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14. ABSTRACT Military leaders publicly predicting that China will invade Taiwan imminently or on a specific timeline have raised concerns that hawkish rhetoric on the US side is increasing the potential for armed conflict. Through analysis of public statements and speeches from US military leaders, the paper highlights the emergence of two divergent approaches that the joint force has used to discuss the potential for conflict. Drawing from the historical examples of the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig crisis with Vietnam, this paper analyzes how messaging, signaling, and PRC perceptions of prestige and legitimacy impact China's military decision-making. The paper concludes by recommending measures to reduce the risk of military conflict in the region through messaging and signaling consistent with long-standing US policy.					
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**Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick:
Preventing US-China Conflict over Taiwan**

INTRODUCTION

The joint force has a messaging problem concerning the PRC's potential invasion of Taiwan. Through public statements, a faction within the US military promotes the view that a cross-Strait invasion is likely and that the US should prepare for war. Furthermore, leaders in this faction have attached specific timelines for the predicted invasion as a call to action amongst the public and within the military establishment. Simultaneously, other equally senior leaders have downplayed the possibility of war, instead advocating readiness, a continuation of the status quo, and an end to their colleagues' invasion predictions. The emergence of factional messaging on the Taiwan issue sends conflicting signals to the PRC, increasing the risk of unintentional escalation.

To improve strategic messaging, the joint force can learn from two past maritime incidents that highlight the impact of messaging on China's decision-making in initiating and ending conflicts. One such incident is the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which demonstrated how the US prevented escalation by reassuring China of its commitment to maintaining the status quo with calm and conciliatory language, backed by credible military power. The other incident is a 2014 skirmish over an oil rig, in which Vietnam cast itself as a victim of Chinese aggression in the media. Despite their military superiority over Vietnam, China backed down in the face of this messaging and its effects. This historical record suggests that the joint force can similarly mitigate potential conflicts by contrasting malign Chinese actions with US efforts to maintain peace and security across the Strait. Establishing this posture of US legitimacy begins with the public messaging of senior leaders, who can create off-ramps to war by "speaking softly" and not overreacting to Chinese provocations.

DUELING MESSAGES

The first senior leader in recent years to publicly predict a PRC invasion was then-USINDOPACOM commander Admiral Phil Davidson during his 2021 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC). In his testimony, he responded to a question about a Taiwan Strait attack timeline by saying, "Taiwan is clearly one of their ambitions [...] and I think the threat is manifest [...] in the next six years."¹ The media amplified his remarks, dubbing 2027 the "Davidson window."² Interviewed in 2023 as a private citizen, Davidson held firm on his prediction timeline in an interview in Japan, reportedly saying, "I still believe this is the decade of concern. And I'm still concerned about the period between now and 2027."³ Davidson's message of an impending attack is more apt to attract public interest – and thus widespread press coverage – than less sensational messaging from current leaders. Further, his continued public dialogue challenges the ability of successor commanders to manage the US signaling posture in the Pacific.

This practice of openly predicting specific attack timelines has spread to other senior military leaders, prompting hawkish responses from the PRC. For example, when questioned in October 2022 about Navy readiness for the Davidson window, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Mike Gilday would tighten the timeline dramatically, saying, "that has to be a 2022

¹US Congress, Senate, *Hearing before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services to receive testimony on United States Indo-Pacific Command in review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2022 and the Future Years Defense Program*, 117th Cong., (Mar. 9, 2021). https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-10_03-09-2021.pdf.

²Jerry Hendrix, "Closing the Davidson Window", RealClearDefense, RealClear Media Group, July 3, 2021, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2021/07/03/closing_the_davidson_window_784100.html.

³Koji Sonoda, "Philip Davidson: China's Advances Show 'Erosion' in U.S.-Japan Deterrence," The Asahi Shimbun, Oct. 14, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14457793>.

window or potentially a 2023 window."⁴ STRATCOM commander Admiral Charles Richard amplified the CNO a month later, remarking that "this Ukraine crisis [...] is just the warmup; the big one is coming."⁵ War prediction fever peaked in February 2023, when Air Force General Mike Minihan wrote in an aggressively-worded and leaked memo to his commanders, "my gut tells me we will fight in 2025" and to "aim for the head" in weapons practice.⁶ Chinese President Xi and Foreign Minister Qin Gang pushed back with hawkish rhetoric of their own, with rare statements accusing the US of trying to contain China and warning that conflict was inevitable.⁷ Joint force leaders make war timeline predictions for multiple reasons, including rallying the troops, shoring up political support for military readiness, and signaling Chinese leaders that the US stands ready to defend. However, military leaders must ensure that messaging intended for a *domestic* audience does not unintentionally impact the perceptions of Chinese leaders, who may view predictions as final preparations for war. Further, such "stray voltage" military messaging risks preempting policy options and may reduce the possibility of non-military solutions.

