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Conquering Taiwan by Other Means: China's Expanding Coercive Options

Concerns about the growing military power of China and the increasing military vulnerability of Taiwan are not new. Nevertheless, they have reached a fever pitch in recent years.[1] While US policymakers have labeled China as the pacing challenge for American defense strategy, US defense planners have regarded a Chinese invasion of Taiwan as the pacing scenario when it comes to posture and procurement.[2] However, the policy discourse has not adequately considered why or how China might seek to annex Taiwan by means short of an all-out invasion, even as Chinese leaders prepare for the island's territorial conquest via amphibious assault.

The challenge China poses to US defense strategy is no longer up for serious debate. The country's size, wealth, and location in the world's most economically important region set it apart from other US adversaries. It also enjoys inherent competitive advantages over a geographically remote and globally deployed great power like the United States, including the ability to concentrate much of its attention and most of its resources on one chief rival. Finally, Beijing has been modernizing its military across the board to exploit structural vulnerabilities in the American style of expeditionary warfare—including Washington's dependence on a handful of fixed and mobile bases to project air power, its aging and shrinking inventory of expensive-to-maintain platforms, its insufficiently

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resilient information networks, and a logistics infrastructure that might not be up to the task of supporting high-intensity operations in highly contested environments.[3] As the congressionally-mandated National Defense Strategy Commission recently observed, current trendlines indicate that China is on pace to be "a peer, if not a superior, of the United States across domains, a situation the United States has not faced since the height of the Cold War."[4]

By contrast, a Chinese seizure of Taiwan without invasion is rarely debated seriously but deserves more scrutiny than it receives. The prevailing focus on the defense of Taiwan against invasion is an understandable one. After all, the potential costs of a conflict in and around the Taiwan Strait, the strategic and economic consequences that might flow from the island's fall, and the common conviction that a US military capable of defeating a Chinese invasion could handle any other threats that Beijing might muster all suggest that a counter-invasion focus is the right approach for the Department of Defense, as well as the wider US and allied national security community. Yet, there are common-sense reasons to suspect that this emphasis on invasion is overweighted, and that China might consider other potentially less costly methods of taking Taiwan.

Notably, an invasion would entail launching an extraordinarily complex operation against a hard island target while also taking on the world's most capable armed forces—and doing so with an expensive and untested military that is the centerpiece of Beijing's quest for status and prestige. Under these conditions, success might not come cheap, if it comes at all, and failure could result in a generational setback for a rising great power. Moreover, China has, or will soon have, a variety of coercive tools at its disposal. Although the amphibious forces that would assault Taiwan and the missile forces that could target the United States tend to capture the most attention, it has also been building out its irregular and paramilitary maritime options, its surface naval assets, and its nuclear arsenal. These tools could complement or, in some cases and in certain combinations, even substitute for an invasion force.

China has, or will soon have, a variety of coercive tools at its disposal

Finally, and most importantly, the current focus on invasion might misread China's ultimate theory of victory by relying on a very narrow understanding of applied military power when a broader understanding of coercive military power is more relevant. Those who worry most about invasion assume that the center of gravity for any Chinese campaign is the enemy's fielded forces, including their formations, platforms, and personnel. In its quest for military victory, therefore, Beijing will try to eliminate Taiwan's armed forces and reduce

America's military ability (and perhaps that of its allies) to intervene on the island's behalf at the outset of a conflict. By decimating the opponents' *means* to resist, so goes this reasoning, China's aim is to remove any real choice on the part of adversary policymakers, even if they possessed the will to fight back, and thereby achieve a military *fait accompli*.

However, it is plausible that Beijing sees another path to success. China may follow an alternative theory of victory that targets the risk calculus of decision-makers in Taipei, in US ally capitals, and in Washington, DC, all of whom might be influenced in other ways that, at least on paper, look to be much cheaper for China than launching an all-out invasion.

For instance, if Beijing can convince leaders in Taipei to concede quickly, it is unlikely that outsiders will mount a serious defense on their behalf. If it can convince leaders in Tokyo to stand aside from the start, it is unlikely that the United States could fight effectively on its own. And if it can convince leaders in Washington that the risks of war are so great that indecision and delay are the result, then it might even achieve a political *fait accompli* and win without a major fight. The question that US policymakers need to ask themselves, therefore, is: How could China try to achieve these goals? Invasion, it turns out, might not be the answer.

To explore why and how China would seek to obtain such a political *fait accompli*, this article lays out the underlying logic of a coercive strategy that falls short of an all-out invasion and examines the means that Chinese commanders already possess to implement such a strategy. Specifically, Beijing could pursue a tailored coercive campaign combining a maritime and aerial quarantine around Taiwan, politico-psychological attacks against Taiwanese political and military leaders, and nuclear threats against Japan and the United States to chip away at the resolve of all three rivals. The intended effects of such coercion, including decision paralysis in Taipei, Tokyo, and Washington, could open the way for annexation beneath the threshold of invasion.

