

Make Deterrence Credible: China's New Posture to Taiwan

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Introduction

After an alarm sounded for a possible crisis or military conflict across the Taiwan Strait, generated by Taiwan ‘President’ Chen Shui-bian’s campaign for an unprecedented public referendum and proposal to introduce the referendum bid into the constitution of the island over last a few years, which could lead to a legislative independence of Taiwan, the tension somewhat diluted with a DPP’s setback in the 2004 legislation ‘election’. Furthermore, a number of encouraging developments have unfolded since then that help stabilize the West Pacific region. In specific, little new provocation from the leaders in Taiwan has been made; the interaction across the Strait has been accelerated, symbolized by the historical visits of leaders of opposition parties in Taiwan to Mainland; and the tone of rhetoric both in Beijing and in Taipei has softened. How these happened? A number of explanations have been offered. Some argue that it is the US pressure on Chen not to ‘unilaterally change the status quo’ that avoids the tension from slipping into a real crisis; some claim that the back fire in the island puts Chen’s pro-independence activities on hold; and some believe that the more subtle and flexible policy of new generation of leadership led by Hu makes independence less attractive among Taiwanese.

While not entirely challenging the explanations, this paper seeks to draw on deterrence theory and practice to understand the strategic dynamism in the Taiwan Strait. According to Ross, there are two deterrence dyads in this area: US deterrence of China’s use of force against Taiwan for the purpose of unification, and the Chinese deterrence of Taiwan from declaring independence.¹ To date, the first deterrence has been extensively addressed while the second deterrence has yet to be carefully and examined. Indeed, despite the growing interest in deterrence theory among the

¹ Robert Ross, Navigating the Taiwan Strait: Deterrence, Escalation Dominance, and U.S.-China Relations, *International Security*, Vol.27, No.2 (Fall 2002), pp48-85

Chinese security analysts and China has long practiced some notions of deterrence in its security thinking, analytical researches on the classical concept of deterrence and its application remain few.² By talking about deterrence theory and its practice, this paper attempts to add the missing part to the whole picture of the deterrence interactions in the Taiwan Strait.

The first section of this paper offers a brief about the new enthusiasm among Chinese security analysts in concept of deterrence, formulated by Western scholars, and in adopting it in the Taiwan issue. Then, the paper reviews the Chinese practice of deterrence toward Taiwan over past decade, and new measures that have been taken to make the deterrence more credible and effective. Finally, the paper offers an outcome of the new practice of deterrence and implications for the regional stability and security. The basic conclusion of this paper is that a credible Chinese deterrence helps in the efforts to stop, or slow down the movement in the island toward independence and, therefore, avoid a military conflict across the Taiwan Strait. Yet, to solve the underlying standoff, measures and policy must be go beyond deterrence.

Deterrence theory and the Taiwan Strait

Simply put it, the idea of deterrence is that in the standoff, one party/state tends to acquire enough retaliatory capability and resolve to inflict the costs that outweigh the benefits on the other party/state which may otherwise launch attack to it. While the deterrence theory, formulated in early years of the Cold War, widely adopted by states on both sides of military blocs to deter attacks and threat of attacks, it encountered strong reservation among Chinese in the Cold War era. Literally, Chinese translation of deterrence (*wei she*) closely refers to “threats based on strong military capability”. This reminds the Chinese of the military threats, including nuclear threats that they received from superpowers during the Cold War years. As a result, deterrence theory had rarely been seriously studied by scholars and defense analysts and become guidance in Chinese strategic decision-making, let along the appearance of *Weishe* in official documents.

Ironically, the Chinese took a second thought about the concept in the context of debate on nuclear disarmament and strategy in the post-Cold War era, especially, when the momentum of deterrence in the US security planning decreased and was displaced by the concept of ‘defense’ with the introduction of missile defense plan in the turn of Clinton and Bush administrations. With the new look in deterrence, some Chinese suggest that ‘deterrence’ should be better translated into ‘*he zu*’, rather than, ‘*wei she*’ to make the concept morally more acceptable, because the former sounds more ‘defensive’³. Having gone through a learning curve on the deterrence theory, Chinese defense planners gradually applied this theory in their thinking in various issues, including Taiwan issue. The driving forces behind the new enthusiasm on deterrence come from a simple assertion: deterrence, overall, serves Chinese goal of ‘peaceful rise’. Firstly, to show Beijing’s benign intention, its security strategy could hardly be based on a ‘war-fighting’ doctrine, which dominated military planning during the Cold War, but on capability-supported non-war military practice. War should be treated as nothing but the last resort to secure Chinese integrity and sovereignty. Second,

² Articles and books on deterrence and its practice have focused on nuclear weapons-related issues, such as the policy of NFU, missile defense, etc.

