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14. ABSTRACT China's rhetoric and aggression towards its neighbors have been at record-high levels since Xi Jinping assumed power in China. China has effectively eliminated the democratic freedoms formerly enjoyed by the citizens of Hong Kong. China can now prosecute a successful invasion of Taiwan, putting the U.S. in a difficult position to attempt a military response. It is not likely that the U.S. can fight China near Taiwan and walk away unscathed. China has developed substantial asymmetric capabilities to counter U.S. military strengths and exploit weaknesses. Unlike great power competition the U.S. has faced since WWII, China can match U.S. economic might making a war of attrition untenable. Taiwan is too important to Western Pacific peace and stability, and the U.S. must stand with partners to maintain global credibility. Taiwan needs the ability to defend itself, and the most effective and economically feasible measure of deterrence is nuclear weapons. Historically, nuclear weapon deterrence has a proven track record when aggressively postured. The risk of a violent Chinese response as an invasion or blockade is real, but there are ways to reduce those risks significantly. The U.S. must deliver nuclear weapons clandestinely, and they must ensure Taiwan does not declare its independence. To deal with a blockade, Taiwan must continue to build up its stock of supplies to give the U.S. and its allies time to respond with an unarmed resupply, as the allies did during the Berlin Airlift. Time is running out, and senior U.S. officials must ask themselves if Ukraine would be in its current predicament if they retained a nuclear arsenal. China has been boldly imposing its will in the Pacific and beyond for years. Therefore, the U.S. must act now as the window of opportunity to maintain the free and open Indo-Pacific may close permanently.					
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INTRODUCTION

The window of opportunity to keep Taiwan free and prosperous is rapidly closing. As President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping has intensified his inflammatory rhetoric and threatened military force against Taiwan. China displayed this aggression after Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit there. Following her visit, the PRC responded with a tremendous show of military force, violating Taiwanese airspace and exclusion zones.¹ This overt display of aggression was a sharp shift in the more ambiguous responses the PRC has typically had with the United States (U.S.) and Taiwan. Correspondingly, there has been a longstanding U.S. policy of strategic ambiguity with China on the issue of Taiwan.² This ambiguity supported the "One China Policy" and the willingness to provide Taiwan military assistance through foreign military sales. However, the U.S. has resisted fully arming Taiwan with the full spectrum of capabilities necessary to defend itself.

The ability of China to threaten Taiwan's sovereignty is very serious to its 24 million citizens, who are incredibly vulnerable to a full-scale Chinese invasion. Furthermore, the Chinese armed forces' ability to harm U.S. forces and allies is significant in a kinetic and non-kinetic conflict. The anti-access and area denial abilities of China are very robust.³ In fact, the U.S. may no longer possess the conventional forces necessary to defeat a PRC invasion of

¹ Ryan Hass and S. Philip Hsu, "Beyond Pelosi's Taiwan Visit: Uncertainties about Cross-Strait Stability," Brookings (Brookings, August 22, 2022), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/08/22/beyond-pelosis-taiwan-visit-uncertainties-about-cross-strait-stability/>.

² Mazarr, Michael J., Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Timothy R. Heath, and Derek Eaton, What Deters and Why: The State of Deterrence in Korea and the Taiwan Strait. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, (2021): 76

³ Thomas-Noone, Brendan. "Tactical Nuclear Weapons in the Modern Nuclear Era." Lowy Institute for International Policy, (2016): 5

Taiwan.⁴ The reality is that a large-scale kinetic conflict between China and the United States has far-reaching global impacts making it a lose-lose scenario.

Building the conventional force necessary to defeat China in their backyard is feasible, but that strategy is cost prohibitive. The staggering economic costs and time needed to develop a conventional winning force are too great a burden on Taiwan, the U.S., and allied nations. The traditional advantage of the U.S. to outspend adversaries is negated by China's enormous economy, second only to the United States.⁵ China's ability to match U.S. economic might demands a bold and economically feasible deterrence strategy to blunt PRC ambitions.

