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Schelling Goes to Sea: Managing Perceptions in China's 'Contested Zone'

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China has geared its diplomatic and military endeavors since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis primarily to discouraging the United States (US) from getting involved in a cross-strait war. By constructing combat systems able to hold US naval assets at risk in Asia, and by telegraphing the importance it attaches to resuming control of Taiwan, Beijing hopes to induce Washington to stand aside or, at a minimum, to hesitate long enough for the Chinese military to accomplish its goals on the island. If successful, the Chinese communist leadership will present the US and the world the fait accompli of national unification before US forces can step in. China's coercive strategy toward Taiwan is a function in large part of its ability to influence how Washington reckons the value of de facto Taiwanese independence, including the likely costs and repercussions of defending the island.

For China, then, coercion and deterrence in the Taiwan Strait are as much a matter of communication and diplomatic signaling as of putting to sea potent ships, aircraft, and missiles. Beijing's prospects of recovering Taiwan vary directly with its ability to raise the perceived costs to the US of military action. Washington may simply tire of preserving the cross-strait status quo – letting Beijing win in the Strait without fighting.

Never Again

US naval intervention in the Strait confronted Beijing with the disquieting reality that a non-Asian sea power controlled events off Chinese

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shores – holding China's prospects for national unification and prosperity in its hands. To be sure, the American presence in Asia was nothing new. The United States vanquished the Japanese Empire in 1945, leaving the US Navy atop the Asian maritime order. The People's Republic of China, or PRC, had acquiesced in US Navy custodianship over Asian maritime security since the inception of the PRC in 1949. Mao Zedong, the founding chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, disdained nautical pursuits. Mao argued that the People's Liberation Army, or PLA, should content itself with controlling China's immediate coastal environs. This sort of thinking drove Chinese maritime policy and strategy, by and large, until the end of the Cold War.

The standoff in the Taiwan Strait, however, made two things glaringly obvious to Beijing. First, the PRC had vital interests in nearby waters. The crisis arose over the impending re-election of President Lee Teng-hui, whose supposed drive for independence and other transgressions seemed to cancel out the '1992 consensus' under which Taipei and Beijing jointly declared that there was only one China but agreed to disagree on what comprised that one China or who ought to rule it. Lee's actions seemed to cross the mainland's redlines for the use of military force. This affront demanded some form of forceful response as a deterrent. Accordingly, the PLA conducted multiple 'missile tests' in sea areas near Taiwan, both to intimidate the island's populace and to influence the 1996 election campaign.

Beyond lobbing surface-to-surface missiles toward Taiwan, however, there was little the PLA could do to subdue the island. The US Navy could impose command of the seas around Taiwan at will, isolating the island from a cross-strait military offensive without undue fear of Chinese countermeasures. The Clinton administration dispatched two aircraft-carrier battle groups to the area to perform a protective function, deterring any Chinese military action that might go beyond missile demonstrations. Faced with its inability to strike at US forces or vital interests, Beijing had little recourse other than to back down, acknowledge the uncomfortable reality that a maritime superpower controlled events off Chinese shores, and adapt its grand strategy to this reality.

Second, the US government could withdraw the international public goods it provided – chiefly maritime security – when it suited the interests of the US or its allies in the region, or conceivably on a whim.[1] The maritime constable could change his garb almost instantly, becoming a maritime tyrant capable of trampling China's prerogatives along its nautical periphery. What seemed to US officials like a routine exercise of naval power to manage regional conflict ended up being a defining moment in post-Cold

War Chinese foreign and defense policy. Deterring the US from intervening in some future showdown in the Strait assumed top priority for Beijing.

That meant building up the capacity to mount a credible threat to US forces, North America, or other vital US interests – raising the potential costs of entry into Asian waters to an unbearable level for Washington. Chinese analysts scrutinized the US carrier deployment for lessons applicable to future contingencies. There were at least four:

1. *Clarity of Message*. Diplomacy was a strong suit for Beijing in the Taiwan Strait crisis. Few in Washington, Taipei, or elsewhere in the international community doubted the sincerity of Chinese leaders' alarm at the island's seeming drift toward *de jure* independence. Given the value they and Chinese citizens clearly attached to resuming control of the island, it was a safe assumption that Beijing would use whatever instruments of national power it possessed. Consistent, often strident advocacy on behalf of national unification represented the groundwork for successful coercive diplomacy in the Taiwan Strait – provided China matched rhetoric with physical might.
2. *Naval Incapacity*. Beijing was unable to control events in the seas adjoining its shorelines. The 'first island chain' of which Taiwan forms the midpoint eluded the grasp of the Chinese military. Not only was the PLA unable to track and target the two US task forces; it could not even detect their presence. The debacle set in motion furious efforts to build up surveillance and intelligence capacity, as well as seagoing military capabilities able to operate beyond China's immediate coastal environs. Amassing the wherewithal for sea denial was the immediate goal for the PLA, while command of the sea might be thinkable over the longer term, opening up new coercive options in the cross-strait standoff.
3. *Asymmetric Possibilities*. Another finding involved undersea warfare. Chinese analysts concluded – rightly or wrongly – that US commanders had refrained from sending the *Nimitz* task force into the Strait for fear of Chinese submarines lurking there. Three implications emerged from this analysis. First, finding and sinking submarines remained a difficult problem, even for the world's predominant navy. US antisubmarine-warfare prowess had atrophied as the US Navy turned its attention to littoral combat. Second, carriers were more than instruments of war for the US. They were expensive, and consequently they were few in number. Only a dozen of these behemoths ranged across the world's oceans, and at any time a third of these were in shipyards for extended upkeep. America's position as the world hegemon depended in large measure on this 'lumpy capital', and US leaders could ill afford to lose