When Admiral Aquilino relieved Admiral Davidson as INDOPACOM commander in 2021, it represented an abrupt about-face in the command's rhetoric towards China to one focused on calmly sticking to official US policies. Speaking in March 2023 in Singapore, the

⁴"How will the US Navy navigate an uncertain security environment? A conversation with ADM Mike Gilday," video, 57:51, posted by "AtlanticCouncil," Oct. 19, 2022, <https://youtu.be/7UfKN4oU22g>, 17:10.

⁵C. Todd Lopez, "Stratcom Commander Says US Should Look to 1950s to Regain Competitive Edge," DOD News, US Department of Defense, Nov. 3, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3209416/stratcom-commander-says-us-should-look-to-1950s-to-regain-competitive-edge/>.

⁶Dan Lamothe, "US General Warns Troops That War with China Is Possible in Two Years." *Stars and Stripes*, Jan. 28, 2023, <https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2023-01-27/us-air-force-memo-war-china-8913860.html>; General Michael A. Minihan, "February 2023 Orders in Preparation for - The Next Fight" (unpublished document, Headquarters Air Mobility Command, Feb. 1, 2023), cited in Lamothe, "US General Warns Troops."

⁷Christian Shepherd, "China's Foreign Minister Predicts Impending Clash with United States," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 7, 2023. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2784117704>.

new INDOPACOM chief addressed President Xi's comments directly, saying, "we do not seek to contain the [PRC]" and elaborating that "we do not support Taiwan independence."⁸ Aquilino's response was consistent with his prior statements, such as his testimony before the SASC in 2022, where when asked about the Davidson window, he directly rebuked his predecessor, saying, "I do not even think about that last guy anymore [...] we would have to ask Admiral Davidson how he came to that."⁹ Further, when pressed about whether to clarify the US position on defending Taiwan, Aquilino stayed firmly rooted in official US policy, noting that the command "support[s] the One-China policy" and that "strategic ambiguity has served us very well."¹⁰ Aquilino's recitation of official US policy represents a conservative school of thought which seeks to maintain consistency until and unless changed by political leaders. This approach reduces the risk of miscalculation by ensuring that military leaders do not create *de facto* national policies based on a single leader's beliefs or preferences.

Remarks from the Joint Chiefs highlight the division in how senior military leaders talk about the potential for conflict. For example, Air Force Chief of Staff General CQ Brown, speaking at a Brookings Institution conference in February 2023, responded to the Minihan memo by noting that he did not "see that a conflict is imminent or inevitable," and characterized

⁸ "TISS Special Lecture by Admiral John C. Aquilino, Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command," video, 1:00:10, posted by "The International Institute for Strategic Studies," Mar. 16, 2023, <https://youtu.be/TFuHcMpsEqQ>, 5:05.

⁹ US Congress, Senate, 2022, "Hearing before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services to receive testimony on the posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea," 117th Cong., (Mar. 10, 33). https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/22-11_03-10-2022.pdf.

¹⁰ US Congress, Senate, "Hearing on Indo-Pacific Command and US Forces Korea, 34-35; US Department of State, "US Relations with Taiwan," May 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-taiwan/>. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), the Three Joint Communiques between the US and China, and the Six Assurances to Taiwan codify the official US policy on Taiwan. The US agreed to a series of carefully-negotiated points in these agreements, including the "One China Policy," stating the US interest in peacefully resolving the Taiwan issue and acknowledging various aspects of the PRC position. However, while the TRA provides the provision for US arms sales to Taiwan, it remains ambiguous on whether the US will defend Taiwan from a PRC attack, a policy known as "strategic ambiguity."

invasion prediction timelines as "not necessarily helpful."¹¹ Brown's remarks are a remarkable contrast to fellow service chief CNO Gilday's predictions of a near-immediate time horizon. Two consecutive Marine Corps Commandants would similarly differ, with General Neller predicting that "there's a war coming" and anticipating "a big-ass fight", while his successor General Berger more cautiously remarked, "I [don't] believe that war is a foregone conclusion with China. I'm not in that camp."¹² Chairman Milley staked out his position in an interview in March 2023, noting that "I don't believe war is inevitable, I don't think it's imminent," and cited Teddy Roosevelt's approach to "speak softly and carry a big stick" in describing his preferred policy.¹³ Such open divisions at the highest levels imply that the US military is operating without a messaging strategy that considers how the PRC would interpret senior leaders' public statements. Additionally, it indicates that the military leadership lacks consensus on what messaging strategy might best achieve US national security objectives vis-à-vis China.