Nuclear weapons offer militaries a cost-effective defense strategy with a history of success in deterrence. Atomic weapons also provide Taiwan with a proven means of deterring a substantially more potent military force in a way that Taiwan's economy can afford. Research has clearly illustrated that an ability and willingness to posture nuclear weapons in a ready and aggressive stance has not produced a single instance of major conflict.⁶

The inconvenient truth is that Taiwan does not have the military readiness, capacity, or capability to repel a full-scale Chinese invasion with conventional forces alone.⁷ An asymmetric and ready capability in the form of a domestic nuclear deterrence option offers Taiwan the best opportunity to overcome its military capability gap. It is important to note that Taiwan should not declare its independence, and the U.S. should make delivery of weapons contingent upon

⁴ Cordesman, Anthony H., Arleigh A. Burke, and Max Molot. "China's Emergence as a Military Superpower: China vs. US and Russia." *China and the U.S.: Cooperation, Competition and/or Conflict An Experimental Assessment*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), (2019): 194

⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA World Factbook," CIA.GOV (CIA, October 2022), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/gdp-official-exchange-rate>.

⁶ Narang, Vipin. "What Does It Take to Deter? Regional Power Nuclear Postures and International Conflict." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57, no. 3 (2013): 480

⁷ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. "2021 Annual Report to Congress, Chapter 4: A Dangerous Period for Cross-strait Deterrence: Chinese Military Capabilities and Decision-Making for a War over Taiwan" USCC.Gov. U.S. government publishing office, Washington D.C., (November 2021): 394

agreeing to this. The U.S. and Taiwan must not cross Chinese red lines to allow PRC leadership decision space and the opportunity to respond rationally. Therefore, the U.S. must begin rapidly and clandestinely arming Taiwan with nuclear weapons as a vital deterrence measure to maintain peace.

Chinese Rhetoric and Aggression at Record-High Levels

Now is the time to pursue bold action to defend Taiwan against the threat of a PRC invasion. Statements by President Xi Jinping and actions taken by China indicate a more aggressive stance towards Taiwan. Before recent aggression, China genuinely wanted to peacefully acquire Taiwan under the so-called 'one country, two systems approach. The 'two systems' approach was applied in Hong Kong until the residents, accustomed to free speech, publicly protested Chinese policies. Those free speech protests resulted in a violent PRC crackdown, and Hong Kong's 'system' is no more.⁸ Unfortunately, international condemnation of Chinese actions has not deterred PRC behavior.

Xi Jinping is comfortable taking risks because he wants to make a name for himself. A 2021 USCC report to the U.S. Congress states that much of Xi's risk tolerance comes from a desire to cement his legacy as one of the preeminent leaders in Chinese history.⁹ A successful invasion of Taiwan would undoubtedly achieve that. The USCC highlights Xi's risk tolerance examples by illustrating China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea and Hong Kong. The long list of novel and destabilizing actions taken by China under Xi gives more credibility and merit to the possibility of invasion.

⁸ Proper, Eyal. "The National People's Congress 2020: The Hong Kong National Security Law and China's Enhanced Presence." Institute for National Security Studies, (2020): 3

⁹ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2021 Annual Report to Congress: 413

Xi's confidence in a successful invasion of Taiwan is due to the incredible improvement of Chinese military capabilities in the last decade. China fully displayed this impressive capability following Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. The PRC launched aggressive and large-scale military exercises very close to Taiwan, arguably raising tensions to the highest levels since the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis.¹⁰ During that crisis, the U.S. deployed two aircraft carrier groups unopposed by China in the Taiwan Strait and surrounding seas. Times have changed as the U.S. reaction in August 2022 was to maintain a carrier strike group in the region, but it did not venture closer to China.¹¹ The PRC's confident display of aggression, accompanied by the limited U.S. response, is a telling example of how far China has come towards matching U.S. military power.

Conventional Deterrence and War are too Costly

The Chinese advances in military power, particularly in the last two decades, have been primarily focused on countering American strengths while simultaneously targeting weaknesses for exploitation.¹² Weaker or rising powers can use this asymmetric strategy to close the capability gap with a stronger opponent. China's asymmetric military developments have primarily focused on two lines of effort. First, the PRC developments have concentrated on anti-access, area-denial (A2AD) capabilities to deal with U.S. military force projection.¹³ These capabilities manifest as the world's largest and most diverse ballistic and cruise missile arsenal.¹⁴ Second, the PRC has identified that advanced U.S. warfare depends on their information

¹⁰ Rising, David. "China's Response to Pelosi Visit a Sign of Future Intentions." AP News. Associated Press, August 19, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-china-beijing-congress-8857910a1e44cefa70bc4dfd184ef880>.