them in battle. Third, and closely related, carriers were tokens of US national prestige. Disabling or sinking a *Nimitz*-class vessel in combat would represent a serious blow, endangering US naval supremacy and diplomatic clout. For a modest investment in asymmetric capabilities like diesel-electric submarines, Beijing concluded, it could reap disproportionate military and political gains.

4. *Ability to Escalate*. Responding asymmetrically to US intervention could involve escalation. Embodied in a small, aging force of intercontinental ballistic missiles and a single, unreliable fleet ballistic-missile submarine, the PLA nuclear deterrent was woefully inadequate for this purpose. While it was sufficient for China's traditional posture of 'minimal deterrence', it was insufficient for coercion in a Taiwan contingency. Unable to escalate horizontally and vertically, holding US bases or the American homeland at risk through the threat of a nuclear exchange, China had little hope of deterring US involvement in the Strait.

The upshot: staying 'on message' while correcting material shortcomings should be the core of Chinese strategy toward Taiwan. Beijing needed to restate its opposition to Taiwanese independence clearly and consistently while convincing the few governments that recognized Taiwan to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The PLA needed the ability to monitor China's offshore domain, threatening US Navy task forces with unacceptable damage, and it needed to bolster its nuclear deterrent. This need not involve building a fleet symmetrical with the US Pacific Fleet. With selected capabilities like submarines or sea mines, China could create conditions highly inhospitable to US aircraft carriers – inducing US naval commanders and their political masters to keep their distance during a China–Taiwan war.

Skillful Non-use of Military Force

China's effort to dispute US mastery of Asian waters finds solid footing in both strategic theory and social science. To start with, Carl von Clausewitz advises statesmen and soldiers to analyze the costs of military enterprises. The value of the political object, he maintains, should determine the magnitude and duration of the effort expended on behalf of that object. Once the costs exceed the value of the object, the enterprise ought to be abandoned.[2] Building on Clausewitz's logic, it is possible to shift an adversary's cost-benefit calculus, raising the costs above the value that adversary attaches to its own political object. Estimating the value of the object for the

enemy, then, represents an essential part of pre-war net assessment.[3] An accurate estimate suggests how much of the nation's resources will be required to prevail in an armed conflict. It may also reveal strategic options that ratchet up the costs for the opposing side.

To be sure, Clausewitz writes primarily for operational-level commanders, defining strategy as the use of the engagement for the purposes of the war. His focus remains squarely on the battlefield during the 'war proper'.[4] But Clausewitz also postulates that 'war is only a branch of political activity; that is in no sense autonomous', and thus that the common assumption that war suspends political interchange between the belligerents 'and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own', is faulty:

> Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.[5]

By this the Prussian theorist means two things. War – the pursuit of national policy with the admixture of martial means – differs from other political interactions by virtue of its coercive nature, the impassioned environment, and a host of other factors. But political exchange persists between warring nation-states even after the bullets start flying – meaning that non-military intercourse like diplomacy, economic pressure or incentives, and alliance politics has some role to play in wartime. In large measure, accordingly, Clausewitzian precepts apply to the operational, strategic, and political levels. While he says little about the substance of policy, he insists that politics permeates all levels of war – perhaps even determining minor tactical matters like 'the posting of guards' if they hold operational or strategic import.[6]

Many of the concepts found in *On War* pertain to wartime and peacetime competition alike. In a similar vein, the classical Chinese theorist Sun Tzu maintained that international competition spanned the boundary between war and peace. Indeed, his injunction to 'win without fighting' implies that adroit statesmen and generals can arrange matters to convince an enemy to acquiesce in their chosen policy without a trial of arms.[7] A modern Chinese theorist and practitioner of statecraft, Mao Zedong, blurs the line between war and peace into invisibility, maintaining that 'politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed'.[8] If Mao and his philosophical forebears like Sun Tzu have it right, there is no sharp break between war and peace.[9] Political interactions fall along a continuum.