¹¹General CQ Brown, "The US Air Force and American defense strategy," moderated by Melanie Sisson and Michael O'Hanlon, Brookings Institution, Feb. 13, 2023, accessed Apr. 11, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/fp_20230213_air_force_transcript.pdf.

¹²Hope Hodge Seck, "Marine Leaders Highlight Norway Unit's Role as Deterrent to Russia," Military.com, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/12/21/marine-leaders-highlight-norway-units-role-deterrent-russia.html>; Gen David H. Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, "The Marine Corps and the Future of Warfare," Moderated Michael O'Hanlon, Brookings Institution, May 18, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/fp_20210518_marines_berger_transcript.pdf. While Gen Neller did not specify which country he was referring to in his "big-ass fight" remarks, he noted ambiguously that "the focus is more on the Pacific and Russia." Nevertheless, his remarks are consistent with the faction of senior leaders that openly predict a war on the near horizon.

¹³Mark Milley, "Joint Chiefs of Staff Chair Mark Milley on the Joint Forces' Future," Interview by Kevin Baron. Mar. 31, 2023, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?527095-1/joint-chief-staff-chair-mark-milley-joint-forces-future>; Ben Welter, "Sep. 3, 1901: Roosevelt 'Big Stick' Speech at State Fair," <https://www.startribune.com/sept-3-1901-roosevelt-big-stick-speech-at-state-fair/273586721/>. Roosevelt himself quoted an old proverb with the "speak softly" line. Perhaps more pertinent to this paper are Roosevelt's further remarks that "if a man continually blusters, if he lacks civility, a big stick will not save him from trouble," and more pointedly, "whenever on any point we come in contact with a foreign power, I hope that we shall always strive to speak courteously and respectfully of that foreign power."

The most compelling case for adopting the strategy of speaking softly comes from Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) commander Rear Admiral Mike Studeman, who spoke at length in February 2023 on how the US should react to China's ambitions.¹⁴ Studeman's recommendations are uniquely credible: He is a Mandarin-speaking career intelligence officer who served as the USINDOPACOM Director of Intelligence (J2) under *both* Admirals Davidson and Aquilino from 2019-2022.¹⁵ In that speech, the Naval Intelligence director made a case for integrated *assurance* to China, noting that "you have to assure China that you are not trying to permanently separate Taiwan from them."¹⁶ Should this assurance fail, Studeman assesses that the PRC "will feel that time is not on their side and [the US will] force them into a war of necessity."¹⁷ Studeman's apparent influence on Aquilino appears in the latter's testimony to Congress, where he would repeat nearly verbatim the talking point that "strategic ambiguity has served us very well for the past 40 years."¹⁸ Consistent, enduring language by military leaders assures China that formal policies drive US military policy, regardless of posturing by political leaders.

In this context, President Biden's stated position that he would order US troops to defend Taiwan raise a question about whether military leaders are simply mirroring a national policy

¹⁴Mike Studeman, Commander, Office of Naval Intelligence, "Navy Information Warfare Theater (ONI) - an Intelligence Officer's Perspective on China." Video, Posted by "WEST Conference," Feb. 20, 2023. <https://youtu.be/hVf1rfHH4g4>.

¹⁵Studeman, "Intelligence Officer's Perspective on China," 7:45; Office of Naval Intelligence, "Rear Admiral Mike Studeman, USN," Accessed Apr. 12, 2023, <https://www.oni.navy.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Article/3113780/rear-admiral-mike-studeman-usn/>.

¹⁶Studeman, "Intelligence Officer's Perspective on China," 40:51.

¹⁷Studeman, "Intelligence Officer's Perspective on China," 40:51.