Should China opt to settle its score with Taiwan through means other than invasion, it would create a significant challenge for US defense planners and policymakers. As the side looking to overturn the status quo, Beijing can already choose *when* to strike. But it can also choose *how* to strike. That means Washington cannot afford to focus too closely on one particular threat, even as it cannot take its eye off the invasion ball. The United States should be just as attuned to the political dilemmas that China might impose as the military damage that it could inflict.

Explaining the Emphasis on Invasion

As China has emerged as a major military power, two aspects of its defense modernization have stood out. First, it has developed a suite of anti-access/area denial

(A2/AD) capabilities that could target US and allied forces operating in the region, notably its extensive inventory of surface-to-air, surface-to-surface, and anti-ship missiles. "Anti-access" refers to impeding the arrival of opposing forces into a theater (for instance, by attacking expeditionary units on their way to the region or local facilities that would receive them), whereas "area denial" refers to inhibiting their freedom of maneuver while they are conducting operations (for example, by disrupting their ability to communicate or establishing defensive barriers they would need to penetrate before reaching potential targets).[5]

Second, it has been pursuing the amphibious forces necessary to conduct maritime power projection operations against its neighbors.[6] The biggest concern for most US strategists and planners is that these capabilities would be employed in tandem: A2/AD assets would degrade US forces in theater and block reinforcements from coming to Taiwan's aide, while amphibious units (along with military assets that would attempt to seize local command of the air, the seas, and other domains) would spearhead an assault on the island that would bring it to heel. These tools that China might use to seize Taiwan and stop the United States from defending the island remain the primary focus for US officials and analysts concerned about a deteriorating military balance in the region.

The reasons for this are straightforward: an invasion of Taiwan seems like one of the most likely major war contingencies that the United States might face, and it is almost certainly the most consequential conflict scenario for US planners to consider. Resolving the status of Taiwan by annexing the island is a core interest for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), one that its leaders have deferred for many years but might not be able to postpone indefinitely. The prevailing wisdom, therefore, is that Beijing will eventually decide to make a move on Taiwan, and when it does, it will go "all-in." Overwhelming the island by force and physically controlling it is the only certain route to victory, or so the argument goes. Alternative approaches, by comparison, would be merely half-measures that offer no guarantee of success.[7] These include gray zone provocations designed to expose Taiwan's inability to enforce its de facto sovereignty, offshore island seizures intended to highlight the challenges of protecting Taiwan against its much larger neighbor, or an economic blockade to gradually wear down the island's population and the international community.

At the same time, countering an invasion would entail some of the most operationally and tactically demanding tasks for the American military, should leaders in Washington opt to mount a full-fledged defense of the island. From the outset, local US forces would need to avoid significant losses at the hands of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) which has them in their sights and benefits from a first-mover advantage. Surviving US forces would need to fight within the densest layers of China's defense network or orchestrate a complex technical

effort to destroy critical PLA targets from afar. And reinforcements would need to transit thousands of miles over vulnerable air, sea, and information lines of communication.[8] Nevertheless, the US defense community generally adheres to a "pacing-threat/lesser-included" case mindset, for understandable reasons. That is, if the United States fields a force that can handle the toughest contingency, that force should also be able to handle a less demanding scenario. From this perspective, if the United States can stop a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, it can probably manage any other military threats that Beijing might throw its way, not to mention military threats from weaker rivals.[9] Consequently, many high-profile US defense modernization efforts are being pursued with halting an invasion foremost in mind.

Considering the Costs of Conflict

Prioritizing the threat of invasion might be conventional wisdom, but there are two underlying reasons to doubt that invasion is the course of action that China will ultimately choose. First, large-scale amphibious assault is one of the most complex and difficult military operations any state can embark upon; for all the challenges that countering invasion would present for Washington, launching and sustaining an invasion would be an enormous undertaking for Beijing.[10] Unless Taiwan rapidly crumbled under the weight of an assault, it could probably inflict a significant toll on attacking forces, particularly given the limited number of areas suitable for an amphibious landing, and especially if Taiwan makes improvements to its defensive capabilities.[11] Even if local defenders were overwhelmed, China would still need to confront the long-term costs of occupation—from the material costs that could accrue if some determined Taiwanese continue to resist to the reputational costs that would come with snuffing out a vibrant democracy and keeping its population in line at gunpoint. Moreover, an all-out invasion that required preparatory attacks against such critical infrastructure as power stations, transportation networks, and telecommunications—not to mention devastating urban combat were it necessary to eradicate die-hard Taiwanese resistance fighters in the major cities—would shatter the island. The CCP would thus potentially face massive postwar reconstruction costs to rebuild the occupied territory.