¹¹ Rising, China's Response to Pelosi Visit

¹² Hardy, The Military Correlation: 103

¹³ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 2021 Annual Report: 399

¹⁴ Hardy, The Military Correlation: 103

networks on Earth and space.¹⁵ Chinese cyber operations and anti-satellite technologies could likely cripple or severely degrade networks necessary for synchronizing U.S. joint operations and disrupt targeting that would neuter precision weapons.¹⁶

Historically, an expeditionary force fighting far from home in the enemy territory has been costly or disastrous. This was the case with Germany's losing effort against the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, even an expeditionary victory for the U.S. in WWII came at the cost of hundreds of billions in today's dollars and over 400,000 dead Americans.¹⁷ In a fight against China, the U.S. must travel hundreds to thousands of miles through a robust and lethal A2AD sphere of defense that can now reach Anderson Air Force Base on Guam.¹⁸ There is no 'safe' staging area for U.S. forces, and any fight over Taiwan must involve U.S. forces penetrating A2AD defenses by air and sea. China is essentially fighting in its backyard, with Taiwan just 80 miles from the mainland.

A war between China and the United States over Taiwan may not span the globe as it did in WWII, but it will be the first time the U.S. has gone up against a military peer competitor with an economy nearly as large. In WWII, the German and Japanese economies comprised roughly 40% of the U.S. economy.¹⁹ The economic might of the U.S. played a prominent role in achieving victory during WWII. At its best point in the Cold War, the USSR achieved only 50%

¹⁵ Hardy, *The Military Correlation*: 103

¹⁶ Blackwill, Robert D., and Philip Zelikow. "Three Scenarios for a Military Conflict Over Taiwan." *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War*. Council on Foreign Relations, (2021): 10

¹⁷ DeBruyne, Nese F. "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics" Congressional Research Service, (2017): 2 American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics (census.gov)

¹⁸ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 2021 Annual Report: 400

¹⁹ Mark Harrison, "The Economics of World War II: an Overview", in Mark Harrison, ed., *The Economics of World War II: Six Great Powers in International Comparison*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (1998), 10

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) compared to the United States.²⁰ Today China's GDP is approximately 75% of the U.S. GDP, with the gap continuously shrinking.²¹

Closing the economic and military capability gaps with the United States has allowed China to achieve initial operational capability for a successful invasion against the armed forces of Taiwan as of 2020.²² China's massive economy is an issue that the U.S. and its allies must consider when investing in new capabilities. U.S. hegemony and dominance in world affairs have been the standard norm since the collapse of the USSR. The rise of China as a peer adversary means that any weakness in U.S. military capability or political resolve threatens American influence and Allied willingness to side against China. Furthermore, studies have shown that the U.S. could lose a war with China which may permanently alter the geopolitical world order for decades.²³

Unfortunately, even winning may not be worth the effort. In a kinetic war with China, there is a strong possibility of a pyrrhic victory for America.²⁴ A 'victory' in a cross-strait battle with China could result in a significantly degraded U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific region. American weakness or inaction on the global stage is detrimental to U.S. peace and prosperity and has led to death and chaos on the international stage. For nearly a century, America's essential role in enabling peace and security is not hyperbole. It is easy to imagine the global dynamic if Americans did not participate in WWII, blunted the Soviet Union, or did not

²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "A Comparison of the US and Soviet Economies: Evaluating the Performance of the Soviet System," CIA Historical Review Program (CIA, 1999),

²¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA World Factbook," CIA.GOV (CIA, October 2022), <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/gdp-official-exchange-rate>.

²² The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 2021 Annual Report: 392

²³ Porter, Patrick, and Michael Mazarr. "Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way." Lowy Institute for International Policy, (2021): 12

²⁴ Porter, Countering China's Adventurism: 12

lead the effort to destroy ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Therefore, the instability, economic turmoil, and chaos resulting from a significant kinetic fight between the U.S. and China are unacceptable.

Nuclear Deterrence is the Way

Since war between China and the U.S. is unacceptable, it is logical that peace and stability are the only viable alternatives. To maintain peace and stability, deterring China must be the ultimate cross-strait objective that the U.S. pursues without hesitation or limitation on methods. Since the U.S. deployed the atomic bomb in WWII, there have not been any global wars resulting in tens of millions of deaths. However, the U.S. has fought in several large-scale conflicts where its unmatched and overwhelming nuclear power did not deter an adversary. The Korean War, Vietnam War, and Desert Storm involved a substantially weaker and non-nuclear opponent that chose to challenge the U.S. in a kinetic conflict.

