



Credibly Deterring China

NOVEMBER 2021 REBECCA L. HEINRICHS

Xi Jinping—general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and president of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for the indefinite future—has consistently expressed the PRC’s intent to replace the United States as the global leader.¹ The PRC’s behavior is in line with General Secretary Xi’s stated intent: exploiting the free and open US-led order and attempting to reshape global dynamics and systems to reflect its Marxist ideology.² These actions, defined by provocations and acts of aggression, have precipitated the deterioration of relations with the United States.

Specifically, China is behaving in abusive and irresponsible ways militarily against US regional allies and partners. It is within this context that China’s investments in its nuclear weapons program, considered alongside Beijing’s refusal to engage in transparency measures around its intent and capabilities, underscore the gravity of the situation. Nuclear war is a real possibility, which the United States must seek to prevent by focusing on credibly deterring the PRC. The PRC’s claims in the South China Sea could lead to miscalculations, military confrontation, and escalation.³ Moreover, it is not impossible, nor even implausible, that China could decide to use military force to seize control of Taiwan in an attempt at a *fait accompli*. There is ample evidence, however, that such a move would not result in the PRC’s desired outcome, and instead that the United States would vigorously

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- 1 Hal Brands, “What Does China Really Want? To Dominate the World,” Bloomberg, May 20, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-05-20/xi-jinping-makes-clear-that-china-s-goal-is-to-dominate-the-world>; James Doubeck, “China Removes Presidential Term Limits, Enabling Xi Jinping To Rule Indefinitely,” NPR, March 11, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/11/592694991/china-removes-presidential-term-limits-enabling-xi-jinping-to-rule-indefinitely>.
- 2 “United States Strategic Approach to The People’s Republic of China,” White House via Global Security, May 20, 2020, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/national/us-strategic-approach-to-prc_200520.pdf; 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 delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China), Xinhuanet, October 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.
- 3 The PRC’s insistence to stake claim to islands in the South China sea is becoming more dangerous as China becomes more powerful. How would the United States understand its obligations to allies if the PRC tests a nuclear weapon on one of the islands? Of note, the PRC has landed a nuclear-capable bomber on islands in the South China Sea, which Japan claims as its sovereign territory. See: Richard Lloyd Parry, “China Lands Nuclear Jets on Disputed Island Chain,” *The Times*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/china-lands-nuclear-jets-on-disputed-island-chain-3f105f78j>.



A helicopter carries a Taiwan flag during the national day celebration in Taipei, Taiwan, October 10, 2021. REUTERS/ Ann Wang.

engage. Taiwan is the flashpoint that could lead to a large-scale war.⁴ While analysts might determine that it is unlikely that either country could employ nuclear weapons against the other in the current geopolitical context, it is possible, so it is imperative that the United States consider how to regain and maintain strategic stability in the contemporary context.

A Growing PRC Missile Force and Required US Responses

To carry out its national objectives, the PRC has invested heavily in its military, including a growing, diverse, and large missile force specifically designed to attack aircraft carriers, US bases, and space assets. The Chinese have also invested heavily in cutting-edge technologies including hypersonic glide vehicles. The PRC can contest the United States in every domain, including space and cyberspace, so the United States should not assume

any US military asset would be safe if conflict breaks out. Consider, for example, the devastating impact of the PRC destroying US satellites. The United States relies on satellites to navigate, to communicate, for early missile warning, and for targeting the enemy. Thus, even with purely conventional weapons, the PRC has developed the ability to effectuate an outcome that would have strategic consequences for the United States. But the PRC's investments have gone even beyond the conventional realm.

Senior US civilian and military officials have publicly expressed concern about the developments in China's nuclear weapons investments and the trajectory of Beijing's nuclear investments for the future. Its strategic dyad of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) will soon become a triad, with the completion of its nuclear-capable bomber. And, within those land, sea, and air platforms, the

⁴ In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 2, 2021, retired Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, who served as National Security Advisor 2017-18, said "I do think the most significant flashpoint that could lead to a large-scale war is Taiwan. I think that has to do with Xi Jinping's belief he has a fleeting window of opportunity that is closing and that in his view, he wants to make China whole again. You see this with the extension of the Party's arm into Hong Kong in the genocidal campaign in Xinjiang." "Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Global Security," C-SPAN, March 2, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?509431-1/senate-armed-services-committee-hearing-global-security>.

PRC has a diverse range of options for nuclear delivery in the Indo-Pacific theater.

