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# Does the support of Taiwan by the U.S. provide sufficient deterrence to prevent a Chinese invasion?

A predictive study on the future of Taiwan

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## **Abstract**

The 2023 invasion of Ukraine by Russia has cast new light on the tense situation in East Asia between China and Taiwan, the latter supported by the U.S. The potential for conflict between the two great powers China and the U.S. has elevated the conflict over Taiwan to the forefront of international relations. This study aims to use deterrence theory, with an emphasis on conventional deterrence, as a foundation for an analysis of Taiwan's future based on past, present and future capabilities militarily and economically between the two sides. I argue that China can be deterred, and Taiwan's independence preserved, as long as sufficient deterrence is provided. The study also examines the continued relative absence of deterrence theory, particularly conventional deterrence, in IR and argues for its continued relevancy. Finally, I aim to present some of the most important work by John J. Mearsheimer, including from his seminal book "Conventional Deterrence" (1985), and to argue for how and why Mearsheimer's narrow focus rooted in realism is problematic for a full understanding of deterrence theory as well as underlying aspects of international relations.

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## **1. List of abbreviations**

CPC: Communist Party of China

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PLA: People's Liberation Army (Armed forces of the PRC)

PRC: People's Republic of China

ROC: Republic of China (Taiwan's official name according to Taiwan; this thesis uses both terms interchangeably)

RQ: Research question

USFJ: United States Forces Japan

## 2. Map of the geopolitical situation



source: BBC

### **3. Introduction**

#### **3.1 Taiwan and its relevance as an object of study**

War once again ravages the European continent. As Russia's relentless assault on Ukraine continues tensions run high in East Asia between the PRC (People's Republic of China) and ROC (or Taiwan, as most of the world calls the latter). As the U.S. reaffirms, at least in rhetoric, its commitment to Taiwan's independence (including through official state visits to the country) the PRC's military drills of increasing intensity and simulated attacks against Taiwan continue to threaten the status quo (Haenle and Sher, 2022). As it stands, Taiwan can be thought of as a "flashpoint" where the threat of a war between great powers is greater than anywhere else. Taiwan risks becoming "a new Ukraine" if China follows through on its pledges to "retake" Taiwan. It follows naturally, then, that analysing and attempting to understand the relationship between the PRC on the hand and the ROC and U.S. on the other is crucial to any attempts to preserve peace in the region.

What I am ultimately interested in is the continued "preservation of the status quo", i.e. the continued independence of the ROC. By looking at which actions and policies from the U.S. and its allies have helped ensure the de-facto independence of the ROC historically, how these actions and policies may or may not still be relevant today and what can and should be done in the future I believe a comprehensive image can be painted that also includes policy suggestions for the future and that can be applied to other contexts.

For this reason, the theoretical foundation of this thesis will be the "Theory of deterrence". The definitions and specifics of this theory will be discussed later, in the "theory" section, and the methodology of this work will be presented in the "design" section. For this introduction, it is enough to state that of the two main forms of deterrence (conventional and nuclear), it is the former that is the focus of U.S. geopolitical and military thinking on the "Taiwan issue" in the post-Cold War era.

#### **3.2 The problems with contemporary deterrence theory**

Because deterrence theory has often been considered outdated and as irrelevant for the modern post-Cold War era (Zagare, 2006) there have been relatively few attempts to develop and apply the theory to a modern context, rather than one operating under the Cold War's bipolar logic. Contemporary thinking on international relations has not prioritised the "Theory of deterrence", and this is especially true for conventional deterrence as Cold War scholars

primarily concerned themselves with nuclear deterrence. For this reason, I argue that the theory is both poorly understood and understudied. In this thesis, I aim to “break new ground” by simultaneously thinking about deterrence theory in three different ways:

1. By identifying the failure to develop contemporary deterrence theory, its reasons and causes
2. By focusing on conventional deterrence rather than the nuclear deterrence that has dominated the field
3. By arguing for how and why I take issue with Mearsheimer’s narrow focus on realism



#### **4. Thesis aims**

This thesis fundamentally aims to be an attempt at “predicting the future”, that future being one of either a continued de-facto independence for Taiwan or of incorporation into the PRC. By using the theory of deterrence, which states that potential aggressors can be discouraged (i.e. deterred) from attack if the perceived costs of such a move exceed the perceived gains, as a foundation I will present the strengths and weakness military and economically of the two different “sides” of potential future conflict, the PRC and the U.S./Taiwan. Having done so, I will then proceed with an analysis on whether or not Taiwan, on the basis of its own strength as well as that of its ally the U.S., is sufficient to “deter” China, i.e. to prevent an invasion.

