key Takeaways

This case study once again illustrates how China's approach to signalling has changed as its interests and capabilities have evolved. China's transition from leveraging selective leaks, when it was weaker, contrasts sharply with higher-profile exercises as the PLA became more capable to execute more ambitious missions. One constant, however, is that generally PRC signalling for Korea was not targeted at adversary publics (DPRK, ROK, or the United States), just adversary decisionmakers. Although the PRC's understanding of foreign media at a strategic level is often poor—mirror imaging it as an extension of national governments instead of treating it as an independent actor in democratic countries—Beijing has at times demonstrated reasonable deftness with foreign media. Less successful, however, have been Beijing's apparent attempts to differentiate signals between those targeted at North Korea and those targeted at the United States and South Korea. There is likely some indication within these DPRK crises for how China might handle other third-party conflicts on its periphery, such as India-Pakistan or Vietnam-Indonesia. For Australia, this case study again demonstrates that the PRC is able, at least at certain times, to leverage foreign media quite well to serve as a communication channel for deterrence signalling.

Table 5.4 summarises how the analytical framework applies to our assessment of China's use of military signalling related to North Korea.

⁵⁸¹ Ryall, 'China Plans for North Korean Regime Collapse Leaked'.

⁵⁸² Dennis J. Blasko, 'PLA Winter Exercises—Training Not Mobilization', *Jane's Defense Weekly*, March 28, 2014.

⁵⁸³ Blasko, 'PLA Winter Exercises'.

⁵⁸⁴ Blasko, 'PLA Winter Exercises'.

Table 5.4. Applying the Framework to Chinese Messaging Related to North Korea

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Deterrence of U.S.-ROK operations against DPRK	Selective media leaks	United States, allies, and partners	Party, government, military, and unofficial sources	Widely disseminated
(may also apply to deterrence of DPRK against provocations)	Military exercises Increased readiness High-level statements	Likely also DPRK leadership		

Common Themes and Lessons for Australia

Taken together, what do we learn about contemporary Chinese deterrence signalling from the peacetime and crisis case studies? What are the key differences among the various case studies? What differences do the more recent case studies illustrate compared to how China approached deterrence signalling in the past? Is the modern signalling clear or confusing? What lessons can international audiences learn?

Although Beijing has no single publicly known playbook for deterrence signalling and approaches each episode differently, it is possible through a careful review of these case studies to identify some patterns. First, Beijing is indeed using much of its newest and most high-profile hardware for signalling, evident in unveiling new missiles during military parades, bomber flights over disputed territories in Asia, and carrier deployments around Taiwan, even if it calibrates the public messaging to be less provocative in some instances. Second, Beijing's employment of tailored deterrence—sending different signals to different audiences—is being enabled by China's growing swath of its own global communication channels and its use of foreign platforms, especially social media. Third, Beijing can exercise restraint in signalling when the stakes are slightly lower and domestic political events take precedence, such as the Doklam standoff with India in 2017. Fourth, Taiwan is the clear focus of Chinese deterrence signalling, illustrating the panoply of potential deterrence actions Beijing can undertake and how these military actions can nest within the Party-state's broader whole-of-government approach. However, our understanding of Chinese signalling is inevitably incomplete, both because Beijing has not demonstrated its high-water mark of signalling in a full-blown crisis since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–1996, and because we lack insight based on public reporting into how Beijing has employed the space and cyber domains in recent crises.

For Australia, none of these crisis case studies provides a perfect facsimile of how China is likely to tailor military deterrence signalling towards Canberra if a crisis arises. Yet certain key themes are likely to apply: the use of PRC and foreign media to amplify deterrence actions as signals, dual-use military exercises both to actually prepare for war and to signal the same, among others. In the concluding chapter, we explore the implications for Australia and posit how the PRC might signal to Australia in a future crisis.

6. Implications for Australia

Australia's evolving role in the Indo-Pacific region means that it too will likely over time be the focus of more Chinese deterrence signalling. Looking to the future, Australia should expect that China will not only employ economic coercion and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy to send messages, but perhaps military signalling as well. The changing nature of Australia-China relations, along with more frequent unplanned military interactions, increases the risk of a military crisis or unintended incident between Beijing and Canberra. Australia could also become involved in a crisis that results from a U.S.-China showdown over maritime disputes, Taiwan, or the Korean Peninsula. This makes it imperative for Australian officials and analysts to understand Chinese deterrence signalling. After discussing the changing nature of the relationship and cause for greater attention to the growing risk of military tensions, we hypothesise several potential ways China may in the future conduct military deterrence signalling targeted at Australia. We conclude by offering three policy recommendations for Australia and its ally, the United States, as well as its regional partners.

Changing Australia-China Relationship

As China expands its objectives and national interests across many regions of the globe, increasing its economic power, diplomatic influence, and growing its military capabilities, this is impacting the bilateral relationship and Australia's security. Sources of friction in the Australia-China relationship have been increasingly evident in recent years, and the rapid deterioration of bilateral relations in 2020, combined with a growing number of friction points in the security domain, means the Australia-China relationship is likely on a new and potentially more confrontational course now.