The PRC's investments in its nuclear weapons program are ongoing and uninhibited. US Strategic Command Commander Admiral Charles Richard issued the sober warning that a "there is a real possibility" that a regional crisis with China (or Russia) could escalate to the employment of nuclear weapons. He asserted, "China's nuclear weapons stockpile is expected to double (if not triple or quadruple) over the next decade."⁵ This analysis is consistent with the 2019 remarks of then-Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency Lieutenant General Robert P. Ashley, Jr. at a Hudson Institute event. He warned: "With its announcement of a new nuclear-capable strategic bomber, China soon will field its own version of a nuclear triad, demonstrating China's commitment to expanding the role and centrality of nuclear forces in Beijing's military aspirations. And like Russia, China is also working to field nuclear theater-range precision-strike systems."⁶

Taiwan Could be a Flashpoint

For the PRC, unifying Taiwan to mainland China is a vital national interest. Beyond the symbolic domestic benefit of seizing control of Taiwan (as it has done with Hong Kong), occupying Taiwan would give China other practical benefits, including control over the world's most productive source of semiconductor chips. But above all, seizing Taiwan would grant the PRC regional hegemony and the mantle of global preeminent power. As succinctly stated by strategist Elbridge Colby, "If Taiwan falls, China would have the ability to project military power throughout Asia. Japan, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands would all be more vulnerable to China's military."⁷ Not to be overlooked, in September 2020, China war-gamed an attack with a nuclear-capable bomber against what appeared to be Guam, a US territory, at the same time it practiced seizing Taiwan.⁸

For the United States, keeping democratic Taiwan free, autonomous, and outside China's clutches is a vital national interest. Maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific with the help of US allies and precluding the PRC from assuming hegemony over the region is dependent on Taiwan's security. To put an even finer point on that, the PRC's seizure of Taiwan would effectively mean the end of US global leadership. The ability of the United States to uphold its security commitments to its regional allies and its leadership in enforcing rules that govern safe and reliable trade and commerce will be supplanted by China's whims and interests. The Biden administration has explicitly stated its commitment to Taiwan, consistent with the longstanding US stance and is maintaining and building on the Trump administration's actions to back up these commitments.⁹

The stakes are monumental for both major nuclear powers, and military conflict over the fate of Taiwan could escalate to a nuclear war.¹⁰

US Investment in the Range of Deterrence Measures

The United States must invest in capabilities to deter Chinese aggression and do it in a way that effectively communicates US commitment to its vital interests and its resolve to defend them. It is not enough to merely invest in closing the gap between the United States and China in areas where China has chipped away at the strategic advantage of the United States. To deter China, the United States must convince the Chinese that deciding to make an aggressive move against its vital interests will not be worth the cost. This means the United States should invest in capabilities to threaten deterrence by punishment as well as capabilities and deployment measures that threaten deterrence by denial—both passive and active defenses. It also means the United States should consider both the regional and homeland contexts, and non-nuclear as well as nuclear capabilities.

5 Admiral Charles A. Richard, "Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence," *Proceedings*, February 2021, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>.

6 Rebecca L. Heinrichs, "Transcript: The Arms Control Landscape ft. DIA Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, Jr.," Hudson Institute, May 31, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/15063-transcript-the-arms-control-landscape-ft-dia-lt-gen-robert-p-ashley-jr>.

7 Elbridge Colby, "America Can Defend Taiwan," *Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-can-defend-taiwan-11611684038>.

8 Richard Wood, "China air force video appears to show simulated attack on island resembling Guam," 9News, September 22, 2020, <https://www.9news.com.au/world/chinese-military-video-shows-simulated-bombing-attack-on-us-base/bcab6fa-9414-487a-8786-489c189842bc>.

9 Morgan Ryan, "Biden Admin Vows to Deepen Ties with Taiwan as Chinese Warplanes Threaten Island," *American Military News*, January 28, 2021, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2021/01/biden-admin-vows-to-deepen-ties-with-taiwan-as-chinese-warplanes-threaten-island/>.

10 Hugh White, "Stakes over Taiwan couldn't be higher," *Financial Review*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/stakes-over-taiwan-couldn-t-be-higher-20210129-p56xqe>.



The submarine tender USS *Frank Cable* returns to its homeport in Guam. The United States relies on naval and air bases on Guam for security in the Indo-Pacific. US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jeremy Starr/Released. 120730-N-BK435-154. [tinyurl.com/jjzy9vwj](https://www.tinyurl.com/jjzy9vwj).