However, nuclear deterrence theory offers promising employment methods that increase deterrence effectiveness. First, credibility is an essential component of successful nuclear deterrence. Credibility comes down to whether an actor such as Taiwan will launch nuclear weapons if faced with an existential crisis.²⁵ The second essential component of nuclear deterrence theory is rationality. Rationality assumes that states will act rationally in the presence of nuclear weapons to avoid nuclear devastation.²⁶ However, a paradox within rationality exists where an actor can appear irrational if they are willing to use nuclear weapons sooner than reasonably expected.²⁷ Therefore, Taiwan must possess a credible, rational, or even 'irrational' nuclear weapons stance.

²⁵ Goode, David P. "Perseverance of Power: The Relevancy Of Nuclear Deterrence In The Future" School Of Advanced Air And Space Studies, Air University (June 2013): 10

²⁶ Goode, Perseverance of Power: 10

²⁷ Goode, Perseverance of Power: 11

As stated earlier, the substantial capability gap between Chinese and Taiwanese conventional military forces favors China by a large margin. With time on China's side, nuclear weapon capabilities are the most effective method of deterrence against a more powerful opponent. Nuclearizing Taiwan gives China its own unsolvable North Korea problem that the U.S. faces. North Korean nuclear power is credible and rational when considering the wide capability gap between themselves and the U.S. military. However, nations such as North Korea and Pakistan have successfully deterred violent confrontations due to how they posture their nuclear forces.

There are three postures that nuclear powers have typically taken. First, the catalytic posture seeks intervention by a third party, often the U.S., to deter an aggressor. This posture has had disastrous deterrence results, as shown in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, where Israel's explicit goal was to galvanize U.S. government support.²⁸ Furthermore, dependence on third-party protection would be even less effective when a nation under threat, like Taiwan, does not possess nuclear weapons.

The second posture a nuclear state can take is one of assured retaliation.²⁹ This posture makes good on the principle of mutually assured destruction by ensuring a retaliatory and survivable second-strike capability. However, the assured retaliation posture failed during the 1969 Ussuri River conflict between the USSR and China, and during the 1999 Kargil War.³⁰ Fortunately for Taiwan, the posture referred to as asymmetric escalation has successfully prevented significant violence between nations.³¹

²⁸ Narang, What Does It Take to Deter: 484

²⁹ Narang, What Does It Take to Deter: 485

³⁰ Narang, What Does It Take to Deter: 486

³¹ Narang, What Does It Take to Deter: 486

Under an asymmetric escalation posture, “the key feature is the enabling of a credible, asymmetric first use of nuclear weapons against conventional aggression.”³² For example, Pakistan moved into an asymmetric escalation posture following the Kargil War, preventing significant armed conflict with India.³³ This all changed once Pakistan shifted back to a more strategic and retaliatory posture in its attempt to enter the Nuclear Suppliers Group.³⁴ An aggressive nuclear stance is successful because it offers a more credible and rational threat against powerful adversaries. The risk to a potential aggressor nation is too significant to call the bluff of another defensive country in this state of nuclear readiness.

Counterargument: Nuclearizing Taiwan Provokes Chinese Aggression

The most pressing and obvious concern about arming Taiwan with nuclear weapons is the possibility that the action is so provocative and so threatening that Xi and the PRC will launch an invasion in response. As stated for several decades by the Chinese leadership, Taiwan is a core national priority for the PRC, and failing on the promise of reunification may be completely unacceptable. Permanently losing the option to reunify Taiwan forcefully may threaten the PRC's legitimacy and Xi's desire to keep power. This threat to Xi's legacy may push him to act irrationally.

Another reason to avoid nuclearizing Taiwan is the chance that the U.S. is caught in the act. China's discovery of plans to nuclearize Taiwan before the nuclear weapons arrive will eliminate the opportunity for nuclear deterrence and give China extreme motivation to invade Taiwan immediately. Another concern is that the Chinese could respond with a blockade as the U.S. did during the Cuban Missile Crisis. This tactic would change the dynamic and force

³² Narang, *What Does It Take to Deter*: 486

³³ Narang, *What Does It Take to Deter*: 486

³⁴ Dalton, Toby, and Michael Krepon. “A Normal Nuclear Pakistan.” *Stimson Center*, (2015): 28

Taiwan and the U.S. to make the next move. The threat of a blockade from China is credible because of its capable navy, air force, and comprehensive A2AD capabilities.³⁵

While the concerns above are valid, the U.S. undoubtedly can minimize the risks associated with nuclearizing Taiwan. The U.S. military and intergovernmental agencies certainly possess the ability and means to deliver nuclear weapon capabilities quickly and clandestinely to Taiwan without detection. However, getting bogged down in the transportation details on exactly how to deliver nuclear weapons is pointless if senior U.S. officials disagree with the concept of a nuclearized Taiwan.