Worsening Australia-China Relations

Australian concerns regarding China have been increasing for a number of years, owing to concerns about China's expanding regional ambitions, Chinese interference in Australian politics, Chinese economic coercion, and growing Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands, potentially including Chinese intent to establish a naval base in the area, which would represent a clear challenge to Australian security interests. As these examples illustrate, Australia-China relations were already become increasingly tense over a number of issues over the past several years, but these trends have accelerated more recently, with the events of 2020 appearing to reflect a turning point in bilateral ties. Indeed, China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its increasingly coercive behaviour have further worsened the relationship.⁵⁸⁵ Following

⁵⁸⁵ Andrew Probyn, 'Scott Morrison Lobbies Donald Trump, Others for Greater World Health Oversight to Prevent Another Pandemic', ABC News (Australia), April 22, 2020; Kristy Needham, 'Australia Welcomes Growing Support for COVID-19 Inquiry at WHO Meeting', Reuters, May 18, 2020; Kristy Needham, 'Australia Rejects Chinese "Economic Coercion" Threat amid Planned Coronavirus Probe', Reuters, April 27, 2020.

through on this threat, China over the rest of 2020 gradually enacted a de facto ban on several key Australian agricultural exports to China, including barley, beef, and wine, even at a cost to China of over AUD\$3.6 million.⁵⁸⁶ The MFA consistently reiterated the responsibility was on Canberra to resolve the problem, saying in November 2020, ‘We hope Australia can do more things conducive to mutual trust, bilateral cooperation and the spirit of China-Australia comprehensive strategic partnership, and bring the bilateral relations back to the right track as early as possible’.⁵⁸⁷ This turn of events has likely fundamentally changed the bilateral relationship and is a powerful example of China’s nonmilitary toolkit.

Increasing Points of Friction

This has come as Canberra has taken a tougher stance on Chinese activities in the region. While Australia has generally aligned itself with the U.S. position on China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea, previously it had been disinclined to formally declare Beijing’s territorial claims illegal. This changed in July 2020, when the Australian government, following a similar U.S. Department of State move earlier that month, adopted a more decisive position declaring ‘the Australian Government rejects any claims by China that are inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in particular, maritime claims that do not adhere to its rules on baselines, maritime zones and classification of features’.⁵⁸⁸ China reacted by arguing that ‘Australia’s wrongful acts of ignoring the basic facts on the South China Sea issues and denying China’s land territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea have violated international law and basic principles of international relations, including the Charter of the United Nations’.⁵⁸⁹

Australia’s More Active Regional Role Means More Divergence with China

While China remains, by far, Australia’s largest trading partner, its activities in the Indo-Pacific have undermined the Australia-China narrative of mutual growth and prosperity. From the Australian perspective, the economic and societal dimension that has long supported its

⁵⁸⁶ Dan Conifer, ‘China Imposes 80pc Tariff on Australian Barley for Next Five Years amid Global Push for Coronavirus Investigation’, ABC News (Australia), May 18, 2020; Bill Birtles, Kath Sullivan, and Stephen Dziedzic, ‘Australian Wine Imports “Suspended” by China as Trade Tensions with Beijing Continue’, ABC News (Australia), November 3, 2020; Andrew Tillet, ‘Barley Backfire: Tariffs to Cost China \$3.6b, Birmingham Reveals’, *Australian Financial Review*, June 17, 2020.

⁵⁸⁷ ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on November 2, 2020’, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 2, 2020; Kearsley, Bagshaw, and Galloway, ‘If You Make China the Enemy, China Will Be the Enemy’.

⁵⁸⁸ Andrew Greene, ‘Australian Government Declares Beijing’s South China Sea Claims Illegal in Letter to United Nations’, ABC News (Australia), July 25, 2020.

⁵⁸⁹ Drake Long, ‘China Hits Back at Australia over South China Sea Statement’, Radio Free Asia, July 30, 2020.

relations have not been accompanied by adequate ‘strategic trust’.⁵⁹⁰ China’s use of ‘grey zone’ intimidation, geoeconomic leverage and coercion, political interference and disinformation campaigns, the escalation of territorial disputes and militarisation of disputed features in the South China Sea, and the acceleration of its nuclear modernisation have disrupted the stability of the regional order—in material, physical, and values-based terms.⁵⁹¹ As Prime Minister Scott Morrison remarked in a July 2020 speech, ‘The Indo-Pacific is where we live and we want an open, sovereign Indo-Pacific, free from coercion and hegemony’.⁵⁹²

Changing Australian Threat Perception of China

China’s active pursuit of greater influence in the Indo-Pacific has caused disquiet among Australian policymakers, Defence officials, and the Australian public. Australian Defence Minister Linda Reynolds stated in March 2020, ‘[W]e welcome them as a responsible regional partner but where behaviours are not consistent with the standards we expect of ourselves and expect of other regional nations, in terms of sovereign respect and adherence to rules-based order, then we are calling that behaviour out’.⁵⁹³ Reynolds emphasised, for China, ‘influence becomes interference. Economic co-operation becomes coercion. Investment becomes entrapment. All of these pressures are contributing to uncertainty and tension, raising the risk of military confrontation and compromising free and open trade. Australia must be prepared for all of these strategic challenges’. These concerns have been confirmed by Chinese activities with a direct domestic impact—cyberattacks and foreign political interference, among others.

This has led to broader criticism of Chinese behaviour. As the July 2020 Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) statement said, the ‘sweeping and vague “national security” legislation imposed on Hong Kong’, has been construed as a means to undermine ‘the rights, freedoms and futures of millions of people’, and there is ‘deep concern over the PRC’s campaign of repression of Uyghurs and members of other minority groups in Xinjiang, including mass detentions, forced labour, pervasive surveillance, restrictions on freedom of religion, and reports of forced abortions and involuntary birth control’.⁵⁹⁴

This has been echoed by Australian analysts and the general public. Malcolm Davis, of ASPI, argues that China is clearly ‘exploiting both soft-power inducements and hard-power threats to reassert itself as a new middle kingdom, and overturning what it sees to be a

⁵⁹⁰ Rory Medcalf, ‘Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance’, *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July 2019, p. 112.

⁵⁹¹ Ashley Townshend, David Santoro, and Brendan Thomas-Noone, ‘Revisiting Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Competition: Outcomes Report from the Inaugural US-Australia Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue’, United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney and Pacific Forum, February 2019, p. 2.

⁵⁹² Jamie Seidel, ‘Defence Australia: Why Buying Long-Range Missiles Changes Everything’, *News.com.au*, July 2, 2020.

⁵⁹³ As quoted in Marcus Megalokonomos, “‘The Future Is Now’: Why Chinese Influence in the Indo-Pacific Is Pushing Australia to Boost Its Military”, *SBS News (Australia)*, July 3, 2020.