There are two reasons to doubt invasion is the course of action China will ultimately choose

Second, an air and missile campaign against American forces, bases, and ports in the region could degrade US combat power, especially if launched with little

warning, making it extremely hard for Washington to intervene effectively on Taiwan's side. Whatever short-term tactical and operational success this campaign achieved, however, it would have two foreseeable longer-term strategic consequences: it would be the start of a protracted war against the United States, which is unlikely to take such heavy losses lying down, and it would be the beginning of a wider war against Japan, a large and growing military power that hosts many of the US forces that could be targeted by China at the outset of a conflict.[12]

The risks of horizontal escalation and protraction would govern the CCP's calculus even if it judged that US resolve was in relative decline at any given time. In a high stakes gamble like invasion, Chinese leaders—especially military commanders entrusted to carry out the attack against Taiwan—would be unlikely to dismiss a worst-case scenario out of hand. Moreover, history shows that the galvanizing effects of aggression for territorial conquest can radically alter Washington's position. For example, American ambivalence about the geostrategic value of the Korean Peninsula vanished overnight after North Korean armies swarmed across the 38th parallel in June 1950. In short, Beijing would—or ought to—balance the operational benefits of a blitzkrieg via air and missile bombardment against the strategic risks of an expanded drawn out war.

To put this in a broader context, conventional deterrence is most likely to fail when leaders expect wars to be quick, easy, and successful; it is most likely to hold when leaders expect war to be long, hard, and unsuccessful. Of course, it is possible that PLA commanders and their political masters might convince themselves that an invasion of Taiwan would be a fast and low cost affair. Whether due to strategic culture, organizational pathologies, or the role of risk-tolerant leaders, states, especially authoritarian ones, can make bad decisions based on overly optimistic prognostications.[13] But a clear-eyed assessment of the circumstances would seem to suggest that going all-in via invasion would be a dangerous gamble with significant downsides.

Indeed, the stark lessons of Russia's war against Ukraine make it more likely that rosy invasion projections would meet deep skepticism.[14] Despite widespread predictions of a rapid victory by Moscow, more than three years of conflict have produced several high-level insights: preparations for war would be difficult to conceal, internal resistance may be stiffer than expected, and external opposition could be higher than anticipated. All in all, the failure to achieve strategic surprise, against defenders who do not quickly fold and who are supported by an international community unwilling to turn a blind eye to aggression, is a recipe for a long, hard, costly fight. Moreover, Taiwan could present an even greater invasion challenge for China than Ukraine has for Russia. The enduring dangers of amphibious assault—including bad weather, rough seas, few suitable landing sites, and urban infrastructure obstructing movement across the beach

—that deterred Russia from conducting a large-scale attack from the sea would be significantly greater in a Taiwan scenario.[15] The island's centrality to global supply chains also means that the economic fallout from a cross-strait attack would spread quickly around the world, dimming China's prospects of localizing the conflict while increasing the likelihood that third parties with a vital stake in regional peace and stability would intervene.

> Taiwan could present an even greater invasion challenge for China than Ukraine has for Russia

It is possible that the CCP might throw caution to the wind and launch an invasion of Taiwan no matter the cost. If Beijing has ambitions to continue its rise and eventually rival or even surpass the United States as a leading power, however, it may be more sensitive to the material and reputational costs of conflict than some observers believe. Indeed, General Secretary Xi Jinping's long-term aims for national revival, captured by his "China Dream" slogan, seek to propel the nation to the front rank of the great powers, develop an advanced, high-tech, high-income economy, field a "world-class military," and bring Taiwan to heel by mid-century. A war over the island democracy, especially a costly protracted one which significantly degrades China's military and depletes its treasury, could severely set back Xi's most important goals, even if China managed to win on the battlefield. Mass casualties and widespread physical destruction on the island, possibly owing to PLA atrocities, would be difficult to hide and deny in the era of instantaneous communications and social media. Such "collateral damage" would sour global perceptions of China. Continued local resistance against occupation would also belie any Chinese narrative that the invasion was intended to liberate fellow "compatriots" on the island.

There are, therefore, powerful incentives for Xi and his subordinates to look for ways to reconcile the twin aims of rejuvenation and "reunification," which could be directly at odds in an invasion scenario—especially if China's economic growth continues to slow and it cannot easily shoulder the financial burdens of occupation, reconstruction, and force reconstitution.