¹⁸US Congress, Senate, 2022, "Hearing on US Indo-Pacific Command and US Forces Korea," 35; Studeman, "Intelligence Officer's Perspective on China" 40:30.

shift away from strategic ambiguity.¹⁹ From a simplistic perspective, there is no ambiguity – a panel of 64 Taiwan experts polled in 2022 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies unanimously agreed that China expects the US to deploy troops in defense of an invasion, consistent with the president’s statements.²⁰ However, 91% of the experts in that poll also assessed that an invasion was unlikely in the next decade.²¹ Further, Biden’s comments are within historical norms, considering George W. Bush’s stated support for defending Taiwan, President Tsai’s phone call with President-Elect Trump, and her meetings with House Speakers Pelosi and McCarthy.²² As such, US military leaders are right to draw a clear, bright line between the political posturing of the day, and the country’s carefully negotiated Taiwan policies, based in legislation, treaties, and executive orders rather than media sound bites.

Military leaders would be well-served to embrace the concept of strategic ambiguity from a more nuanced perspective as one of many accepted contradictions in cross-Strait relations that maintain a peaceful status quo. Despite the *de facto* clarity that both sides expect a US defense of the island, military leaders’ acceptance of “strategic ambiguity,” even as a rhetorical device

¹⁹David Brunnstrom and Trevor Hunnicutt, “Biden says U.S. forces would defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion.” Reuters, Sep 19, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/biden-says-us-forces-would-defend-taiwan-event-chinese-invasion-2022-09-18>.

²⁰ Bonnie Lin et al., “Surveying the Experts: China’s Approach to Taiwan,” ChinaPower Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Oct. 3, 2022, 2, <https://chinapower.csis.org/survey-experts-china-approach-to-taiwan/>; Phelim Kine, “Biden Leaves No Doubt: ‘strategic Ambiguity’ toward Taiwan Is Dead,” Politico, Sep. 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/19/biden-leaves-no-doubt-strategic-ambiguity-toward-taiwan-is-dead-00057658>.

²¹Lin et al., “Surveying the Experts: China’s Approach to Taiwan,” 2.

²²Ann Compton, Vic Ratner, and Tamara Lipper, “Bush Vows Taiwan Support,” ABC News, April 25, 2001, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93471>; Josh Chin and Charles Hutzler, “Trump’s Phone Call with Taiwan President Sparks China Complaint; President-Elect Donald Trump’s Conversation with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen Breaks with Decades of U.S. Policy,” The Wall Street Journal, Dec 3, 2016, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1845378257>; Brian Hioe, “An Assessment of the Narratives Surrounding the Tsai-Mccarthy Meeting,” Global Taiwan Institute, April 18, 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/04/an-assessment-of-the-narratives-surrounding-the-tsai-mccarthy-meeting/>.

based on a questionable foundation, satisfies Beijing's need to prove that the US still accepts its narrative. This long-standing balance, where the US concedes rhetoric while China exercises military restraint, is also consistent with the National Security Strategy's mandate to avoid unintended escalation.²³ Thus, speaking softly in the face of Chinese provocations is a continuation of the US approach to cross-Strait relations, which has safeguarded Taiwan's freedom since its democratization in 1996.

²³White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," Washington, DC: White House, Oct. 2022, 25.

LESSONS FROM THE THIRD TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS²⁴

The mid-1990s was a political transition period in Taiwan that offers a case study on how calm and measured messaging by joint force leaders supports a credible combat capability, deters PRC aggression, and provides off-ramps for reducing tensions. The root of the crisis was a series of statements from Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui between 1994 and 1996 that promoted Taiwanese independence from China.²⁵ The situation culminated in 1996 when the PRC fired six missiles over Taiwan, coinciding with Taiwan's first direct presidential election.²⁶ The US military's response -- surging two carrier battle groups into the Taiwan Strait -- had a significant role in diffusing the crisis by demonstrating the US willingness to come to Taiwan's aid.

However, what US joint force leaders *said* during the crisis was so effective in de-escalating the situation that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invited Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General John Shalikashvili to speak in Beijing at the National Defense University just fourteen months after the missile tests. Moreover, in public statements and interviews, military leaders held firm to two consistent messages throughout the crisis. First, they emphasized that US policy towards cross-Strait relations remained the same, specifically that the US does not support Taiwan's independence and favors a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue. Military leaders at all levels used language that reflected carefully negotiated cross-Strait rhetoric, such as Chairman Shalikashvili's description of the Taiwan issue as one for "Chinese people on both

²⁴The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996 is commonly referred to as the "Third Taiwan Strait Crisis" in most commentaries. However, some authors, such as Taiwan expert Bruce A. Elleman, refer to it as the "Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis," taking into account a previous incident in 1962, where a Chinese military buildup raised concerns of an invasion of several offshore islands. It is worth noting, however, that the 1962 crisis was resolved diplomatically and did not result in armed conflict. Therefore, this paper will follow the more common convention and refer to the 1995-1996 event as the "Third Taiwan Strait Crisis."