⁵⁹⁴ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘Joint Statement Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020’.

century of humiliation. Part of the “China Dream” is ensuring that its periphery is secure through a belt of vassal states that accede to Beijing’s interests’.⁵⁹⁵ China’s recent behaviour has caused profound changes in the region that affect Australian interests and security. Rory Medcalf, head of the National Security College at the Australian National University, highlights, ‘awareness of China as a source of risk has become a whole-of-government attribute, crossing the spectrum from defence to development assistance to domestic policy such as communications and national infrastructure’.⁵⁹⁶ A recent poll on *Understanding Australian Attitudes to the World* found that in the past two years, there has been a rapid decline in Chinese credibility, with 23 per cent of respondents saying that they believe China will ‘act responsibly in the world’.⁵⁹⁷

Changing Australian Policy Towards China

China’s bellicosity across domains has been the key reason for the recalibration of Australia’s defensive posture. Then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull set the foundations for Australia’s strategy in his June 2017 speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue, saying that ‘a coercive China would find its neighbours resenting demands they cede their autonomy and strategic space, and look to counterweight Beijing’s power by bolstering alliances and partnerships’.⁵⁹⁸ The Pacific Step-Up policy, first announced in 2016, is one of Australia’s topmost foreign policy priorities, highlighted in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper⁵⁹⁹ and the 2016 Defence White Paper,⁶⁰⁰ as being of vital importance to Australia.⁶⁰¹ Indeed, Australia was a very early proponent of the use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in the discourse for the reason that it renews ‘the region’s enduring maritime and multipolar character’, and serves contemporary national security interests, specifically in relation to China. As Australia sees it, the Indo-Pacific ‘does not exclude or contain China, though it does dilute China’s influence. Moreover, the region’s scale, ambiguity or “duality”, and apparent diversity of national approaches are advantages rather than liabilities. They can improve the durability

⁵⁹⁵ Malcolm Davis, ‘Going Forward to Manus’, *The Strategist*, September 21, 2018, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

⁵⁹⁶ Rory Medcalf, ‘Australia and China: Understanding the Reality Check’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, 2019, p. 111.

⁵⁹⁷ This is a 29-point fall since 2018. According to polling, only 22 per cent of Australians have some or a lot of confidence in China’s President Xi Jinping to do the right thing in world affairs (see page 8). And feelings towards China on a scale of 0° to 100° have fallen sharply in 2020, to 39°. This represents a drop of 10° in a single year, and the lowest score that China has received in the history of the Poll. See Natasha Kassam, ‘Lowy Institute Poll 2020’, June 24, 2020.

⁵⁹⁸ Malcolm Turnbull, ‘Keynote Address 16th IISS Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue’, speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue via Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Singapore, June 2, 2017.

⁵⁹⁹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2017.

⁶⁰⁰ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2016.

⁶⁰¹ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘Stepping-Up Australia’s Engagement with Our Pacific Family’, September 2019.

and effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific in framing strategies to cope with Chinese power'.⁶⁰² Australia has become 'an outspoken and independent power in the Indo-Pacific, whose criticism and solidarity-building resistance to Chinese power is noted and potentially followed by others'.⁶⁰³ How Australia navigates increasing friction with China, both its own, and that of interlocutors in the region, will be key to its strategic trajectory.

The recent *Strategic Update 2020*⁶⁰⁴ and the associated *Force Structure Plan*⁶⁰⁵ communicate a pivot in 'Australia's strategic posture from a largely defensive force primed for coalition operations to a conventional deterrence role, with an elevated focus on lethality and Australian-led military operations within the country's immediate environment'.⁶⁰⁶ Apart from speaking to a greater level of engagement in the region and earmarking substantial resources to augment capability, the *Strategic Update* specifies Australia's deterrence strategy, specifically against Chinese activities in the near region. Although infrequently mentioned in the document itself, 'China looms front and centre in this gloomy assessment'.⁶⁰⁷ Explicit acknowledgement of the dangers posed by the expansion of 'military and nonmilitary forms of assertiveness and coercion' in the Indo-Pacific, ranging from 'militarisation of the South China Sea to active interference, disinformation campaigns and economic coercion', and the need to 'be better prepared to respond to these activities, including by working more closely with other elements of Australia's national power', leaves no doubt as to the country of concern.⁶⁰⁸

The *Strategic Update* demonstrates this new threat perception and the resultant strategic positioning. The documents signal an important change in the strategic orientation of the nation to the pursuit of the 'self-reliant ability to deliver deterrent effects'.⁶⁰⁹ Australia is seeking to operationalise deterrence in the Indo-Pacific to disincentivise increased Chinese activities and expansion in the region in a way that both recognises and exploits the power asymmetry that defines the relationship, and orients it to Australia's advantage. Acknowledging Australia's 'limited resource base', the intention is to improve the nation's 'ability to deliver these effects without seeking to match the capability of major powers'. This means 'developing capabilities to hold adversary forces and infrastructure at risk further from Australia, such as longer-range strike weapons, cyber capabilities and area denial systems'.⁶¹⁰

⁶⁰² Medcalf, 'Indo-Pacific Visions', p. 80.

⁶⁰³ Medcalf, 'Australia and China', p. 110.

⁶⁰⁴ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020.

⁶⁰⁵ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Force Structure Plan*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2020.

⁶⁰⁶ Euan Graham, 'Australia's Serious Strategic Update', International Institute for Strategic Studies, July 3, 2020.

⁶⁰⁷ Graham, 'Australia's Serious Strategic Update'.

⁶⁰⁸ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, p. 5.

⁶⁰⁹ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, p. 27.

⁶¹⁰ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, p. 27.