The Logic of Coercion

The prospective difficulties surrounding an invasion of Taiwan do not mean that China is likely to abandon its revisionist ambitions; resolving the island's status in Beijing's favor undoubtedly will remain a core objective for the CCP. Nor does it mean that China will stop developing the tools necessary for invasion,

including its amphibious and A2/AD forces. Beijing will almost certainly want these capabilities for their coercive value, for the contributions they might make to different military strategies, for their potential to overawe the United States and its allies, and if necessary, as an option of last resort to be used against Taiwan. It does suggest, however, that the CCP will explore alternative coercive strategies, using other tools, that hold out the prospect of achieving its ambitions at lower cost and less risk. And as Beijing's conventional military, paramilitary, and nuclear toolkits continue to expand and grow, it will have more options to choose from—options like air and maritime blockade, political subversion, and highly tailored nuclear threats—that it can combine in ways which would create thorny dilemmas for the United States and its allies in the region.[16]

Given Beijing's expanding menu of options, China could mix and match its various coercive instruments to complicate adversary decision-making, erode opponent resolve, and divide enemy alliances. If Chinese leaders decided to make a move against Taiwan, they could opt to shut off Taiwanese access to seaborne and airborne transportation, destabilize the island from within, and issue oblique or overt nuclear threats. These courses of action could be executed sequentially or simultaneously, and they are not the only lines of effort that Beijing could pursue to shape the target audiences' risk calculi. The three illustrative coercive campaigns depicted below are intended to unpack the transmission mechanisms that would produce the desired strategic effects—such as loss of will or confidence to resist—against China's rivals.

Three coercive campaigns could produce the desired strategic effects without invasion

First, the PLA could use large-scale military and paramilitary exercises as cover to begin imposing an air and maritime blockade of the island.[17] Doing so would have the advantage of leveraging surprise to a greater extent than an invasion, the preparations for which would be extremely hard to disguise.[18] The primary aim would not necessarily be to coerce the population through deprivation, although this is possible given Taiwan's limited stocks of food and fuel, but to isolate the population from outside support, and put the onus on outsiders to escalate further by challenging the blockade.

Second, the CCP could engage in assassination and subversion to prevent or degrade local resistance. Decapitation attacks could take a variety of forms, not all of which are as overt as missile strikes or special operations raids, although China could resort to those options. This could, for example, entail the use of fifth-column saboteurs to bribe, intimidate, blackmail, discredit, or kill Taiwanese leaders. Covert CCP agents or compromised insiders

could be employed to pit politicians against military commanders or induce them to stay on the sidelines.[19] The aim here would be to create a reverse "Zelensky effect": to complicate the calculations of third parties debating intervention by eliminating key partners on the ground and raising doubts about Taiwanese resilience.

Third, China could engage in nuclear coercion against the United States and its allies. These threats could be relatively subtle. For instance, Chinese leaders could make discrete but noticeable changes in the readiness level of their nuclear forces by moving units out of garrison and deploying them to possible launch locations. Threats could also be blunter. Beijing could, in addition to raising alert levels, make public statements that military intervention would cross a nuclear red line and obviate its already-dubious nuclear no-first-use policy. In either instance, though, these steps would raise the stakes of a crisis by bringing nuclear weapons from the background to the foreground.[20]

Rather than try to beat Taiwan down and knock the United States and its allies out, this type of coercive strategy would aim to throw China's opponents off-balance—to present so many dilemmas and introduce so many risks that it creates decision paralysis in key capitals. Alone, none of these coercive measures might have that effect—blockades, decapitation strikes, and vague nuclear threats each have a mixed track record. But when combined, and with the invasion threat still lurking in the background, their influence on policymakers could be enormous.

In such a coercive campaign, Beijing would seek to shape the risk calculus of Taipei, Washington, and Tokyo in close succession or all at once. Although two of three options are directed at Taiwan itself, they would produce knock-on effects on the United States and Japan. A quarantine would sap the island's power to resist and sustain itself, while testing US and Japanese resolve if they were to contemplate efforts to lift the quarantine or to convoy shipping to Taiwan. Subversion would destabilize the Taiwanese leadership, but it would also raise doubts in the minds of decisionmakers in Washington and Tokyo about Taipei's determination to hold fast. Nuclear threats would erode Japan's confidence in US extended deterrence even as they apply mounting pressure on the United States. Taiwanese leaders would certainly be paying close attention to how Beijing's nuclear saber-rattling affected policy deliberations in Washington and Tokyo. The bottom line is that all three parties would not only be scrambling to respond to Chinese hostilities, but they would also be looking over their shoulders to gauge each other's reactions in a three-way interaction.