²⁵Richard Bush, "Lee Teng-Hui and 'Separatism,'" in *Dangerous Strait*, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, 81-82.

²⁶Bruce A. Elleman, 2015, *Taiwan Straits: Crisis in Asia and the Role of the US Navy*. 128-133.

sides of the Taiwan Straits to resolve in a peaceful manner."²⁷ Secondly, US military leaders articulated a desire for continued engagement and dialogue and backed this up with a strategy of increasing military-to-military relations. These twin messages, carried calmly and repeatedly, created a consistent narrative that allowed the PRC to demonstrate their displeasure at the Lee government while avoiding unwanted escalation.

Rhetoric from the three sides followed a recurring pattern: Lee would hint at independence, the PRC would hint at using force, and US military leaders would urge restraint on both sides of the Strait. Scholars suggest that Lee first signaled his advocacy of separatism (in the eyes of the PRC) in a 1994 Japanese interview where he described the PRC as "foreign" and himself as "Moses," ostensibly leading Taiwan away from China.²⁸ Chinese President Jiang Zemin responded with his "Eight Points" speech in early 1995, which put a military solution to the Taiwan issue on the table with a double negative: "We do not promise not to use force."²⁹ Two weeks later, PACOM commander Admiral Richard Macke would testify before Congress that "dialogue rather than [...] confrontation" is the best approach to relations with China.³⁰ A few weeks later, he would continue to speak softly, remarking, "what we have to do is make China one of our friends."³¹ During this war of words, Macke's calm public messaging signaled

²⁷John M. Shalikashvili, "Remarks as delivered by General John M. Shalikashvili, PLA National Defense University, Beijing, China," May 14, 1997. The Chairman's characterization of "Chinese people on both sides" tacitly acknowledges Beijing's position on Taiwan's cultural identity.

²⁸Bush, "Lee Teng-Hui and 'Separatism,'" in *Dangerous Strait*, 81; Chan Wai-Fong, "Anger Over Lee Interview," *South China Morning Post*, June 15, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1524193011>.

²⁹Jiang Zemin. "Continuing to Strive Toward the Reunification of China," Jan. 30, 1995, translated by China Daily, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2011-01/30/content_29715090.htm.

³⁰US Congress, Senate, 1996, "Hearings before the Committee on Armed Services on S. 1026," 104th Cong., Feb. 16, 253, <https://congressional-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1995-sas-0016>.

³¹Michael Richardson, "US Admiral Warns of China's Big New Navy," *International Herald Tribune*, Mar. 8, 1995. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/319115147>.

to China that the US military's objective in the region was to preserve, not upend, the delicate balance across the Strait. Additionally, it gave China maneuvering room to saber-rattle in front of its domestic and international audiences without risking a US overreaction.

Even at the height of the crisis, while Chinese and US military forces faced off, joint force messaging remained calm, stable, and predictable, supported by high-level bilateral military-to-military engagements. For example, during the March 1996 missile launches, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Stephen Joseph was in China signing a medical cooperation memorandum with his PLA counterpart Lt Gen Zhou Youliang.³² Moreover, according to Congressional Research Service records, the US and China held at least one high-level military-military engagement each month between the 1996 missile firings and Shalikashvili's May 1997 speech.³³ These military engagements de-escalated tensions with China by providing an implicit assurance that the US would look the other way during China's military provocations, provided that they remained non-lethal and performative.

The US expressed its assurances at all levels of command and ensured that the media was present to report on leaders' statements. For example, at the height of the crisis, Vice Admiral Archie Clemins, the 7th Fleet commander, would remark in a shipboard press conference, "the United States supports peaceful reunification with China," adding, "the key word [...] is peaceful."³⁴ Similarly, Rear Admiral James Ellis, the Battle Force 7th Fleet commander, would hold the party line, saying, "We're here [...] only to send a signal of US government concern to

³²US Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-China Military Contacts: Issues for Congress," Dec. 12, 2014, 56, <https://congressional-proquest-com.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/congressional/docview/t21.d22.crs-2014-fdt-0776>.