Therefore U.S. officials must understand there is a low probability that Xi and the PRC will launch an invasion against an asymmetric escalation posture. The historical case for asymmetric escalation deterrence is strong and discussed above. With established nuclear weapons, China cannot risk a first strike on the weapon sites for the same reason President Kennedy did not attack the locations in Cuba. There is no way to guarantee that Taiwan will not fire before the attack or that the pre-emptive Chinese attack will successfully neutralize all the weapons. Furthermore, while a nuclearized Taiwan may threaten Xi's hold on power, being at the receiving end of nuclear hellfire in a failed invasion of Taiwan is surely more harmful to Chinese domestic politics.

The possibility of a blockade is a more credible and significant threat to Taiwan, but China has already claimed its right to exercise that capability if they deem it necessary. Therefore, regardless of the strategy to protect Taiwan's independence, it is imperative to be ready for a blockade immediately. Taiwan must prepare by maintaining ample food, medicine, fuel, and weapons stocks. This stockpile will buy Taiwan time and allow global political,

³⁵ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. "2021 Annual Report to Congress, Chapter 4: 401

military, and economic pressure to mount against Chinese aggression. Additionally, the U.S. and its allies undoubtedly have plans to counter a blockade and need the unnerving will to execute a bold and unarmed international resupply effort.

Using history as our guide again, between 1948 and 1949, the USSR attempted to blockade the peaceful people in West Berlin to force a political change and break the will of allied support.³⁶ Instead of responding with military force, the U.S. and its allies acted boldly by flying over the blockade for nearly a year with unarmed aviation to support an embattled ally.³⁷ Standing strong with U.S. partners is critical to maintaining U.S. influence in the Pacific. Therefore, the U.S. and its allies must ignore the blockade and proceed with an unarmed international resupply to force a decision back to China. An irrational and violent PRC response against a peaceful international effort to feed the people of Taiwan would only coalesce global animosity towards China; all other PRC priorities would be at risk.

Finally, there is the novel idea that after successfully arming Taiwan with nuclear weapons in secret, the U.S. leadership could privately inform senior Chinese leadership. This bold and decisive tactic after the fait accompli of established atomic weapons would still protect Taiwan but save Xi and the PRC from global humiliation. A violent response from the PRC against Taiwan under these circumstances would appear incredibly hostile and irrational on the international stage. Conversely, if the PRC plays along with the deception, Taiwan is still safe from attack, and China benefits from not acknowledging the astonishing news. Taiwan, the United States, and China could continue with the status quo with the public none the wiser.

³⁶ Delpech, Thérèse, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, (2012): 64

³⁷ Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century*: 65

Conclusion: Now is the Time for Bold Action

President Xi and the PRC leaders possess a strong sense of urgency and a higher tolerance for risk in their interactions with the U.S. and neighboring nations. The PRC has publicly stated its intent to obtain 'reunification' with Taiwan sooner than later and permitted itself to use a blockade or invasion to make it a reality.³⁸ The PRC has spent decades modernizing and expanding its armed forces to address U.S. military strengths and weaknesses. China developed impressive capabilities focused on Command and Control, amphibious forces, and a robust A2AD ability to keep the U.S. out of the conflict.³⁹ China desires to face Taiwan alone and is in the strongest position ever to ensure that happens.

The only realistic option that avoids widespread death and destruction is to defeat China's ambitions for Taiwan before the fighting starts. However, the U.S. should not nuclearize Taiwan in a vacuum. Inexpensive and plentiful conventional A2AD capabilities and an aggressive nuclear posture amplify Taiwan's deterrence potential. Additionally, planning for and gaining international support to respond to a Chinese blockade peacefully must take place to repeat the success of the Berlin Airlift. Since a direct war with China is too costly, the U.S. must act as an armorer with nuclear weapons at the core of that defensive strategy.

China now has the ability and desire to accomplish a military conquest over Taiwan, closing the window of opportunity to deter the PRC. The aggression that Russia and China have shown their neighbors offers the U.S. and its allies a watershed moment to respond. U.S. leaders must move quickly with Taiwan and ponder whether Russia would have invaded Ukraine if they

³⁸ The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council and the State Council Information Office. "The Taiwan Question and China's Reunification in the New Era" The People's Republic of China (PRC), (Aug 2022): 19

³⁹ The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2021 Annual Report to Congress: 394-395

still possessed nuclear weapons. History favors the bold and now is the time for the U.S. to act by arming Taiwan with nuclear weapons to maintain peace and stability in Asia and beyond.

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