Consider how China's three-pronged coercion could influence US decision-making. American officials could find themselves debating the mechanics of

running a blockade to provide relief to Taiwan and the merits of providing support to a partner without a functional leadership, all while coping with the prospect of nuclear escalation. Policymakers may even have a difficult time discerning and interpreting what is happening if Beijing opts for more ambiguous forms of blockade (e.g., by relying on paramilitary rather than military forces), decapitation (e.g., through sabotage rather than overt military attacks), and nuclear coercion (e.g., using changes in force posture rather than bold proclamations), all of which could contribute to deliberation and delay. Indeed, Beijing would probably *try* to muddy the waters to sow confusion. Moreover, even if Washington came to a quick decision and were determined to meet China's coercive challenge, the decision-making process in allied capitals like Tokyo could be even slower and more fraught, contributing to intra-alliance tensions in the best case and creating a major obstacle to an effective combined military campaign in the worst.[21] Meanwhile, China would gain time for pressure against Taiwan to take effect and desperation to take hold as the prospect of a swift and severe international response faded away.

There are also good reasons to believe that this triple coercion could trigger not-so-latent fears in Taipei and Tokyo that Washington might not live up to its security commitments. In recent years, growing concerns in Taiwan about US unreliability have coalesced around the so-called "America Skepticism Theory," which posits that the United States would abandon the island if doing so served Washington's interests. There is persuasive evidence that the CCP has amplified and exploited this theory through its political warfare apparatus to drive a wedge between Taiwan and the United States.[22] Similarly, Japanese leaders have publicly expressed doubts about the credibility of US extended deterrence following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[23] Japan's misgivings about the Obama administration's 2009 decision to retire the nuclear-armed submarine-launched *Tomahawk* land-attack cruise missile reflected acute sensitivity to relatively small shifts in the US nuclear posture, a sensitivity born out of deep insecurity that persists to this day. In short, both Taipei and Tokyo are already inclined to entertain the possibility that Washington might back down when the going gets tough.

One virtue of this multi-layered coercive approach, which targets different vulnerabilities of multiple audiences, is that it confers to China a high degree of initiative and agency. Beijing can calibrate and sequence quarantine, nuclear threats, and subversion in ways that conform to its judgments about the opponents' resolve. The CCP could lend greater weight to nuclear coercion to decouple the US-Japan alliance if it believed that it could pick off Tokyo early in a crisis. Alternatively, Chinese leaders might

frontload subversion to destabilize Taiwan if it concluded that Taipei was the weakest link and was likely to fold quickly. If any single target proved more resilient against one coercive option than expected, China could pivot to another.

To complicate matters, because many of Beijing's military investments could support multiple coercive strategies, invasion could not be written off entirely, compounding the pressures from the coercion strategy hypothesized above. Chinese warships could assert local sea control to open the way for a cross-strait invasion or impede seaborne traffic just as the PLA air forces could enforce a no-fly zone or achieve air superiority around and over the island. Similarly, conventionally armed theater-range missiles could neutralize Taiwan's defenses as a prelude to invasion or bombard enemy air and naval bases to deny their use by US and allied forces. As a result, US officials would still need to wrestle with how to get vulnerable forces out of harm's way and increase the readiness of reinforcements—and whether these steps might trigger the type of assault they most fear.

This multi-layered coercive approach confers China a high degree of initiative and agency

This type of strategy would not be an attempt at "winning without fighting," or securing Taiwan by relying exclusively on psychological warfare and information operations rather than military force.[24] It would still require a substantial mobilization of forces for a blockade or quarantine, the selective use of violence to support economic interdiction as well as some types of decapitation attacks, and all of the escalatory risks inherent in making nuclear threats. For the CCP, though, the choice would come down to the very high and very certain costs of invasion versus the less certain but potentially much lower costs associated with this coercive alternative. And in the scenario outlined above, Chinese leaders might very well convince themselves that a conflict would be quick and easy, at least compared to launching a full-on invasion from the outset. After all, if they thought they could keep the United States, Japan, and others out of the fight, and do so with calibrated threats rather than massive brute force, the odds of winning fast and winning cheap would seem to be on their side.

Indeed, there is preliminary evidence that Chinese strategists are already thinking in these terms. Liu Mingfu, an influential hawk with direct ties to Xi Jinping, makes a case for fighting a "new type of unification war" which resembles the logic of coercion illustrated here. Liu believes that China should pursue strategies which transcend brute force and avoid the high costs, collateral damage, and casualties entailed in employing such violence during a cross-strait showdown. Rather, the PLA should strive to "crush the enemy's hearts and minds," break the adversary's will to fight, achieve victory with minimum loss to itself

and to Taiwan, and thereby seize the island intact.[25] Thanks to China's prodigious growth in military and paramilitary power, the PLA possesses many of the means to fulfill Liu's vision.