³³Congressional Research Service, U.S.-China Military Contacts, 56-58.

³⁴Joe Leahy, "Navy Presence a Commitment, Says Admiral," *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 14, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/315691257>.

the peaceful resolution of this issue."³⁵ Finally, sailing his aircraft carrier USS Nimitz through the Strait during the election, skipper Alfred Harms said, "The emphasis is clearly one of neutrality, hoping to lower the chances of conflicts."³⁶ Though skeptical of the US approach, once Beijing finished sending its message, it curtailed further provocative demonstrations and harsh rhetoric, seeking to build closer military ties with the US instead.³⁷ Using similar language by all leaders regardless of rank, the consistent message signaled to China that the US military spoke with a single voice originating from Washington. This strategy of not overreacting and maintaining a calm, consistent tone in messaging during Chinese provocations kept the door open for continued dialogue and allowed Beijing to negotiate from a position of mutual respect.

The US military dominated the information space during the crisis with a unified message. Statements by military leaders were laser-focused on assuring the governments on both sides of the Strait of the stabilizing purpose and intent of the US combat power transiting through it. Further, the message itself was strikingly similar in tone and content to those of Admiral Aquilino and the "speak softly" faction in the contemporary US military. The broader lesson from this crisis is that China's behavior is responsive to US military signaling. However, China's recent military expansion and modernization makes the analogy imperfect, as it may soon have – or believe it has – the ability to invade Taiwan regardless of what US leaders say.³⁸ Therefore,

³⁵"Observer Battle Group Stays Cool," *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 18, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/265347903>.

³⁶"USS Nimitz Enters Taiwan Picture," *South China Morning Post*, Mar. 25, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/265316513>.

³⁷US Department of Defense. "Chinese Perspectives on Defense Minister Chi Haotian's Visit to the United States and Key Issues in Sino-American Relations," Nov. 7, 1996, 5-6, 20, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1679053615>.

³⁸Mark F. Cancian, Matthew Cancian, and Eric Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 9, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/first-battle-next-war-wargaming-chinese-invasion-taiwan>. This widely reported war

joint force leaders would do well to understand how public messaging impacts President Xi's perception of his options independent of the military balance of power.

CHINA AND VIETNAM TUSSELE OVER AN OIL RIG

A 2014 standoff over petroleum drilling rights highlighted how Vietnam's use of public messaging and shaping international opinion effectively deterred China's aggressive behavior, despite China having a military advantage. In this episode, the PRC positioned the Haiyang Shiyou 981 oil rig in waters claimed by both countries, protected by dozens of coast guard ships, light naval patrol craft, and other auxiliary vessels.³⁹ However, this incident was less about oil exploration than it was about the new Chinese President Xi testing the limits of what the PRC could get away with in asserting questionable geopolitical claims against a militarily weaker neighbor.⁴⁰ Vietnam fought back in the press, with a concerted information campaign that attacked China's prestige, legitimacy, and economic interests. In the face of this non-military resistance, Xi blinked, ending the crisis rather than deploying the PLA Navy's superior firepower.

Xi's choice to send a constabulary rather than a combat force to protect the rig implies that Beijing restrained itself, establishing a narrative that it was executing a police action within

game suggests that while the US still likely retains the upper hand in defending Taiwan from a PRC invasion, it would likely come at a considerable cost to both sides. This suggests that the PRC has closed much of the capabilities gap with the US and is approaching combat power parity in a Taiwan invasion scenario.

³⁹"Vietnam Says China Sent another Two Military Ships to Defend Oil Rig," BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, June 6, 2014, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1532885564>; Austin Ramzy, "With Oil Rig, China Flexes its Muscle: Standoff with Vietnam Illustrates Long Reach of Beijing's Ambitions at Sea," *International New York Times*, Aug 11, 2014, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1552295662>.

⁴⁰Derek Grossman, "Can Vietnam's Military Stand Up to China in the South China Sea?" *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 113–34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26403232>.

its territorial waters. However, Hanoi upended this narrative by framing China as the aggressor and highlighting the disruption of peaceful civilian activities in areas that were, at best, disputed. Once the public learned of China's actions, an intense anti-China backlash swept through Vietnam.⁴¹ This public reaction was no accident -- Vietnamese political leaders used the country's state-controlled media to shape public opinion against China while remaining within international norms for acceptable discourse.⁴² In the context of this damage to China's reputation and image abroad, the PRC abruptly withdrew the oil rig more than a month ahead of schedule, ending the crisis.⁴³ Joint force leaders should heed this lesson that the prospect of damage to China's prestige has deterrence value independent of military considerations.