The faster the United States can telegraph that it is willing to fight and win if US deterrence fails, and that it is moving to do so quickly, the more effectively it will be able to complicate the PRC's calculations and uphold deterrence. This will ultimately create enough doubt in its ability to successfully carry out its objectives that it will be dissuaded from making the first act of aggression. US success in maintaining peace and stability in the region is critically dependent on close collaboration with allies. To the extent the United States can demonstrate solidarity with its allies, and keep lesser matters where its interests diverge private, the better.

Congress included in Section 1251 of the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act a requirement that the commander of US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) provide an independent assessment to Congress by March 1, 2021, outlining resourcing requirements for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) to defend US vital interests, deter China, and—if deterrence

fails—fight and win. The commander submitted that report and concluded, “[t]he greatest danger to the future of the United States continues to be an erosion of conventional deterrence.” The report reiterates Admiral Davidson’s call to defend Guam, stating, “Guam is our most crucial operating location in the western Pacific and its defense remains USINDOPACOM’s number one unfunded priority.” In addition, the report says, “USINDOPACOM requires highly survivable, precision-strike networks along the First Island Chain, featuring increased quantities of ground-based weapons.”¹¹

The commander’s requirements are worthy and deserving of strong bipartisan congressional support. The diplomatic work with allies required to actualize the plan will be significant but entirely possible. If the United States is serious about deterring a military confrontation, however, his request should not only be supported, but supported enthusiastically—and with an eye toward urgent deployments. An essay by Michèle Flournoy for *Foreign*

¹¹ US Pacific Command’s Investment Plan for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, Pursuant to Section 1251 of the FY21 National Defense Authorization Act. See <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr6395/BILLS-116hr6395enr.pdf>.

Affairs modeled the necessary urgency and seriousness. Fournoy suggested that “if the U.S. military had the capability to credibly threaten to sink all of China’s military vessels, submarines, and merchant ships in the South China Sea within 72 hours, Chinese leaders might think twice before, say, launching a blockade or invasion of Taiwan; they would have to wonder whether it was worth putting their entire fleet at risk.”¹² This is precisely right.

The United States should seek to quickly produce, test, and deploy at scale a robust conventional strike portfolio. Within this conventional strike portfolio, hypersonics are one class of weapon (with multiple subclasses) that the United States must produce at scale. Hypersonic weapons are critical in the highly contested regional context with the PRC and designed to have operational value—that is, to attack key nodes in PRC air defenses and certain counterspace capabilities. In addition to hypersonics, the United States should utilize mature weapons that could be produced sooner and in higher quantities due to their relative affordability. President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Cold War-era Intermediate-Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), due to Russia’s persistent cheating, frees up the United States to deploy a variety of ground-launched missiles, with ranges necessary to hold at risk certain targets in the region. The United States must take full advantage of this timely development.¹³

Prioritizing what is necessary for assuring allies should override other national objectives, including the Biden administration’s desire to achieve further arms control.¹⁴ For example, missile defense is critical for strategic stability, deterrence, and assurance. The United States and allies should anticipate Chinese objections and should not be daunted by them. China has objected to US-Japan missile defense cooperation in the past as well as US-South Korean missile defense cooperation.¹⁵ But improving and expanding regional missile defense is a critical component of both deterrence and assurance.

Even if specific US and ally missile defense deployments are meant to intercept non-Chinese missiles, as is the case of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment in South Korea, failing to improve those systems and demonstrate US alliance resolve in light of Chinese objections is unwise and sets a dangerous precedent. Japan could decide, for example, that US missile defense cooperation should move beyond defense against only against North Korea missiles, and the United States should be willing to meet those requirements without hesitation.

In appreciating the vulnerability and the indispensability of Guam in a war with China, Admiral Davidson has repeatedly requested significant investments in Guam’s increased protection, specifically 360-degree protection against air and missile attacks to bolster deterrence.¹⁶

Additionally, the United States should improve US homeland missile defense to defend against the most plausible kinds of missile threats and that increasingly means an attack from China with a handful of missiles (as opposed to a raid). It is imprudent to defend the homeland against a North Korean nuclear missile attack but remain intentionally vulnerable against what could be a grave, albeit modest-in-number, missile attack from the PRC, especially considering the uncertainty about the ability of the United States to sufficiently control the escalation of a war that begins in the Indo-Pacific theater. This means the United States should pursue the Next Generation Interceptor (NGI) program in tandem with improvements for the more limited homeland defense architecture to ensure the country’s missile defense capabilities remain adequate relative to any North Korean missile threat. The United States should also invest in promising advanced technologies, such as directed energy, which could effectively defend against increasingly complex threats and will have applications in the PRC context.