A New Offense-Defense Balance in the Making

China already has an arsenal of tools, which are continuing to grow, and which would allow it to exercise these complementary coercive options. To prosecute a blockade, the PLA would count on the largest navy by hull count in the world and the largest air force in the region, all backed up by an unmatched arsenal of land-based conventional missiles.[26] These forces were on display during the large-scale military exercise around Taiwan in August 2022 following then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's high-profile visit to the island democracy. The PLA fired eleven short-range ballistic missiles near and, provocatively, over Taiwan, launched hundreds of air sorties into the island's declared air defense identification zone, and stationed warships around the island. The exercise simulated an "encirclement" of Taiwan and demonstrated the PLA's ability to conduct a "joint blockade and control" operation.[27] The show of force was a mere fraction of military power that China would bring to bear in a real-world contingency.

A blockade or quarantine, moreover, would likely involve China's coast guard and maritime militia. These two sea services, the largest of their kinds in the world, could be called upon to enforce a maritime exclusion zone and a customs inspection regime, provide an additional sensor layer at sea, and "flood the zone" with many vessels to complicate the adversaries' ability to grasp the situation and support other missions. Their outward civilian character could also help to advance a diplomatic narrative by Beijing that it was performing a domestic law enforcement action against a wayward province, which could further chip away at the rationale and resolve of outside powers to intervene on Taiwan's behalf. Tellingly, China's coast guard practiced stopping and inspecting inbound shipborne cargo traffic off Taiwan's east coast as part of a larger show of force following Taiwanese president William Lai's inauguration in May 2024. Taiwan's National Ministry of Defense, in a report to the island's parliament, reportedly claimed that China could employ such tactics, which fall short of clear military conflict, to threaten Taipei.[28] After President Lai's National Day speech in October 2024, four Chinese coast guard formations practiced quarantine operations against commercial shipping heading into and out of seven major Taiwanese ports.[29]

Although gauging China's ability to engage in assassination and subversion is more difficult given the secretive nature of these subjects, there are reasons to

suspect that its capabilities are quite well developed in both areas. Indirect indicators show that the CCP and the PLA have actively tried to penetrate the Taiwanese state as well as society, and that the island democracy is especially vulnerable to subterfuge meant to divide the elites, the military, and the populace. For example, journalists regularly uncover disturbing news of active and retired senior Taiwanese officers expressing sympathies for China or acting on behalf of Chinese intelligence agencies.[30]

The CCP and PLA have actively tried to penetrate the Taiwanese state as well as society

More troublingly, well-placed insiders were caught leaking information to Chinese intelligence about the organization and personnel responsible for protecting the Taiwanese president (Taiwan's equivalent to the US Secret Service).[31] In July 2024, the head of Taiwan's National Security Bureau, the island's primary intelligence agency, warned that "the Chinese Communist Party's infiltration activities are increasingly rampant in Taiwan, posing a severe challenge to national security work." Chinese operatives have specifically targeted active-duty members, "retired national security personnel," and "political parties and government departments."[32] In early 2025, Taiwanese authorities indicted seven retired military officers who were accused of taking money from a PLA intelligence agency to form local paramilitary units and assassination squads which would collaborate with the enemy if China were to invade Taiwan.[33] Tellingly, *The Economist* reports that prosecutions of similar cases have leapt fourfold in just the last four years and that the majority of the cases in 2024 involved active or retired military officers.[34]

Finally, successive US government reports confirm that Beijing is on track to develop highly accurate, low-yield nuclear options that would enable it to make increasingly credible limited nuclear threats. In 2023, a congressional commission concluded that, sometime in the next decade, China will "for the first time have survivable (mobile) theater nuclear forces capable of conducting low-yield precision strikes on U.S. and allied forces and infrastructure across East Asia."[35] The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review similarly found that the expansion of China's nuclear inventory between now and the early 2030s would furnish it with "a broader range of strategies to achieve its objectives, to include nuclear coercion and limited nuclear first use."[36] The Pentagon speculated that "the PRC probably seeks lower yield nuclear warhead capabilities for proportional response options that its high-yield warheads cannot deliver."[37] Citing PLA writings, it further observed that some Chinese strategists believe "the introduction of new precise small-yield nuclear weapons could possibly allow for the controlled use of nuclear weapons, in the warzone, for warning and deterrence."[38]

Among China's theater nuclear weapons, the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile stands out. With a range of 3,000 to 4,000 kilometers that puts Guam within its reach, it is capable of conducting precision nuclear strikes, the first of its kind.[39] According to the Pentagon, "The multi-role DF-26 is designed to rapidly swap conventional and nuclear warheads and is capable of conducting precision land-attack and anti-ship strikes in the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the [South China Sea] from mainland China." The PLA Rocket Force has reportedly deployed a new nuclear-capable theater missile, the DF-27, boasting a range of at least 5,000 kilometers.[40] The PLA Air Force has also fielded the H-6N bomber that "likely can conduct nuclear precision strikes against targets in the Indo-Pacific theater" with a nuclear-capable air-launched ballistic missile.[41]