While the showpiece is an AUD\$800 million commitment for the AGM-158C Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM), which can be fired from the land or from the air, and has a range greater than 370 km, the deterrence remit of the *Strategic Update* is much broader. The capabilities announced are intended to ‘deliver deterrent effects against a broad range of threats, including preventing coercive or grey-zone activities from escalating to conventional conflict’ and the increased presence of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) in the region acts as a means to ‘prevent actions that undermine regional resilience and sovereignty’.⁶¹¹ The growing influence of China in the region compels the nation towards ‘a defensive approach . . . which is unthreatening to others, but which can hurt them if they get too close’. While high-intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific is relatively improbable, it is less remote than it once was. The ADF ‘must be better prepared for such conflict if deterrence measures fail, or to support the United States and other partners where Australia’s national interests are engaged’.⁶¹² These documents communicate Australia’s commitment to augmenting its defensive and strategic capability in the region to a domestic and international audience. They also send a more direct message to China that Australia’s military profile within the Indo-Pacific has shifted.

The release of the *Strategic Update* prompted a new round of reprimand from Chinese state media outlets. An article in *Global Times*, titled ‘China “Prepared Against Military Provocation from Australia”’, declared that Australia’s ‘weapon procurement plans have been widely interpreted as being “aimed at China”, and Chinese experts said . . . that while the Chinese military has no intention of provoking Australia, it is also not afraid of Australian provocations’. While asserting that ‘China has no intention of challenging Australia militarily’ the article warned that ‘if Australia wants to provoke China, China is also ready to defend itself. Australia is only a follower of the US and its capability in the South China Sea will be limited despite the new plans’. Moreover, ‘Li said that China may develop defense systems among other measures to deal with potential Australia-US collaboration against it, and China can also take countermeasures in terms of politics, diplomacy and economic measures’.⁶¹³

Australia Moving Towards Centre of Strategic Competition with Closer U.S. Ties

As Australia increasingly interprets China’s influence in the region as malign, and more overtly resists its expanding presence, it has moved from the periphery to the centre of the U.S.-China strategic competition. The *Strategic Update* and *Force Structure Plan* are not just a message to China, however. They demonstrate the changing nature of the Australia-U.S. alliance. Historian James Curran of Sydney University has suggested that the phrase ‘Who

⁶¹¹ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, pp. 28–29.

⁶¹² Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, p. 29.

⁶¹³ Zhang Yichi and Liu Xuanzun, ‘China “Prepared Against Military Provocation from Australia”’, *Global Times*, July 2, 2020.

lost Australia?’ has started to gain traction in Washington. ‘Even if its use is not widespread’, Curran argues, ‘the phrase carries baggage worth unpacking, for it highlights a central dilemma for the U.S.-Australia relationship as it responds to China’s rise’.⁶¹⁴ While the strategic outlook of Australia and the United States are overlapping, they are not the same, and in terms of relations with China, each needs to take steps to coordinate its respective appetite for risk. Australia can, and evidently does, ‘expect Beijing to lash out more and more often. China is a rising power with expanding interests’.⁶¹⁵ Australia, then, is implementing measures that shore up its security, on its own terms, and in its own neighbourhood, as much as it continues to support the Australia-U.S. alliance. Australian analysts are also calling for Canberra to see its interests more intertwined with the rest of East Asia, including the fate of Taiwan, long a major U.S. concern.⁶¹⁶

While Defence Minister Linda Reynolds reassured in the AUSMIN statement in July 2020 that the Australia-U.S. alliance ‘spans the full spectrum of values, history, practical benefit, evolving interests, economic exchange and natural affiliation’, she also highlighted that engaging a relationship ‘with the global power that has served as an anchor of the regional rules-based order carries obligations’.⁶¹⁷ Reynolds advised that the *Strategic Update* and *Force Structure Plan* demonstrate that Australia is doing its part by implementing programs and developing capabilities that ‘significantly enhance our self-reliance’ and allow us to ‘achieve greater combined effects with US forces to deter aggression and respond with military force, when required’. As one analyst has argued, ‘Australia cannot independently deter Chinese coercion; but it can complicate Beijing’s risk calculus by supporting US deterrence efforts, building domestic and regional resilience, and fostering collective action in the Pacific and Southeast Asia’.⁶¹⁸ Yet the statement that it has become ‘essential that the ADF grow its self-reliant ability to deliver deterrent effects’ suggests there is a continuing need for Australia-U.S. dialogue on deterrence.⁶¹⁹

This shift in the Australia-U.S. relationship may well be consequential for dynamics between China and Australia. To delegitimise Australia’s actions, Chinese media has frequently claimed that Australia is the henchman of the United States when it comes to its dealings with China. A 2020 article in the *Global Times* asserted, ‘Australia is giving up the opportunity to think and act independently, but attaches itself to the US anti-China chariot

⁶¹⁴ James Curran, ‘Why America’s Relationship with Australia Revolves Around Its Geopolitical Competition with China’, *National Interest*, August 17, 2020.

⁶¹⁵ Natasha Kassam and Darren Lim, ‘Australia Can Expect China to Lash Out More Often: We Must Foster Resilience and Sangfroid’, *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020.

⁶¹⁶ Linda Jakobson, ‘Why Should Australia Be Concerned About . . . Rising Tensions in the Taiwan Strait?’, *China Matters Explores*, January–February 2021.

⁶¹⁷ Linda Reynolds, ‘Joint statement—AUSMIN 2020: Australia’s Enduring Ties with the US Are a Strong Union of Shared Values’, Australian Government, Department of Defence, July 26, 2020.

⁶¹⁸ Townshend, Santoro, and Thomas-Noone, ‘Revisiting Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Competition’, p. 2.

⁶¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, p. 27.

with alarmist rhetoric'.⁶²⁰ It continued, 'It is doing the Trump administration's bidding, leaving itself no room to strike a balance between China and the US, as what other countries do. It finds fault with China on almost all fronts where it cannot live without China, trapping itself in an embarrassing dilemma'. Rory Medcalf argues, 'Australia did not lead the international trend to reject PRC influence in order to impress the United States, or its "America First" proponents. Australia acted for its own sovereign reasons, both reflecting and protecting an independent foreign policy. If anything, the United States has taken its cue from Australia on the PRC interference question'.⁶²¹ As Australia takes a defensive posture that emphasises more overt self-reliance, a stance that is also reflected in the more straight-talking diplomatic posturing Australia has taken in relation to China's own Indo-Pacific Step-Up, the relationship is developing new contours and may well reshape deterrence parameters for China in relation to Australia.