Many social scientists agree. Thomas Schelling observes that 'most conflict situations are essentially *bargaining* situations' in which strategy 'is not concerned with the efficient *application* of force but with the *exploitation of potential force*' (his emphasis). In particular, deterrence is the art of 'the skillful *non-use* of military forces', placing a premium on using latent military power as a tool of political influence (his emphasis). For Schelling, '"winning" in a conflict…may be done by bargaining, by mutual accommodation, and by the avoidance of mutually damaging behavior'.[10] The government that deploys bargaining power effectively couples physical power with persuasive evidence that it will unleash that power should an opponent behave unacceptably. In short, the antagonist that frames matters to its advantage improves its chances of winning without fighting.

Veiled or overt threats are central to hard-bargaining situations. Schelling's 'Commitment Tactic' involves communicating one's 'final' position, or nonnegotiable demands, to the other side and showing that incentives rule out any flexibility on these demands: 'What we have to do is to get ourselves into a position where we cannot fail to react as we said we would – or where we would be obliged by some overwhelming cost of not reacting in the manner we had declared.'[11]

All leaders must answer to certain constituencies; no leader can lightly accept the humiliation of climbing down from a public pronouncement. Waffling or dissembling on a commitment – taking a stand, then compromising on principle – undercuts a statesman's credibility in bare-knuckles diplomacy, reducing interlocutors' incentives to yield. Prospective adversaries know this, and thus are bound to take seriously public statements of purpose from high-ranking leaders. An individual who has demonstrated resolve in the past stands a good chance of persuading an adversary he prefers to endure heavy costs rather than sacrifice principle.[12]

One caveat is worth stating. The commitment tactic risks creating *two* immovable positions. If both sides stand on principle, high-stakes brinksmanship, a complete breakdown, or armed conflict may ensue.[13] This is a tactic best used sparingly. Wise negotiators estimate the likelihood of having to follow through on commitments before binding themselves. Some gamesmanship is unavoidable. Schelling observes that, while a negotiator typically has no desire to execute a threat, he 'does have an incentive to bind himself to fulfill the threat, if he thinks the threat may be successful, because the threat and not its fulfillment gains the end; and fulfillment is not necessary if the threat succeeds'.[14] Successful statesmen say what they intend to do and do what they say, lending their words and actions a measure of predictability.

How do these theoretical precepts apply in the real world? Political and military leaders can deploy all elements of national power – diplomatic, ideological and informational, military, and economic – to manipulate real and perceived costs and payoffs, enhancing their credibility in zero-sum encounters. Some strategic options open to governments:

- *Tell an Appealing Story.* Strategic communications with audiences able to influence the outcome represents a key ingredient in high-stakes diplomatic encounters. Again, conveying resolve is critical. Consistency in words and deeds over a long period of time builds up credibility when the time comes to offer carrots or brandish sticks. A peace offensive intended to reassure onlookers of one's peaceful intentions is another useful option. Positioning oneself as the aggrieved party – and thereby attracting the sympathy of audiences like an enemy populace or the international community – can apply pressure on an opponent, enhancing the prospects of diplomatic or military victory.
- *Divide Opposing Alliances.* Peeling off international support for the main adversary increases one's relative power. Courting, threatening, or intriguing against allies enfeebles the other side in material and political terms. Sun Tzu urged rulers to divide enemy alliances, ranking efforts to sow divisions second on his list of strategic targets. (First was defeating an enemy's strategy.) This was doubly true when the enemy's strategy *was* to preserve its alliances, without which it could not resist the demands made on it. Deft diplomatic maneuver helps the sovereign attain 'the supreme excellence', winning without fighting. Deterrence can enter into the equation. If one side telegraphs its willingness and capacity to damage the interests of one member of an opposing alliance, it may be able to deter that member – driving it out of the alliance or, at a minimum, imposing stress on relations among the allies.
- *Strike at the More Powerful Ally.* Should war ensue, attacks on enemy alliances remain an effective approach on the operational level. Clausewitz advises commanders to seek out ways to splinter the 'community of interest' uniting a countervailing alliance. The ability to strike a blow against the army of the more powerful ally is especially important in a war in which the main enemy depends on help from a stronger partner.[15] Collapsing the opposing alliance could collapse enemy resistance altogether, opening the way to military and political victory.
- *Amass Local Military Preponderance.* A build-up of military power – the physical expression of the capacity to elevate the costs for an antagonist – represents a straightforward way to strengthen a political leader's hand. This need not mean a build-up of forces symmetrical with those of the

> adversary. Nor, in the case of a regional power confronting a superpower, is outright military superiority necessary to prevail. Seldom if ever do entire orders of battle clash in the real world. Instead, superiority over the largest fraction of an enemy's military likely to be committed to the fight, or even the simple ability to deny access to nearby waters and skies long enough for the regional power to accomplish its aims, is the sine qua non for victory in a regional contingency.