Capabilities are important, but so is doctrine, and Chinese military writings suggest that the PLA is indeed preparing for blockade, subversion, and nuclear signaling. The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* by the Chinese National Defense University, for example, discusses all three missions. According to the document, a "strategic blockade" is a type of "strategic offensive operation" designed to deliver a "decisive blow" against the enemy and thereby "produce shock and disintegration effects on the overall situation." The goal of such a blockade, it further explains, is "to destroy the enemy's economic and military relations with the outside world, weaken its combat capability and war potential, and make it isolated and helpless."[42]

In addition, the PLA's doctrine of "disintegrating the enemy" is a longstanding Communist way of warfare that calls for politico-psychological attacks and subversion to undermine the adversary's will to fight. The *Science of Military Strategy* depicts the doctrine as a "fine tradition," and exhorts the PLA to employ the doctrine as a "means to politically shake the enemy's mind and destroy the enemy's combat effectiveness."[43] It foresees an intense non-military contest involving infiltration, propaganda, defections, and sabotage that would take place along the "hidden front"—the largely invisible political war behind enemy lines—in future conflicts. Assassinations and other plots would feature in such a campaign to decapitate the adversary, to sow chaos, and to shatter the opponent's resolve.

Finally, the *Science of Military Strategy* obliquely discusses the potential role of nuclear weapons in shoring up "strategic deterrence," which involves actions by one side "to force the other party to yield to its own will and show its determination to use force and prepare to use force." In times of crisis, the study envisions changes to China's military posture "to send a real deterrent signal to the opponent to make it feel the pressure of the coming war."[44] Movement of forces, for example, which conveys Beijing's intent to escalate or to use force, might compel the enemy to drop its sword. Notably, the *Science of Military Strategy* identifies the maneuvering of China's nuclear triad as one of many ways that

the PLA could adjust its posture. In short, there is a material and doctrinal basis for Beijing to mix and match its coercive options to compel Taiwan to give up and to convince the United States and its regional allies to stay out of the fight.

Individually but especially together, these coercive courses of action would pose enormous problems for the United States, as well as its allies, if they chose to intervene on behalf of a beleaguered Taiwan. Although Washington has been gearing up to prepare for an invasion, the US military is neither structured nor postured to challenge a blockade, especially one that includes both paramilitary and military components.[45] Although it has become more attuned to the risks of political warfare in recent years, it is even less capable of responding to subversion directed against foreign partners. And although it has recently been on the receiving end of nuclear threats delivered by Russia, nuclear crisis management is a delicate skill that has undoubtedly atrophied since the Cold War, as has its inventory of non-strategic nuclear options to bolster its brinkmanship.[46] In sum, Beijing is developing a set of coercive options which exposes latent asymmetries in the Sino-US competition and creates new areas of advantage which it could exploit should it prove reticent to roll the dice on an invasion of Taiwan.

These coercive courses of action would pose enormous problems for the US as well as its allies

Rethinking Red and Blue Theories of Victory

The prospect that Chinese leaders might pursue alternatives to invasion has considerable implications for US defense strategy. To date, US officials have been narrowly focused on the invasion scenario, for understandable reasons. Moreover, policymakers cannot ignore the invasion threat; doing so would lower China's expected costs of a direct assault and increase the chances that it might go down that path. By the same token, however, policymakers should not overweight the invasion threat; doing so could leave them out of position and out of options if the CCP adopts a different coercive strategy.

In short, there are risks on both sides of the ledger. Right now, however, the risks associated with overweighting invasion are under-appreciated and potentially growing. That should drive policymakers to seriously debate issues such as: (1) whether the capability and posture changes that are most relevant to an invasion scenario would also have utility in other scenarios; (2) what countercoercive tools the United States might be missing to help it manage threats other than invasion; and (3) how alliance relations should adjust to account for contingencies other than an outright assault on Taiwan.[47]

For instance, given Washington's growing concerns about an invasion of Taiwan, the Department of Defense has long been working to develop options to counter such a threat. The vision that seems to underpin these efforts, moreover, is one of rapid decisive battle, or a swift, short, and geographically limited campaign which would inflict enormous losses on PLA forces in, above, and below the Taiwan Strait before the island could be conquered.[48] Yet, this vision of a brute force defense to stop a brute force attack may be a poor guide if China opts for a coercive alternative to invasion.