Because China's actions in deploying the oil rig contravened international norms, Vietnam was able to weaponize the truth to attack Chinese prestige. Hanoi's initial crisis response was to deploy the coast guard to assert its claim, protect fishing rights, and, perhaps most importantly, capture photos and video of Chinese wrongdoing.⁴⁴ As the two sides clashed, Chinese ramming and harassment activities provided ample fodder for the Vietnamese

⁴¹"Vietnam Stops Anti-China Protest, China Evacuates Workers." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, May 18, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-vietnam/vietnam-stops-anti-china-protest-china-evacuates-workers-idUKKBN0DY01D20140518>

⁴²Nhung T. Bui, "Managing anti-China nationalism in Vietnam: evidence from the media during the 2014 oil rig crisis." *The Pacific Review*. 2017. Vol. 30, No. 2, 169-187. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1201132>

⁴³John Ruwitch and Phuong Linh Nguyen. "Chinese Oil Rig Moved Away from Disputed Waters off Vietnam." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, July 16, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-vietnam-rig/chinese-oil-rig-moved-away-from-disputed-waters-off-vietnam-idUSKBN0FL00Y20140716>.

⁴⁴"China/Vietnam: China's oil rig violates Vietnam's sovereignty," *Asia News Monitor*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1522222123>; "China Mobilizes 80 Ships and Aircraft Around the Illegal Drilling Rig, ramming the Vietnam Coast Guard Vessel," *VTV News*, May 7, 2014, Translated by Google, <https://vtc.vn/trung-quoc-huy-dong-80-tau-may-bay-quanh-gian-khoan-trai-phep-dam-rach-tau-canh-sat-bien-vn-ar155648.html>.

argument.⁴⁵ The media push shortly followed, with Vietnam's state-owned VTV channel broadcasting images of Chinese ships firing water cannons juxtaposed with photos of an injured fisherman, bloodied and bandaged from the altercation.⁴⁶ Backed by undeniable visual evidence, Vietnam established a good versus evil narrative, with Beijing playing the villain. This approach of exploiting the truth exemplifies the importance of perception and legitimacy in constraining malign state behaviors.⁴⁷ In the context of a potential conflict over Taiwan, US military leaders must similarly ensure that their media messaging portrays the US as a protector of international law and norms. When leaders express the view that conflict is inevitable, it signals that the US already sees itself as a belligerent and reduces the credibility of the US presence in the region.

Framing China's malign activities as illegitimate impacts the PRC through second-order effects, which create a powerful incentive for the Chinese leadership to change course. For example, during the initial wave of demonstrations in Vietnam, the PRC had to operate special flights and ferries to evacuate Chinese nationals after rioters targeted Chinese-owned businesses.⁴⁸ Additionally, cross-border tourism and commerce dropped dramatically as Chinese tourists feared for their safety, and the Vietnamese people launched boycotts of Chinese goods.⁴⁹

⁴⁵Sam LaGrone, "Hanoi: Chinese Ships Rammed Vietnamese Patrol Boats in Escalating Oilrig Dispute." USNI News, May 7, 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/05/07/hanoi-chinese-ships-rammed-vietnamese-patrol-boats-escalating-oilrig-dispute>.

⁴⁶"China Mobilizes Around Drilling Rig", *VTV News*, May 7, 2014.

⁴⁷Charles J. Demmer, "Lawfare During Information Operations," *Marine Corps Gazette* 104, no. 9 (2020), 80; Jianyong Yue, "China, Global Capitalism and the Quest for Legitimacy," *International Politics* 53, no. 6 (11, 2016): 752-774, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-016-0013-9>; Ivan T. Luke, "Legitimacy in the Use of Seapower," Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, Joint Military Operations Department, Feb. 2020 (NWC 2133A).

⁴⁸"More than 3,000 Chinese Evacuated from Vietnam after Violence-Xinhua." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, May 18, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-vietnam/more-than-3000-chinese-evacuated-from-vietnam-after-violence-xinhua-idUSL3N0O401C20140518>; "Hot oil on troubled waters; Vietnam and China," *The Economist*, May 18, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2014/05/18/hot-oil-on-troubled-waters>.