Two closely related points pertain.

First, regional powers possess certain intrinsic advantages within their geographic environs, including nearby bases, short lines of communication, superior manpower reserves, and knowledge of material, political, and cultural circumstances in the region. As Barry Posen observes, regional powers can exact a high price from superior forces that venture into the region – raising the costs of entry into their geographic backyards. As superpower forces close in on enemy-held territory, that enemy becomes more and more competitive, its overall inferiority notwithstanding. 'This arises from a combination of political, physical, and technological facts', observes Posen. 'These facts combine to create a contested zone – arenas of conventional combat where weak adversaries have a good chance of doing real damage to US forces.'[16] To borrow a sports metaphor, regional adversaries enjoy the home-field advantage, letting them push the 'culminating point of the attack' – the point at which the defender's strength exceeds an oncoming attacker's – away from their frontiers, holding approaching enemy forces at bay.[17]

Second, the responsibilities of world power compound the dilemma for a superpower contemplating intervention in regional strife. In most circumstances a superpower's efforts will be limited by 'contingent', to borrow from Sir Julian Corbett.[18] Having assumed worldwide commitments, that is, such a power can spare maximum force for any given regional contingency only if it attaches enormous value to the political object, justifying an effort of commensurate magnitude and duration. More likely, it will apply only partial force to regional conflicts, allowing the regional power to amass local parity or even superiority. World power thus represents a vulnerability in a sense. If a regional power can impose sufficient costs on a superpower, it can threaten to strip that superpower of its hegemonic standing. The prospect of losing its dominant position in an afternoon is bound to affect the cost-benefit calculus of a superpower, and thus its propensity to accept risk in a secondary theater.

As noted before, the lessons Beijing drew from the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis were overwhelmingly material and doctrinal in nature. The

PLA needed to back Chinese commitments with steel and identified Taiwanese and US vulnerabilities it might exploit. Schelling rightly observes that 'it is a tradition in military planning to attend to an enemy's capabilities, not his intentions'. He also points to the interactive nature of human affairs, observing that 'deterrence is about intentions – not just *estimating* enemy intentions but *influencing* them'.[19] Schelling seems to undersell the importance of material capabilities, however, or rather to presuppose a relative parity between two or more contending parties. Such assumptions often founder on geostrategic realities.

The US and the Soviet Union, for instance, boasted comparable arsenals, allowing Cold War politics to be reduced, more or less, to a function of shaping perceptions. Should Washington or Moscow convince its adversary that unacceptable repercussions would flow automatically from certain actions, deterrence would be a likely result – unless of course that adversary attached such value to the object that it was willing to incur heavy costs in lives and treasure to meet its political objectives. Any assumptions of naval and military parity clearly did not hold true for the US and China in the mid-1990s, when the high seas were barren of PLA naval assets. The cross-strait military balance is a matter of debate today. The balance between China and Taiwan now clearly favors the mainland. Widening the analysis to include America, US naval supremacy is increasingly in doubt for a variety of reasons – escalating shipbuilding costs and economic malaise, to name two. The uncertain configuration of military power engenders political uncertainty.

Now, Schelling's apparent blind spot is a function of his audience, the level of analysis, and chronology. He writes less for defense officials or military officers than for statesmen entrusted with foreign policy. Whereas Clausewitz confines his attentions in large measure to the operational level and to the 'war proper', Schelling is more like Sun Tzu in orientation. He is more concerned with the strategic and political levels of international competition, and he is mainly interested in international interactions that take place before the outbreak of war. After all, as he points out, mastering the art of commitment allows top leadership a chance to fulfill its policy aims without resort to arms. For him, military force is as much an instrument of influence as a bludgeon to compel an enemy to do one's bidding.

Erecting a Contested Zone

Beijing understands all of this. China suffered – and suffers – from no deficit of political determination to regain control of what it sees as a renegade province and one of the last remaining impediments to national unity.

While the Chinese leadership sees no reason for haste with regard to reunification – Mao Zedong famously told President Richard Nixon that China could wait a century for it – Beijing has never flinched from this nonnegotiable political goal. Rather, China's coercive effort toward Taiwan in 1995–96 exposed a shortfall in capabilities useful for holding US Navy expeditionary strike groups at bay or targeting other assets that would raise the costs of war for Washington. The challenge before China, then, is fourfold:

1. *Influence US Intentions*. It must remind all parties to the dispute, as well as outsiders able to influence the outcome, that it will not deviate from its ultimate aims. This is a straightforward matter of diplomatic consistency, and a task at which the communist leadership has excelled during the six decades since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Beijing has commitment in abundance on matters relating to Taiwanese independence, and indeed it appears more committed than Washington or even Taipei to settling matters on its terms. The value of the object justifies an effort of maximum duration and magnitude. Maintaining a consistent message about ultimate goals – and conveying the passion with which the Chinese people, armed forces, and political leadership view these goals – is essential at the diplomatic and strategic levels. Difficult though managing human interactions may be, diplomacy represents the easy part of the cross-strait equation for China.
2. *Develop Fleet Tactics and Hardware*. The hard part is for the PLA to develop capabilities missing in 1995–96. This will put substance into threats aimed at the US, its navy, its allies in the region, and its interests. Shoring up the capabilities lacking during that crisis will allow Beijing to respond directly to US intervention off Asian shores while striking back asymmetrically at American alliances, economic interests, or even the homeland. In short, China needs to assert local preponderance along its maritime periphery, inhibiting US entry into waters and skies adjoining the island while showing that it can hit back at interests Washington presumably values more than de facto Taiwanese independence. This would match political determination with military might, giving Beijing the capacity not only to mount credible threats but to follow through on its threats should Taipei or Washington balk.
3. *Keep 'Taiwan Independence Forces' in Check*. Gaining the upper hand over the Taiwanese armed forces is a critical element of Chinese naval strategy. Cross-strait military superiority carries a variety of benefits for Beijing. Absent the element of Chinese coercion, the Taiwanese electorate clearly leans toward *de jure* independence from the mainland.

As the PLA has tipped the military balance in its favor, however, the overwhelming majority of respondents in opinion polls have come to support the status quo, whatever their leanings might be in the abstract. Only a tiny minority – generally fewer than 10 per cent of respondents – would accept the costs and hazards associated with a bid for outright independence. As the PLA increases its military edge over the island's armed forces and its capacity to hold US reinforcements at bay, Taipei may ultimately capitulate, relenting on its demand for more or less perpetual de facto independence. And indeed, the Taiwanese populace and its American benefactors seemed to heave a sigh of relief following the 2008 election of President Ma Ying-jeou, an unabashed advocate of closer cross-strait cultural and economic ties.[20] As Beijing's military capacity to impose unification on Taipei increases, in short, the likelihood of its actually having to fight for its aims decreases.

4. *Think Ahead to the 'Day after Taiwan'*. Vaulting back up to the level of strategy and high politics, China's leadership must communicate its intentions artfully. What, China's neighbors will reasonably ask, are the purposes of the PLA's increasingly imposing arsenal of nautical weaponry? The interactive relationship between hardware and diplomacy cannot be underestimated. Chinese emissaries must strike a delicate balance. They must show, *pace* Schelling, that they are irrevocably committed to using these capabilities should certain redlines – say, a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence – be crossed. And they must do this while reassuring neighbors predisposed to worry about the ambitions of this new seafaring power. China's carefully wrought 'soft power' diplomacy, which depicts China as a responsible great power with no desire to bully its neighbors, could suffer should Beijing mishandle military operations in the Taiwan Strait. What will become of China's seagoing capabilities on the 'day after Taiwan', once China has achieved its long-sought objective of national reunification? Will a militant China emerge? Clearly, issuing threats and palliatives at the same time and to disparate audiences constitutes a strategic-communications challenge of monumental proportions for Chinese leaders.

Again, Barry Posen's concept of an offshore contested zone harks back to the Clausewitzian concept of the culminating point of the attack. But there is clearly much more to contested zones than simple correlations of military force among prospective belligerents. As it builds up its capacity and reach, the PLA can push the culminating point outward from Chinese shores, improving Beijing's capacity to deter US intervention or, should deterrence fail, to mete out punishment against US forces. Schelling might describe

the contested zone as a manifestation of potential force, useful for coercion and deterrence.

In strictly military terms, the PLA likely would not attempt a perimeter defense of Asian waters, with all the resource demands such an approach would entail in the vast Pacific. It would take its cue from Mao Zedong, who urged Chinese commanders to mimic the 'clever boxer' who 'usually gives a little ground at first, while the foolish one rushes in furiously and uses up all his resources at the very start, and in the end he is often beaten by the man who has given ground'. Mao quoted Sun Tzu, who urged generals to 'avoid the enemy when he is full of vigor, strike when he is fatigued and withdraws', approvingly.[21] For him, yielding territory was a precursor to the clever boxer's roundhouse counterpunch.