Greater Interaction with Chinese Military

China's increasingly expeditionary military activities and Australia's more active regional role mean the two militaries are coming into more frequent contact with each other.

More Frequent Chinese Military Presence Near Australia

Located beyond the South China Sea and the First Island Chain, the Chinese military does not have a long history of operating near Australia or in its immediate region. While the PLA's first port call came in 1998 and the first bilateral military exercise came in 2004, it was only in 2014 that an uninvited PLAN combat readiness patrol transited south of Indonesia through the Sunda and Lombok Straits, passing Christmas Island.⁶²² This served as 'a bit of a wake-up call to [Australian] defense planners to contemplate that in the future they're going to have to expect the Chinese to be able to operate in considerable force in the vicinity of [Australia's] ocean territories'.⁶²³

Since then, Chinese military operations near Australia have become more frequent, though not yet normalised. The PLAN conducted an antipiracy exercise near Christmas Island in 2016 and passed by Christmas Island again in 2017 with another patrol.⁶²⁴ In 2019,

⁶²⁰ Wang Wenwen, 'Hurting Ties with China Will Have Consequences Australia Cannot Afford to Bear', *Global Times*, September 1, 2020.

⁶²¹ Medcalf, 'Australia and China', p. 111.

⁶²² Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, July 2017; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Navy Extends Its Combat Reach to the Indian Ocean*, March 14, 2014.

⁶²³ David Wroe, 'China's Military Might Is Australia's New Defence Reality', *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 15, 2014; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *China's Navy Extends Its Combat Reach*. For Australian views, see Rory Medcalf and C. Raja Mohan, 'Sea Change of China Power', *The Australian*, February 11, 2014; Henry Lawton, 'Australia Startled by Chinese Naval Excursion', *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2014.

⁶²⁴ David Wroe, 'Chinese Naval Ships Close to Australia? "Get Used to It", Experts Warn', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10, 2017.

Chinese surveillance ships got closer as they approached Australia's territorial waters to observe an Australia-U.S. bilateral exercise.⁶²⁵ In early 2020, a Chinese military research vessel surveyed parts of the Timor Sea south of Christmas Island after similar surveys north of Papua New Guinea the year before, both in areas the Australian Navy has frequently operated in.⁶²⁶ These combat patrols and surveillance close to Australia make clear Chinese interest in operating in these waters more and more in the future.

Other recent PLAN activities have also reflected a subtle show of force. In June 2019, three Chinese vessels arrived in Sydney Harbour for a 'reciprocal visit', docking at Garden Island for a four-day stopover, much to the surprise of the general public. While Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that plans for the visit had been in place for 'some time' as part the Chinese Navy task force's return trip from conducting antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, it was not publicly announced and the timing was not without interest, occurring on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.⁶²⁷ Moreover, Morrison made that assurance during a speech in the Solomon Islands, a visit intended to stave off China's influence in the Pacific. Rory Medcalf suggested that 'Sydney is hardly a convenient stopover on their way home. . . . This looks like a serious show of presence in the South Pacific', and remarked that 'Chinese naval visits to Australia have more typically been a lone frigate, not a task group with an amphibious assault ship and 700 personnel'.⁶²⁸

Greater Australian Military Engagement in the Region

Australia's more active regional role also means it has more frequent military interaction with the Chinese military in the Indo-Pacific.⁶²⁹ Australia's stepped-up role, reflected in its inclusion in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) since its founding in 2017, has led to deeper security cooperation, including military exercises, with the United States, Japan, and India. This led to Australia's participation in India's multilateral naval exercise, Exercise Malabar, in October 2020 and follows a trilateral exercise with Japan and the United States based in Guam in July and August 2020, among others.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁵ Colin Packham, 'Australia Tracks Chinese Warship Headed Toward U.S.-Australia War Games', Reuters, July 7, 2019.

⁶²⁶ Andrew Greene, 'Chinese Surveillance Near PNG Expanding as Australia and US Begin Manus Island Naval Upgrades', ABC News (Australia), April 20, 2019; Andrew Greene, 'Chinese Research Vessel Xiang Yang Hong 01 Tracked in Waters Near Christmas Island off Western Australia', ABC News (Australia), March 1, 2020.

⁶²⁷ Maani Truu, 'Three Chinese Warships Make Surprise Stopover at Sydney's Garden Island', SBS News, June 3, 2019.

⁶²⁸ Andrew Greene, 'Chinese Warships Arrive in Sydney as Beijing Warns of South China Sea Resolve', ABC News (Australia), June 2, 2019.

⁶²⁹ For a recent overview of Australia's security engagement with other Indo-Pacific nations, see Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3125, 2019, pp. 159–218.

⁶³⁰ Hunter, 'Huge Pacific Exercise Centered on Guam'; Andrew Greene, Stephen Dziedzic, and James Oaten, 'Australia to Rejoin "Quad" Naval Exercises in Move Certain to Infuriate Beijing', ABC News (Australia), October 19, 2020.

More direct engagement with the PLA, desired or not, has come in the South China Sea. The Chinese Navy has harassed Australian transits of the South China Sea in recent years, just like those of the United States, raising the possibility of a Chinese response.⁶³¹ This comes despite the fact that Australia's transits are not officially 'freedom of navigation' operations, though they may be unofficially.⁶³² If Canberra does decide to step up official protests of Chinese behaviour through military activities, a debated topic, then Beijing may adopt brinkmanship such as it has with the United States, and Australia would have to be prepared for an unexpected accident turning into a crisis.

Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling for Australia

Much of the deterrence signalling Australia has faced from China so far has been nonmilitary, with China regularly using economic threats and even punishments to try to send a message or compel Australia to bend to its will. However, it is entirely plausible, if not likely, that Australia will eventually find itself on the receiving end of military deterrence signalling from China as well. So, what might drive China to adopt military actions for deterrence signalling targeted at Australia, and what specifically would these actions intended for Canberra look like? Drawing from the analytical framework, previous case studies, and China's record of military operations near Australia, we can construct some notional examples involving Chinese naval, air, missile, and space and cyber capabilities.

It is difficult to predict the specific conditions that may lead China to adopt such military actions, but we posit several possibilities. First, Beijing may escalate to military signalling if it believes previous nonmilitary actions have proven insufficient for changing Australia's behaviour on the issue of concern, and the issue is of sufficient importance (a high bar). Second, Beijing may seek to 'respond' symmetrically to an Australian military action that Beijing interprets as impacting its national security. Third, Beijing may seek to forestall Australian support for third-country (especially U.S.) military operations against it in a regional contingency. Beijing has likely decided so far to avoid resorting to high-profile military signalling because the issues at stake currently in the Australia-China relationship are either political (origins of COVID-19) or do not directly undermine China's national security, and because the lack of territorial dispute means Beijing does not feel compelled to enforce its claims (such as with the Philippines, Japan, and India).

A PLAN deployment near Australia is a straightforward example, since China has already done this several times since 2014 with surface action groups (SAG) passing near Christmas Island. While this operational activity carried the potential to be used as a deterrence signal,

⁶³¹ Andrew Greene, 'Australian Ships Tailed by Chinese Military in South China Sea', ABC News (Australia), May 27, 2019.

⁶³² Shannon Tiezzi, 'Did Australia Secretly Conduct Its Own Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea?', *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2015; Andrew Greene and Bill Birtles, 'South China Sea: Audio Reveals RAAF Plane Issuing Warning to Chinese Navy During "Freedom of Navigation" Flight', ABC News (Australia), December 15, 2015; Stephen Dziedzic and Andrew Greene, 'US Official Urges Australia to Participate in South China Sea Freedom of Navigation Operations', ABC News (Australia), July 27, 2020.

Beijing apparently decided it did not want (or need) to actually communicate the signal by voicing it in official statements or media commentary. A future PLAN patrol with either a SAG or submarines could thus easily turn into a deterrence signal with any number of clear accompanying messages. In addition, if China established additional overseas bases in the Indo-Pacific region, this could provide China with more options for PLAN operations, including for deterrence signalling aimed at Australia. In particular, a Chinese military base in the Pacific Islands would be a game changer for Australia in this regard, as well as a sharp challenge to Australian interests more broadly.⁶³³

Another possibility would be signalling with PLA bombers. Media reports indicate that PLAAF and PLAN Aviation bomber flights occur in the South China Sea, and there is a potential for bombers to be based at China's artificial island bases in the South China Sea.⁶³⁴ In August 2020, this reportedly became a reality when a PLAN Aviation bomber deployed to Woody Island in the Paracels.⁶³⁵ So far, these PLA activities in the South China Sea do not appear to be specifically targeted at Australia for deterrence signalling, though some in Australia have interpreted them in that way.⁶³⁶ Moreover, it is worth noting that even with long-range land-attack cruise missiles (LACM) or ALBMs, currently deployed Chinese bombers would need to fly very long distances to reach targets in Australia, and would probably face issues related to overflight of other countries and other concept of operations (CONOP)-related challenges. In all, using bombers for signalling aimed at Australia seems relatively unlikely given these complications, at least in the short term. But as the PLAAF appears set to extend the range of its strike capabilities with a new strategic bomber and a reported regional stealth bomber in the future, it is not difficult to imagine bomber flights intended to demonstrate they have the range to strike Australia. Similar to how the PLAAF establishes deterrence credibility against Guam by flying to the launch basket for a strike, without actually flying near Guam, PLAAF strategic bombers could fly to the launch basket for a strike against Australia. Any bomber flight south of Indonesia would almost certainly be intended as a clear signal to Canberra. Such an action could go unnoticed in the public domain, however, unless it was publicised by China or Australia, so Beijing could decide to announce such flights on the PLAAF's social media accounts or through Party-state and affiliated media such as the *Global Times* or *South China Morning Post*.

PLA operations far from Australia—even on the Chinese mainland—could potentially serve as a deterrence signal, reflecting the PLARF's extended strike ranges. One possibility in this regard is signalling using PLARF mobile ballistic missiles with ranges sufficient to strike targets in Australia to signal the ability to hold the country at risk from the Chinese

⁶³³ Consequently, Australia would undoubtedly take a strong position in opposition to any attempts by China to pursue such military outposts in the Pacific Islands.

⁶³⁴ Wroe, 'Chinese Bomber Planes from South China Sea'.

⁶³⁵ Newdick, 'China Deployed Bombers to One of Its South China Sea Islands'.

⁶³⁶ Wroe, 'Chinese Bomber Planes from South China Sea'.

mainland.⁶³⁷ This could simply be a mobilisation exercise that is accompanied by explicit messaging by Party-state media about its range and hypothetical target. Alternatively, China could display the missiles when government or commercial satellites are passing overhead, highlight missile force activities in official media reports, or post photos or videos on websites or Chinese or international social media, perhaps accompanied by statements from military officers, diplomats, or media figures, or even ‘leaks’ to the media from anonymous sources. In the event of an escalating crisis, higher-intensity deterrence actions could involve test launches of missiles with ranges sufficient to reach Australia, which could be aimed at China’s standard inland missile impact locations. China could potentially even launch one or more missiles out into the ocean, into an area at comparable range that could reach Australia. The latter option would be more escalatory, but could be somewhat downplayed publicly if targeted away from Australia.⁶³⁸ The highest-intensity deterrence signal could be a missile launch into waters off Australia, accompanied by threatening public or private statements. Depending on the capabilities of the specific missiles involved, the strategic missile force’s messaging could involve some ambiguity about whether the intended signal is nuclear or conventional, and perhaps deliberately so.