12 Michèle A. Fournoy, “How to Prevent a War in Asia: The Erosion of American Deterrence Raises the Risk of Chinese Miscalculation,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia>.

13 For more on taking advantage of a post-INF environment, please see Rebecca Heinrichs and Tim Morrison, “Put US Post-INF Missiles Into Production,” *Defense One*, December 20, 2019, <https://www.hudson.org/research/15610-put-us-post-inf-missiles-into-production>.

14 For more on how US extended deterrence measures have frayed, please see David Cooper’s “Trump and Obama: The odd couple who broke ‘extended deterrence’ for the Indo-Pacific,” *Hill*, February 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/539987-trump-and-obama-the-odd-couple-who-broke-extended-deterrence-for>; “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

15 “China Criticizes US Missile Defense Radar in Japan,” *Reuters*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-japan-usa/china-criticizes-u-s-missile-defense-radar-in-japan-idUSKCN0IC16P20141023>.

16 Richard R. Burgess, “Adm. Davidson: 360-Degree Air Defense of Guam is Top Priority,” *Seapower*, July 22, 2020, <https://seapowermagazine.org/adm-davidson-360-degree-air-defense-of-guam-is-top-priority/>.



A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptor is launched from a THAAD battery located on Wake Island, on November 1, 2015. Photo by Ben Listerman, Missile Defense Agency. <https://www.dvidshub.net/image/2266068/fto-02-e2a-flight-test>.

Consider non-Conventional Weapons

Obama-era US nuclear downsizing raised concerns among conservative politicians and security officials in Japan, generating skepticism of US extended deterrence commitments. In particular, the retirement of sea-launched Tomahawk Land Attack Missile-Nuclear (TLAM-N) increased concerns.¹⁷ Last year, the Pentagon acknowledged it had deployed at least one low-yield nuclear warhead on a US Navy nuclear ballistic missile submarine, consistent with the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review. This move was purportedly taken with the Russian nuclear context in mind. It was meant to adapt the US nuclear deterrent to disabuse Russia of the notion that it could escalate a conventional conflict to a nuclear one by employing a low-yield nuclear weapon in Europe, and that the United States and NATO would

merely sue for peace rather than respond with a low-yield nuclear weapon and risk escalation. It would be prudent to incorporate private planning as well as public statements about this capability in the China context.

Additionally, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review also planned that the "SLCM [Sea-Launched Cruise Missile] will provide a needed non-strategic regional presence, an assured response capability, and an INF-Treaty compliant response to Russia's continuing Treaty violation."¹⁸ The Trump administration rightly withdrew from the INF Treaty due to Russian cheating. However, the nuclear SLCM-N still has salience. The Biden administration should seriously consider the great potential of the SLCM-N in the China context, both for deterrence of China and for bolstering assurance of US allies.

¹⁷ Singo Yoshida, "Nuclear Deterrence: Mixed Messages from Japan," *Diplomat*, October 17, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/nuclear-deterrence-mixed-messages-for-japan/>.

¹⁸ Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

The United States is right to focus its national defense strategy to deter the PRC but, given the high-stakes nature of the contest between the PRC and the United States, it must also consider that should deterrence break down and warfare ensue, this conflict might not remain conventional. Indeed, it should guard against the fatal mistake of mirror imaging in its planning. In other words, it should not assume that the PRC will place a value on objectives in the same way the United States thinks *it ought* or make calculations in ways *the United States deems reasonable*. The United States should not assume PRC leadership's risk-taking decisions would be the same as its own. It should also consider that the PRC could miscalculate, wrongly deciding that a particular action would not elicit a particular response from the United States and its allies. And the United States should give great weight to the views of its allies when it comes to what is necessary for nuclear assurance. Failing to do so could result, however unintended, in nuclear proliferation. Last, the United States must hedge for the future and the possibility that the PRC could have the support of other significant military powers.

Contemporary strategic stability and deterrence require careful thinking and adaptations to policy, operations, and technology based on geopolitical realities. The United States would be wise to take a sober examination of those realities, make the investments, and implement associated strategies in collaboration with allies—and do so with a sense of urgency to communicate its resolve. Credibly deterring the PRC to avoid conflict and defend a peaceful US-led order should be its highest aim.

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