The home-field advantage, in short, improves a lesser power's chances of denying a superior one access to the seas and skies along peripheral areas, or even commanding its oceanic environs. Coastal states intent on creating contested zones can hope to (a) raise the political, economic, or military costs of entry into nearby waters or airspace, deterring an adversary from even making the attempt; (b) deny an opponent that is undeterred access to the commons for at least a finite period; or even (c) assert local supremacy over the largest naval contingent the external power is likely to dispatch to nearby seas and skies. Several advantages accrue to regional powers intent on defending contested zones, even against global naval powers like the British Empire of bygone years or the US today:

- *Mismatch in Political Commitment.* In competitive endeavors, the side that wants to prevail more often does. The defender can summon up greater political resolve. It is fighting close to home for aims to which its government, military forces, and populace typically attach great value. Thus it is willing to undertake a longer, costlier effort to realize its goals. By contrast, faraway great powers must juggle multiple commitments and often recoil from the costs and risks of protracted action. Such disparities oftentimes characterize regional conflicts that involve world powers.
- *Nearby Assets and Sustainment.* The defender typically possesses marked material advantages. Its air, naval, and ground forces are stationed nearby. They enjoy short lines of communication with their bases, allowing them to rearm, reprovision, and refit after battle. Manpower is abundant. By contrast, a world power must sustain operations across great distances, incurring great cost while straining its logistics capacity. This is especially true in the Asia-Pacific region, where the tyranny of distance is a basic fact of life.

- *Familiarity with the Strategic Setting.* Knowing the operating environment is invaluable. Because it is situated in-theater, the defender is intimately familiar with the region's geographic, political, and cultural terrain, as well as circumstances that shape the strategic context. Greater understanding of the operational and tactical landscape tends to improve the performance of indigenous forces, even in a tilt against an outside power that commands greater resources and superior forces.
- *Concentrated Study of the Opponent.* Material inferiority concentrates minds. A savvy regional power that anticipates taking on a hegemonic opponent will carefully study its prospective antagonist's way of war in an effort to discern patterns, trends, weakness, and vulnerabilities in that antagonist's operational art. The reverse may not be true, or even practical, for a world power confronting manifold potential antagonists and contingencies. Such asymmetries are bound to favor the regional power that knows its enemy, despite that enemy's superiority on paper.
- *Doing More with Less.* The proliferation of cheap but effective armaments for close-in operations has allowed regional adversaries to amass surprisingly lethal arsenals, featuring systems like sea mines and anti-ship cruise missiles. Coastal powers are often the beneficiaries of transfers of dual-use and off-the-shelf technologies. Even trivial forces like Somali militias have exacted unacceptable political costs from the US military, forcing it to change its behavior. The 1987 Iraqi Exocet missile strike on the destroyer USS *Stark* and Hizballah's 2006 strike on the Israeli corvette *Eilat* serve as reminders that inexpensive weaponry can penetrate the defenses of expensive warships.

Influencing US Intentions

In light of all this, it appears that a Chinese strategy of deterrence is taking shape in the Taiwan Strait. As Thomas Schelling points out, a believable statement of political commitment joined to the capacity to uphold that commitment is the essence of deterrence or coercion. Its marked advantage in political commitment, along with tepid attitudes voiced in the US toward cross-strait politics, could let Beijing dissuade Washington from getting involved in hostilities in the Strait altogether. This would be especially true should the mainland cow the Taiwanese populace or their leadership into submission by virtue of its military supremacy. There would be little Washington could do other than to stand down. Or, at a minimum, US leaders might hesitate in times of crisis long enough for China to create a fait accompli. American public support is questionable. Asked whether China poses a serious threat to the island, most US citizens polled respond

in the affirmative, but their willingness to invest US lives and treasure in meeting that threat appears thin. Majorities typically oppose sending US forces into harm's way to uphold de facto Taiwanese independence. Observes one survey of American attitudes:

> Much previous research has shown that, in general, Americans are wary of using military force without benefit of allies and a broad multilateral context for [US] actions. The possibility of having to defend Taiwan falls into the unilateral category – and it does so much more unequivocally than do most of the possible conflicts into which the US could be drawn. Thus it is not surprising that *the polls give no suggestion of majority support*.[22]

It seems safe to say there is little public ardor for waging war against China, a valuable trading partner, on Taiwan's behalf.

In all likelihood, tough economic times and financial upheaval will only harden public opposition to a new military engagement. Now, if the US estimated the magnitude, duration, and costs of a cross-strait war as low, the public might regard sustaining the island's de facto independence as a worthwhile undertaking. But the prospect of a long, costly conflict disproportionate to the value of the object inspires muted enthusiasm at best.