Potentially more subtle options exist as well, such as deterrence signals in the cyber or space domains. For example, China could publicise a PLA exercise that includes cyberattack capabilities, and reveal—or at least suggest—that Australia was among the adversaries involved in the exercise scenario. China might also disclose newly developed cyberweapons and equipment through the media, reveal testing of its capabilities, or conduct a demonstration of cyberattack technology against another country, along with an accompanying public or private message that it could use its cyberweapons against Australia. In a crisis scenario where higher-intensity deterrence actions could come into play, China might even conduct limited cyberattacks against Australia, perhaps displaying an ability to strike critical infrastructure targets. China might then try to influence decisionmakers or manipulate public opinion by threatening further escalation if Australia refuses to comply with its demands.

For communication channels, Beijing in recent years has proven quite adept at leveraging both domestic Party-state and independent foreign media for its messaging through selective leaks and deniable messaging. On social media, Chinese ambassadors are adopting their ‘wolf warrior’ persona with Australian counterparts.⁶³⁹ In a future military crisis, it is easy to imagine much more aggressive public messaging by Beijing across multiple channels targeting Australian media and public opinion.

Table 6.1 summarises how the analytical framework could be applied to the types of notional Chinese deterrence actions described in this section.

⁶³⁷ Peter Layton, ‘Australia’s Chinese Ballistic Missile Problem’, *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), April 26, 2018.

⁶³⁸ In reality, the PLA would have limited appealing options for such a launch range, either having to overfly Southeast Asia or launch through the Bashi Channel and thus towards Micronesia.

⁶³⁹ Mathew Lee and Jim Gomez, ‘China, Australia Spar on Twitter over South China Sea’, *Associated Press*, August 3, 2020.

Table 6.1. Applying the Framework to Notional Deterrence Actions Aimed at Australia

Context	Content	Audience	Authoritativeness	Scope
Period of heightened tension in bilateral relationship	PLAN carrier or SAG operations	Australian political leaders and public	Party, government, military, and unofficial sources all possible	Could be narrowly or widely disseminated
	PLAAF bomber flights	Australia's allies and partners	Likely to include social media with varying levels of authoritativeness	Likely to be coordinated with diplomatic pressure, economic coercion, and various types of information operations
Regional security crisis in which China perceives Australian involvement as likely (Taiwan, South China Sea, Korea, etc.)	PLARF activities, up to high-intensity deterrence actions such as missile launches Cyber demonstrations or limited attacks			

Policy Recommendations

Beijing's potent mix of growing ambition, growing military capabilities, and deepening nationalism under General Secretary Xi Jinping means that China is increasingly willing to throw its weight around the Indo-Pacific region, and likely beyond, to achieve its political objectives. The Chinese conception of deterrence—which not only includes dissuasion against adversary military actions but also coercion towards China's political objectives—means that the PLA will likely undertake an increasingly active role in furthering the Party-state's efforts through the threat, if not use, of military force. This 'new era' extends to Chinese deterrence signalling, which will be an ever-present feature of China's aggressive behaviour going forward.

Deciphering deterrence signalling by any country will always be more art than science, but is certainly a complicated endeavour when it comes to China. The analytic framework proposed is focussed on identifying the principles underlining China's approach to deterrence signalling and the case studies identify recent patterns of Chinese behaviour.

Canberra's transition to a more active security regional role against the backdrop of hardening strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific means the risk of a bilateral Australia-China military crisis is growing for the first time in Australia's history. The recent downturn in relations with China in 2020 and Australia's apparent addition to the ever-growing list of democracies that have 'wronged' Beijing suggests confrontation is likely to be an enduring theme in the relationship going forward, including in the military domain. Understanding Chinese deterrence signalling will be an important component of ensuring that any crisis avoids turning into conflict. Towards that end, we offer three policy recommendations for Canberra, Washington, and regional partners.

Recommendation 1: The Australian, U.S., and Other Regional Governments Should Be More Attuned to Nuanced Chinese Signalling During Future Crises (and in Peacetime)

Although China's principles for deterrence signalling have remained consistent over time, the actual patterns of employment are evolving along with the rest of China's approach to foreign affairs in Xi's 'new era'. This means that foreign governments will always have to pay close attention to Chinese signals in a future crisis. Two important trends will likely make this task even more difficult. First, China's rapidly growing capabilities in new domains, specifically space and cyber, mean that it has more tools at its disposal, but so far there is little precedent for how Beijing will use them in a crisis. Second, the recent trend of China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy', if continued, is likely to further complicate the task for foreign governments to accurately decipher Chinese deterrence signalling. This bellicose rhetoric from a growing number of official but semiauthoritative Chinese government actors exacerbates the already notable problem of a low signal-to-noise ratio in China's communications with the outside world.

The Australian, U.S., and other regional governments should consider ahead of time what signals China may send in a future crisis and how it will communicate them. This includes not just the most likely signals but also ones that might get lost in the noise or that are difficult to confirm. This is especially true for these official but semiauthoritative spokespeople like Chinese ambassadors, who are likely to be much less informed and less empowered than some international counterparts would be, but who may decide to speak out during a crisis. The Australian government should consider conducting structured expert roundtables, table-top exercises, or wargames to explore what signals China might send, how they would be interpreted by different ministries in Canberra, how Australia would respond, and the implications for crisis management.