³ The discussions about the concept of deterrence are conducted largely in arms control circle in China. ‘*he zu*’ is actually the Taiwan’s translation of deterrence. Note to be completed.

the expansion of China's national interests and its border of security, strategic deterrence, instead of 'defense', which based on a robust military build-up, is more affordable choice which allows China to allocate more resources to its economic modernization while offering China with more options to cope with different strategic challenges. Lastly, effective deterrence enables Beijing to avoid US from undermining China's security interests while maintaining a cooperative relationship with Washington.

In the case of Taiwan, a careful review of the new development in the island and its Taiwan policy leads Beijing to turns its eye on the notion of deterrence.

New development in Taiwan

Beijing is facing a danger of Chen's 'push' for quick independence of Taiwan (*ji du*). Since Lee Teng-hui took power in Taiwan, the moves to turning Taiwan's status into an independent state have been intensified. The moves comprise various tactics from changing 'two states theory', to 'flexible diplomacy', and to 'special identification on passport'. However, if these tactics could be labeled as "petty actions", Chen's push for referendum and constitution change has to be treated as a fundamental move toward a *de facto* independence without a formal declaration. Facing the new reality, Beijing has realized that its Taiwan policy now should be built upon a balance between avoiding the worst scenario—independence and preparing for the best outcome—unification. An assertive and decisive countermeasure to push Chen to take a U turn on the brink of a disaster, therefore, has to be seriously considered and taken while engaging in whatever it can to win over the hearts of the Taiwanese. In this vein, deterrence, therefore, has featured in policy alternatives along with economic and culture exchange and diplomacy. As Yan Xuetong argues, "we could not find a better way to effectively stop Taiwan secessionists from declaring a formal independence."⁴

Review of Taiwan policy

Beijing's Taiwan policy has long based upon three pillars: economic integration, diplomatic, especially US pressure, and military deterrence. Since Deng Xiaoping launched the open-door policy in late 1970s, Beijing has used cross-strait economic and trade relations as its key tool to reach the goal of peaceful unification. Over the past two decades, the two sides have established a close linkage in trade and investment. Taiwan has become one of the biggest investors and trading partners of the mainland. According to Beijing's statistics, the mainland enjoyed nearly \$51.2 billion a trade deficit with Taiwan.⁵ And, over a million Taiwanese have settled down on the mainland. While the economic integration making its way ahead, however, Beijing has recognized its limitation. On the one hand, the 'nongovernmental' dialogues started in 1993 as a result of robust economic relations have suspended and have not given any push for future reunification negotiation. On the other, the last two elections show that the sense of separate identity among Taiwanese is not necessarily affected by economic or other pragmatic ties.

While Beijing insists that Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs, keeping the issue 'internal' and

⁴ Yan Xuetong: Taking whatever it takes, we can maintain the Integrity of China, *Lianhe zaobao*, 28 November, 2003

⁵ The figures of trade to be further checked

further more, preventing Taipei from declaring independence, require Beijing to mobilize international pressure on Taipei. In these efforts, the US's commitment on 'one China policy, based on three China-US 'communiqués' has been seen essential. However, Beijing has experienced frustration since the end of the Cold War, especially since mid of 1990s. For instance, US arms transfer to Taiwan has been augmented both in quality as well as quantity, even though it assures Beijing to reduce the transfer in one of the communiqués. In rhetoric, the White House, from time to time, has eaten its word on 'one China policy'. In April 2001, Bush soon after he took power, pledged to do 'whatever it takes' to help Taiwan defend itself. And, for the first time, the US and Japan claimed that Taiwan is one of their "common strategic objectives" in a joint statement after the 2+2 dialogue this February. For the Chinese, US deeds do nothing good but encourage Taipei to move onto the road to independence.

Having experienced impatience and frustration over the first two in the three approaches of China's Taiwan policy, Beijing gradually drops these illusions, and pays more attention to deterrence.

Make deterrence work

In retrospective, as I illustrated above, China has long been taken a negative view on the classical deterrence theory, and thus has not developed a full-bodied deterrent capability. Resulting from a new look at the concept of deterrence, a learning process has emerged since 1990s. And Chinese security analysts, therefore, has tried to apply this theory in designing strategy toward Taiwan. In this endeavor, they find flaws in the Chinese practice of deterrence in each of its variables: interest, capability, credibility.