Notably, it is questionable whether the United States could marshal the political will to move so fast or respond so massively in response to aggression short of amphibious assault, especially once Chinese nuclear threats are on the table. Meanwhile, a military campaign to defeat the PLA's frontline forces alone might be insufficient to combat a multi-pronged coercive campaign like the one described above. Such an operational design might struggle to match China's ability to reinforce the leading elements of its air and naval blockade in the near term due to the sheer size of its fleets, as well as its ability to reconstitute its military assets over the long run should its attempt at a political *fait accompli* devolve into a protracted conflict of some kind.

If the United States is determined to stymie a move against Taiwan short of invasion, therefore, it might need to explore other ways to impose costs on China during a conflict of this sort beyond just breaking or disrupting a blockade. This could include, for example, engaging in horizontal escalation against Chinese military assets and economic interests in other parts of the world. It could also include pursuing vertical escalation against military or economic targets on Chinese territory—an option that could paradoxically become less dangerous in the future as Beijing's nuclear arsenal grows and the possibility of unintentionally threatening its strategic deterrent declines.[49]

Washington needs to sketch out a multi-pronged coercive campaign of its own

In other words, Washington needs to sketch out a multi-pronged coercive campaign of its own, one that gradually increases the price that Beijing would pay for its aggression.

At the same time, with dueling coercive campaigns unfolding against the potential backdrop of Chinese nuclear threats, the United States needs to rethink the size and shape of its own nuclear arsenal. Having relatively few limited nuclear options encourages China to build and leverage limited nuclear options of its own, and just as importantly, provides a less credible backstop to US conventional power projection than an arsenal with more rungs on the escalation ladder. Expanding the proportional options available to the United States

should cause China to question the efficacy of any limited nuclear threats that it might make, demonstrate to allies in the region that Washington takes those prospective threats seriously, and would provide greater freedom of maneuver to conduct cost-imposing conventional attacks against the PLA in and around Taiwan, in China, or elsewhere in the world.

Finally, novel forms of Chinese coercion could have significant implications for Washington's alliance relationships and heighten a longstanding alliance management challenge. At the most basic level, planning and coordination efforts with allies across the Western Pacific should not be focused narrowly on a short-warning invasion scenario. They should hold out the possibility that future contingencies might be more ambiguous and might require concepts and forces flexible enough to counter invasion and other forms of coercion. More importantly, though, the United States will need to manage a worsening dilemma owing to the deteriorating conventional military and nuclear balances. Washington must assure allies that it will not be cowed by Chinese threats and therefore that its extended deterrence guarantees will remain robust. But it must also ensure that it has sufficient force projection options to account for the prospect that those allies themselves might be increasingly reluctant to provide full-fledged operational assistance in scenarios that are less clear-cut than invasion, yet perhaps even more dangerous given China's expanding coercive nuclear options.

Avoiding Tunnel Vision

Ultimately, weighing the likelihood of invasion versus alternatives highlights biases in the American approach to threat assessment and gaps in our knowledge of the adversary. Specifically, the underlying logic of the approach outlined above, or one like it, is quite different from how many national security experts think about risks in a Taiwan Strait contingency. To date, the prevailing concern has been the amount of damage that China can inflict in its initial military assault, along with any follow-on attacks, measured against the amount of damage the United States can impose against Chinese military forces, particularly the frontline units spearheading an invasion. This reduces a prospective conflict to a brute force clash defined by exchange ratios and attrition rates—and caused by windows of opportunity and vulnerability rooted solely in conventional military balance estimates. The goal for both sides in these types of assessments is not to change minds, but to remove choices; to make it impossible for the other side to conduct an effective military campaign, even if it wanted to fight.

The alternative, however, is to try and sap an opponent's willingness to fight from the start, whether by avoiding an unambiguous *casus belli*, driving a wedge

between allies, raising the risks of escalation, or a combination of all three. Put another way, China might be less concerned about disarming the United States and allies like Japan by inflicting damage and destruction, and more concerned about dislocating policymakers to induce debate, delay, and despair by using other coercive options besides invasion. And it would not be far-fetched for leaders in Beijing to believe that their counterparts in Washington, Tokyo, and elsewhere would experience those reactions when provocations are blurry, partners are unavailable or unreliable, nuclear threats loom large, and the prospect of a large-scale conventional fight still remains.

Which approach China will ultimately adopt, should it choose outright aggression, is uncertain. And devising ways to manage the threat of a brute force invasion as well as a coercive combination strategy is no mean feat, particularly when many of the military and paramilitary tools Beijing is building could support either one. Nevertheless, that is the burden that the United States must bear if it remains determined to uphold the status quo in the face of a rising revisionist power with many options at its disposal.

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