Our findings suggest further research in a number of areas related to different aspects of China's broader approach to deterrence messaging might be valuable to analysts and policymakers. One area in which further research could yield valuable insights would be the way China plans to use its space and cyber capabilities for deterrence signalling, and how it would likely interpret and react to signals sent by others in response to its own actions in those domains. The Australian, U.S., and other regional governments should also seek to better understand how China coordinates and uses comprehensive national power for deterrence beyond military means. This report has focussed on the military aspect of Chinese coercion, but nonmilitary aspects, especially economic coercion, are perhaps an even more preferred tool for Beijing in many instances, and could be coordinated with military signalling in others. Analysts and policymakers would likely also benefit from better understanding how China coordinates its use of economic and military signals in cases where it uses both economic and military tools to deter or compel other countries. Further beneficial research could be undertaken by delving into China's thinking on the role of information manipulation in the context of deterrence signalling: exaggeration of capabilities and activities, disinformation, and deception. Still another area of research would be trying to gain a better

understanding of how China evaluates the success or failure of deterrence signalling activities, and how it makes adjustments in its messaging when it determines they are required. Finally, there are several specific and ongoing developments involving rising Chinese assertiveness against neighbours that would also benefit from an analysis of Chinese signalling efforts. These include the intensifying China-Japan dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, China-India land border dispute along the LAC in the Himalayas, and China-Vietnam maritime and territorial sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea.

Recommendation 2: Australia Should Engage the United States and Regional Partners on How They Understand Chinese Deterrence Signalling

As a fundamentally psychological act, deterrence quite literally is in the eye of the beholder, for two reasons. First, Beijing's approach to tailored deterrence against each target country is different. Second, each country has varying levels of national means to fully collect the range of deterrence signals China is sending and has its own preexisting cognitive frames through which it interprets the signals it receives. This makes it critically important that in a future crisis, Australia and the United States, along with other regional countries, arrive at the same understanding of China's signalling, or at least an understanding of how each other is interpreting it and why they see it differently.

A shared understanding of Chinese deterrence signalling can be improved through government (Track 1) or academic (Track 2) dialogues, as well as joint research projects examining further historical case studies. The Track 1.5 U.S.-Australia Indo-Pacific Deterrence Dialogue, founded in 2018, is a good start, and similar dialogues already exist for other U.S. alliances.⁶⁴⁰ In the future they should specifically cover the topic of Chinese deterrence signalling. Joint historical case studies, either at the unclassified or classified level, would also be useful for comparing notes on what signals each country received and how they were interpreted individually to narrow any potential divergent interpretations in a crisis. Joint table-top exercises could be conducted bilaterally and multilaterally to further identify and work through any differences in how to interpret and respond to potential signals.

Whatever the specific approach, discussions with policymakers and analysts from the United States and other allies and partners should be organised so as to involve participants who can offer perspectives on how deterrence messages might be sent and received in the space and cyber domains, as well as those who focus on nuclear and conventional deterrence issues. Such discussions should also include analysts familiar with China's official media organs and how social media is relevant in the context of China's approach to deterrence signalling. Additionally, reflecting China's broad approach to leveraging different instruments of power for strategic deterrence, participants with an understanding of China's track record of using economic coercion should be invited to participate in the discussions as well.

⁶⁴⁰ For dialogue reports, see Townshend, Santoro, and Thomas-Noone, 'Revisiting Deterrence in an Era of Strategic Competition'; Ashley Townshend and David Santoro, 'Operationalising Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific', United States Studies Centre, April 2, 2020.

Recommendation 3: Pursue Appropriate Dialogue with China on Deterrence Signalling

The hardening of strategic competition with China and growing risk of an inadvertent military crisis means that at least some minimum level of communication with China must continue, however and whenever possible. In future dialogue on strategic issues, the topic of deterrence signalling should be put on the table. This is a topic that has been covered before in U.S.-China Track 1.5 dialogues, but insufficient progress has been made, and misunderstandings likely remain on both sides. For example, as one recent report reviewing the history of U.S.-China Track 1.5 strategic dialogues revealed, Chinese experts believed limited attacks on U.S. space assets would be deescalatory in a crisis until told otherwise by U.S. participants.⁶⁴¹ China's rapid military progress and demonstrated willingness to use its military in ever more coercive ways means that this is an important topic of dialogue for Australia, the United States, and other regional countries to raise in their exchanges with the PLA and Chinese security specialists to better avoid a crisis becoming a conflict through misunderstanding or miscalculation.

Getting the right participants from the Chinese side involved could be very challenging, but it would be essential for the dialogue to produce the most valuable results. Given the growing role of other services in an area once dominated by the PLARF, broader representation would likely make the dialogue much more useful and comprehensive. The growing roles the PLAN and PLAAF play in nuclear and conventional deterrence would make their participation important to provide an opportunity for a more comprehensive discussion. Similarly, PLASSF representation would be essential to understanding China's increasing emphasis on deterrence in the space and cyber domains, and how its actions in those areas would fit in the broader context of its changing approach to deterrence signalling.

⁶⁴¹ Santoro and Gromoll, 'On the Value of Nuclear Dialogue with China'.

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In Xi Jinping's 'new era', Chinese ambitions are increasingly global, its behaviour is increasingly aggressive, and its military is increasingly a leading edge of national power. China is also changing its approach to deterrence signalling in this 'new era' as it leverages growing military capabilities and the availability of new communications channels.

This report is intended to help analysts and policymakers in Australia, the United States, and other countries better decipher Chinese deterrence signalling in this 'new era'. For China, deterrence (威慑, weishe) is not simply the objective of forestalling an adversary's undesired action, as in Western thinking—it also includes aspects of compellence, meaning that China often uses its military to coerce other countries to take actions Beijing desires. This report provides an analytic framework to interpret Chinese deterrence signalling and explores seven case studies of recent Chinese deterrence behaviour to illuminate what has stayed the same and what has changed in Chinese peacetime and crisis deterrence signalling.

Overall, although China's capabilities and communication channels have changed, its fundamental approach to military deterrence signalling as a form of political coercion has not changed. Rather, Beijing is employing military deterrence signalling more frequently and in bolder ways to achieve its grander objectives. This means that analysts are likely to face an ever-greater task of deciphering this ever-expanding milieu to ensure that policymakers can separate the signal from the noise and respond to what matters (and look past what does not) to better manage future crises.

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