Interest

Interest, as one of components of deterrence, determines whether one state/party believes in a deterrence and deterrable or not, and thus determines the efficacy of a deterrence. With no doubt, Taiwan issue occupies a high stake in Chinese national interests. Chinese leadership views Taiwan as Chinese territory and reunification as one of its national goals. Taiwan issue is salient not only because it is vital in China's security calculus, but it is highly relevant to the legitimacy of any leadership. Indeed, independence of Taiwan would dramatically complicate or deteriorate Chinese security environment, and in sequent, sets up the awful for other secession groups. Moreover, independence of Taiwan has significant implication for the leadership in China, as one analyst noted, "no Chinese politician, strategist, or anyone else will dare to abandon the objective of making Taiwan return and the unification of the motherland,"⁶

Having recognized that it is long way to go to achieve the reunification, Chinese leadership has to secure Taiwan not to split into an independent state. China's tolerance of the status quo by no means that it losses or lowers its interest in the Taiwan issue. In a speech after the anti-secession law was passed at Chinese peoples' congress this spring, Hu Jintao, the core of the fourth generation of Chinese leaderships, declared that "Taiwan secessionists and their

⁶ Wang Yizhou, *Chinese Diplomacy Facing the 21st Century: the Search for the Three Musts and their Balance, Strategy and Management*, No. 6 (1999, p.20.

activities...jeopardize the fundamental interest of Chinese ethnic”. His pledge is seen by Chinese analysts as the most accurate expression about the mischief of Taiwan secession activities. In short, compared with Washington’s limited interest in Taiwan, Beijing’s interest is profound and deep-rooted. The asymmetric interests

Capability

Capability determines if the deterrence is credible or not and what extent to which state could inflict the cost to deter a first attack. If the cost does not outweigh the benefit of a potential attacker, the deterrence fails. It’s worthy to note that Beijing’s deterrence in the Taiwan theater has two dimensions: 1) to deter the secessionists from claiming a sovereignty state. 2) deter the US and other powers to intervene if a war or crisis erupted in the Taiwan Strait. In terms of China’s capability to accomplish such a deterrent objective, Beijing has enjoyed inferiority. Even though Beijing has kept sending strong warning through rhetoric and military exercises to the leaders in the island midst of Taiwan leader’s campaign for independence, they often are referred as empty warning of war, or “paper tiger” in Lee Tenghui’s term. Facing the danger of accelerated movement to independence, Beijing has mobilized more resources to military modernization. Some observers suggest that the mainland would not launch an invasion of Taiwan Island in its war planning; rather, it prefers a ‘coercive strategy’. In this line, China has upgraded its missile, submarine capabilities, and it has made the strengthened capability operational through the military exercises.

As the newly disclosed Pentagon’s report of China military capability notices, the military balance has started to move toward Mainland’s favor. With the strengthened capability, Beijing tends to raise the threshold which makes harder for Chen to get across, and at the same time, to convince the US not to jump in a war in which could cause a high casualty.

Resolve

Resolve is an indispensable part of deterrence. It sends message to the other party of a stand-off that the possibility and probability the party would like to use its capability in a conflict or war. Chinese analysts argue that the resolve is the key to keep the deterrence credible, but has been routinely neglected in the Chinese practice of deterrence. Although Taiwan issue is critical for China’s national interest, and Beijing has shown its determination to guarantee its sovereignty over Taiwan, some still put doubts in whether or not the mainland would likely to go for war. Their arguments include: sacrifice of economic achievement, constrains of resources, risk of Sino-US clash and deterioration of Sino-US relations, and concerns about the outcome and post-war governance in Taiwan etc.

To show its resolve, Beijing has taken a number of steps.

- The passage of anti-secession law in March is one of the signals that Beijing sends to international community. By passing this law, whoever takes the power in Beijing, he will take “whatever it takes to maintain the unity of motherland”.⁷
- Hu and Wen’s speeches. Four “nevers”

⁷ This note was made by Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Prime Minister, in this spring. Note to be completed

■ Military exercises

The impact of the new practice of deterrence

1) China has gained a strategic advantage in this tri-party interaction

By taking clear stand on deterrence, Beijing has actually shown its defensive, rather than an offensive posture, because the main objective of China's deterrence is to avoid the change of status quo across the Taiwan Strait. The leaders in Washington have to come to realize that it is Taipei rather than Beijing that wants to alter the status quo, therefore to take clearer stand to discourage Chen's pro-independent activities. The leaders in Taiwan have to realize, as a scholar at Taiwan University suggests, that "Taiwan's security interests are best served by a peace across the Taiwan Strait, rather American's weapons."⁸

2) Deterrence may provoke arms race in the region. Even though China would not likely to pursue a symmetry in the deterrence dyad, security dilemma drives party/state to catch up or retain the escalation dominance. CBMs, therefore, have to be applied to get the race under control and avoid miscalculation and misperception.

⁸ Bei Fan Wang, www.enorth.com.cn, March 19, 2005 Note to be completed