Will a new presidency change that? Should President Barack Obama apply his considerable rhetorical gifts to rallying popular support, he might swing the populace in favor of succoring Taiwan. But there would be opportunity costs measured in Obama's other priorities, such as reinvigorating the American economy, drawing down the expedition in Iraq, and ramping up the effort in Afghanistan. That he would place these priorities at risk absent strong provocation from Beijing seems doubtful.[23]

Fleet Tactics with Chinese Characteristics

Combat performance, measured in weapon systems, doctrine, and tactical skill, represents the bedrock for any Chinese threats pertaining to Taiwan. Without proven combat capability, Beijing could suffer another debacle along the lines of the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait crisis. Here again, Mao Zedong's writings offer a glimpse into how the PLA will wage war in the China seas. There was a pronounced geospatial component to Mao's theorizing about active defense – the land-warfare doctrine from which China's naval strategy of 'offshore active defense' takes its name and inspiration. Writing about the Sino-Japanese War, Mao observed that Japan, the invading power, operated on 'exterior lines' in an effort to envelop the defending Chinese, who operated on 'interior lines'. Then as now, the prospect of

encirclement fueled anxieties among Chinese leaders and stimulated thought about countermeasures. According to Milan Vego,

> A force moves along *interior lines* when it runs between those of the enemy's lines of operations. Interior lines always originate from a central position. They are formed from a central position prolonged in one or more directions or they can also be understood as a series of central positions linked with one another. Interior lines in general allow concentration of one's forces against one part of the enemy force, while holding the other in check with a force distinctly inferior in strength.[24]

Relegated to the interior lines, Chinese communist forces typically fought at a disadvantage relative to their adversaries. Even so, maintained Mao, it was 'possible and necessary to use tactical offensives within the strategic defensive, to fight campaigns and battles of quick decision within a strategically protracted war and to fight campaigns and battles on exterior lines within strategically interior lines'. While he was analyzing the guerrilla campaign against Japan, he assured his readers that this maxim 'holds true both for regular and for guerrilla warfare'.[25]

To wage this sort of micro-level offensive within a macro-level defensive campaign, Mao advised commanders to position forces at strategic points where they could deplete and exhaust enemy forces, vanquishing them piecemeal. 'Concentrate a big force to strike at a small section of the enemy force' and annihilate it, he advised. Better to cut off one of an enemy's fingers entirely than to injure them all.[26] Interior lines had their advantages. As Vego suggests, Mao Zedong's strategic wisdom applies to sea as well as land combat. Chinese naval strategists like Ni Lexiong now talk routinely of prying control of the waters within the first island chain from the US Navy's grasp.[27] They intend to surround and control these waters by offensive means, even while the US retains its overall mastery of Asian waters. Indeed, it is increasingly common for Chinese strategists to urge Beijing to seize 'absolute control' of the seas within the island chain – giving conceptions of a passive Great Wall strategy an ominous twist.[28]

The Chinese military already possesses or plans to acquire capabilities useful for prosecuting a sea-denial strategy in littoral waters and airspace. China has purchased arms from Russia lavishly while pressing ahead with an array of indigenous programs. The result: a leap in offensive combat power suitable for sea denial.[29] Sophisticated warships armed with anti-ship missiles and next-generation air-defense radars and missiles – designed to increase their survivability against long-range air strikes – increasingly form

the backbone of the Chinese surface fleet. Modern diesel submarines, difficult to detect and track in the littoral environment, are entering service in significant numbers. More accurate and longer-range ballistic and cruise missiles, advanced ground-based air-defense systems, and capable naval fighter/attack aircraft are some of the other key features of China's military modernization effort.[30] If the Chinese package these assets wisely and develop the requisite tactical proficiency, they will gain confidence in their ability to deter or defeat any foreign power intent on hostile entry into nearby waters.[31]

Interestingly, many of China's emerging military capabilities, including anti-ship missiles, air-defense systems, and attack aircraft, are designed to launch strikes against targets along the littoral from bases on the mainland. This approach would exploit China's deep continental interior, which in effect affords PLA forces a safe haven from which to inflict punishment against intruding forces operating along the coastline.[32] Its possession of such a haven would also allow Beijing to dare US forces to strike at the mainland – and risk seeing a limited conflict at sea escalate to full-blown war, with repercussions disproportionate to presumably modest US strategic goals. In Beijing's reckoning, the Clausewitzian value of the object would not measure up to the magnitude or the duration of the effort, let alone the long-term diplomatic costs of strikes on the Chinese homeland. In all likelihood, then, shore-based assets would be exempt from counter-strikes until they ventured seaward.

In other words, a PLA that exploits the mainland's vast strategic depth will enjoy the luxury of waiting for enemy forces to enter the combat range of its weaponry – compelling US forces to seek battle on China's geographic and military terms. Dispersed attacks on exterior lines would become thinkable, as they were for the Chinese Red Army in its struggles against the Japanese and Nationalist armies.

Coda: What About the Day After Taiwan?

Suppose China's leadership effectively yokes military capability to diplomacy, generating the power to hurt US interests. And, suppose it deters or defeats US intervention in the Taiwan Strait, resolving the question of Taiwan independence to its satisfaction. Beijing will derive a host of benefits from regaining control of the island, ranging from national unification to an offshore naval staging base that overshadows the sea routes connecting East Asia with the Middle East and Africa and allows ready egress into the Pacific Ocean. Having applied its energies to creating a contested zone off Asian shores, and having demonstrated its ability to have

its way with smaller neighbors without US interference, it will not lightly relinquish its new power and prestige.