⁴⁹Mike Ives, "Strife Chokes Chinese Tourism to Vietnam," *New York Times*, July 22, 2014, B.6.; Reasey Poch, "Vietnamese Staging Chinese Product Boycott After Oil Rig Spat," *Voice of America News*, July 28, 2014, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1548832181>.

Chinese elites were shocked that a fellow authoritarian state would accept public disorder to wage economic warfare.⁵⁰ Under these pressures, China withdrew the rig, claiming as rationale that it had completed its job early.⁵¹ In this context, senior leaders should understand that exploiting perception and legitimacy is not just about managing what people think about a country's actions. It is also about mobilizing population-level effects to support or oppose a state's military or national geopolitical objectives.

The joint force lesson from this crisis is that perceptions of US legitimacy can either enhance or reduce the US ability to cause Xi's China to back down from aggression. To maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the world, US military leaders must avoid giving China any rhetorical basis on which to stake an argument that the US shares the blame in a future armed conflict. Statements emphasizing the prospect of war over Taiwan crowd out a more legitimate message emphasizing the US role in protecting commerce, freedom of the seas, and peaceful resolutions to political differences. By steadfastly operating from this rhetorical high ground, the joint force can bolster US legitimacy and deter unilateral Chinese aggression.

⁵⁰Grossman, Derek and Paul S. Omer. "Tracking Chinese Perceptions of Vietnam's Relations with China and the United States." *Asia Policy* 16, no. 2 (04, 2021): 103-127. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2522428103>.

⁵¹Jane Perlez. "Chinese Oil Rig Near Vietnam to be Moved," *New York Times*, July 16, 2014. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1941487064>.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As China continues to pursue its sovereignty claims in the Indo-Pacific with military aggression, the joint force must consider how to use signaling and messaging to respond to an increasingly capable PLA and avoid miscalculations. While traditional military deterrence remains essential, the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis demonstrates that calm and consistent messaging backed by long-standing US policy impacts China's behavior in a way favorable to regional stability. Additionally, the Vietnamese oil rig crisis teaches us that China will back down from militarily enforcing a sovereignty claim if it views the diplomatic, information, and economic penalties are too high. Based on these lessons, the joint force should modify its signaling posture concerning China's claim on Taiwan in two ways.

First, the Joint Staff should adopt a consistent message about the risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The current situation, in which service chiefs talk about China in dramatically different ways, suggests to China that the US military's Taiwan strategy is incoherent and idiosyncratic, based on the whims of individual leaders. Instead, the Joint Staff, as part of a whole-of-government approach, should adopt and enforce a signaling and messaging policy that ensures senior uniformed leaders carry the same message when describing military intents toward China. Civil-military relations theorists suggest that military leaders have a natural bias to overstate threats to a state's security.⁵² Further, the events of the two crises examined in this paper suggest that de-emphasizing the escalatory threat posed by China, while speaking from a position of greater legitimacy, has deterrence value. As such, individual leaders

⁵²Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1957), 66. Huntington would further cite Lord Salisbury's 19th century observation that "if you believe the soldiers, nothing is safe."

should avoid public statements indicating war is inevitable or predictions of a timeline for a Chinese invasion. Such statements constrain options on both sides and increase the chances of a war neither side wants.

Secondly, we must better educate military leaders on how the Chinese leadership perceives US military statements and actions. The history of cross-Strait relations and the various agreements and policies that define the US role are a complex tapestry of negotiated settlements that created an uneasy peace. Professional Military Education institutions that educate the leaders charged with preserving that peace should ensure that their executive leadership curricula incorporate a study of this complex issue. With a senior leadership corps educated in the nuances of the complex history of cross-Strait relations, the joint force will better understand their role in advancing US foreign policy interests in the region without causing unintended escalation.

Until or unless political leaders change US policy towards Taiwan, the joint force has a responsibility to maintain its long-standing posture in the region of strength with restraint. Failure to constrain hawkish messaging risks escalation and challenges the legitimacy of the US military's role in protecting self-determined democratic institutions on Taiwan. On the other hand, a neutral message, grounded in US policy and carried consistently by military leaders, supports stability by signaling China the US commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue and its rejection of unilateral moves on either side. This message helped preserve the peace in the 1990s. It can continue to support peace today, backed by a credible military deterrent that ensures that the resolution to the Taiwan question remains free of violence or coercion.

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