Even successful coercion in the Strait could have repercussions for Chinese policy and strategy. A hypothesis: Beijing may find that, unless carefully managed, its rise to great naval power will damage China's standing in Asia. Neighboring capitals will scrutinize how China deploys its newfound instruments of comprehensive national power, looking for indicators of future Chinese behavior. The lessons they draw may incline them to strategies uncongenial to China. East and Southeast Asian governments might, say, form a countervailing alliance among themselves and with outside powers like the US or India. Needless to say, Chinese soft power could suffer should Chinese brinksmanship vis-à-vis the US fail, compelling Beijing to carry out its threats. A Taiwan Strait war resulting in significant civilian deaths among the Taiwanese populace, an insurgency on the island, or a bloodletting between US and PLA forces – sowing lasting enmity between China and the US – would negate Beijing's carefully wrought image of a beneficent great power.

The ability to coerce or deter the US and Taiwan is a fine thing in the eyes of China's leadership. But the manner in which coercion takes place in the Taiwan Strait matters – as does Beijing's ability to situate its actions within a diplomatic narrative that appeals to fellow Asian powers. Small states worried about finding themselves on the business end of Chinese coercion will be watching.

NOTES

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3 Ibid. p.79.
4 Ibid. pp.36–7.
5 Ibid. p.605.
6 Ibid. pp.87, 606.
7 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford UP 1963) p.77.
8 Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War* [1938] (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1972) pp.226–8.
9 Sun Tzu deemed winning without fighting the supreme excellence for kings and commanders. Americans tend to look askance at such notions, conceiving of war as something that happens 'should deterrence fail'. For them, diplomacy halts when the shooting starts and resumes when the guns fall silent, presumably after the overthrow of an enemy. '*Sun-Tzu's Art of War',* in *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO: Westview 1993) p.161; Carnes Lord, 'American Strategic Culture', *Comparative Strategy* 5/3 (1985) p. 276; Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1973) pp.xvii–xxiii.
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11 Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2008) p.43.

12 Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (note 10) pp.21–80; Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (note 11) pp.35–91.
13 Schelling, *Strategy of Conflict* (note 10) pp.21–80.
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15 Clausewitz, *On War* (note 2) pp.56–8, 596.
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21 Mao Zedong, 'Strategy in China's Revolutionary War' [1936], in *Selected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1966) pp.208, 211, 217, 234.
22 'American Attitudes: Americans & the World', *World Public Opinion.org*, ⟨www.americans-world.org/digest/regional_issues/china/china7.cfm⟩. See also *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, 12 June 2008, pp.34–44, ⟨http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/ 260.pdf⟩.
23 For an extended treatment of US and Taiwanese attitudes toward the cross-strait impasse, see Holmes, 'A Clausewitzian Appraisal of Cross-Strait Relations' (note 20).
24 Milan N. Vego, *Naval Strategy and Operations in Narrow Seas* (London: Frank Cass 1999) pp.85–8. For the US Army's definition of interior lines, see Headquarters, US Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-0, Operations* (Washington DC: US Army June 2001) pp.5-7, 5-9, ⟨www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/service_pubs/fm3_0b.pdf⟩.
25 Mao Zedong, 'Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War' [1938], in *Selected Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1966) p. 83.
26 Ibid. pp. 82–4.
27 Adm. Liu Huaqing, who commanded the PLA Navy during the 1980s, coined the phrase 'offshore active defense'. He urged China to adopt a phased strategy to wring control of the waters within the first island chain from the US Navy before turning its attention to the waters within the 'second island chain', farther out in the Pacific, and ultimately to global competition for maritime supremacy. See Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-First Century* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 2001) pp.165–68; Jeffrey B. Goldman, 'China's Mahan', *US Naval Institute Proceedings* (March 1996) pp.44–7; Jun Zhan, 'China Goes to the Blue Waters: The Navy, Sea Power Mentality, and the South China Sea', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 17/3 (Sept. 1994) pp.189–91; Alexander Chieh-Cheng Huang, 'The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy', *Naval War College Review* 47/3 (Summer 1994) p.18.
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31 James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'The Influence of Mahan upon China's Maritime Strategy', *Comparative Strategy* 24/1 (Jan.–March 2005) pp.53–71; Lyle J. Goldstein and William S. Murray, 'Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force', *International Security* 28/4 (Spring 2004) pp.162–94.
32 Of the Japanese invasion of China, Mao wrote, 'Japan, though strong, does not have enough soldiers. China, though weak, has a vast territory, a large population and plenty of soldiers.' Even if strong enemy forces seized key urban areas and communication nodes, then, China would retain 'a general rear and vital bases from which to carry on the protracted war to final victory'. Mao, 'Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War' (note 25) p.158.