The thesis will also argue against key aspects of Mearsheimer’s theories, particularly his narrow focus on land war and his “offensive realism”, and will use the Russia-Ukraine war as inspiration for certain points and arguments. However, this thesis is not a methodical, empirical comparison between Ukraine’s situation and that of Taiwan.

## **5. Thesis structure**

The thesis begins with a short abstract summarising the key arguments and points, followed by a table of contents. Next, a list of abbreviations has been included to provide clarity on a few abbreviations used frequently throughout the text. After this, a map of the broader Asia-Pacific region has been included highlighting not just the PRC and the ROC and the territories they control but also important neighbouring states and islands, such as Japan and Guam (both home to U.S. bases crucial for any attempt at deterrence against China).

Following these initial introductory segments the thesis moves onto its main parts, starting with an introduction aimed at motivating why China and Taiwan have been chosen as objects of study, and at outlining some of the issues with contemporary deterrence theory that warrant further research making use of the theory. After this short section on the thesis structure a background has been provided, aiming to present a more in-depth look at the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, Sino-Taiwanese tensions and how the two relate.

I then go on to provide sections that outline the previous research available on deterrence theory, clarify the RQ, outline the theory I am using and its framework in greater depth and provide information on the design and methodology of the thesis, respectively. Next, the “empirical analysis” section (in many ways the “core” of the thesis) outlines the core findings, focusing on previous- and currently extant U.S. deterrence efforts against China as well as the rationale and motivations of China. Finally, a conclusion summarises the thesis and its key findings and arguments concerning Taiwan’s likely future, and the “bibliography” section provides information on all the sources used.

## **6. Background and context**

### **6.1 The parallels between Russia-Ukraine and China-Taiwan**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022 presented a serious challenge to the rules-based world order and raised questions both about the long-term commitment and the ability of the West to defend said world order by military means. At the same time, Taiwan finds itself in a position that in many ways mirrors that of pre-invasion Ukraine, with China making use of rhetoric very similar to that used by Russia before its invasion. This rhetoric has included public and repeated insinuations that Taiwan is a province of the PRC and continued refusal to acknowledge the existence of a sovereign Taiwanese state, much as how Putin insisted, and continues to insist, that Russians and Ukrainians are one people and one nation (Putin, 2021). This opposition to recognition of Taiwan has also extended to frequent economic and political pressure from Beijing on countries that themselves maintain or desire to start maintaining formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Since 2014 Russia has carried out several unilateral annexations of a number of Ukrainian regions. The creations of the puppet “people’s republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk along with the 2022 recognitions of them as sovereign states, despite them not living up to all the criteria to be considered a sovereign state that were laid out in the Montevideo convention (Pitchford, 2022), were arguably carried out to create an excuse for Russia to portray the conflict as one of “Ukrainian aggression against Russian territories”, and with that knowledge in mind it is of particular concern that China already, even without militarily invading Taiwan, defines the latter as one of its own provinces and not an independent country. Such language by China might serve to increase the acceptance of, or maybe even create expectations of, military action against Taiwan amongst China’s inhabitants and thereby potentially lowering the threshold for conflict, not least since China has also expressly refused to renounce their right to use force over Taiwan (Lun Tian and Blanchard, 2022).

### **6.2 Brief overview of U.S. engagement with the ROC**

The ROC was the only “China” recognised by the U.S. after the Second World War and all the way up to 1979, and during this time it was also the ROC that was in possession of China’s spot in the United Nations. Initially a nondemocratic nation, the liberalisation and democratisation that the ROC underwent in the 1990s culminating in the first democratic presidential elections in 1996 brought both increased cross-strait tensions with the PRC and a greater importance to ROC-U.S. cooperation, including in defence-related matters (Coffin,

2017). There are quite clear parallels to be drawn here between Taiwan and Ukraine in their mutual move towards full democracy and a pro-Western policy, albeit the ROC's such move happened earlier than Ukraine's eventual pivot away from its authoritarian neighbour. Hence, they have faced the same kind of rhetoric and agitation from their respective "powerful neighbour" mentioned above.

This relationship between the U.S. and the ROC is, however, complicated by the fact that the U.S. remains committed to its "one China-policy", i.e. the idea that there is only one state that can be called "China". Needless to say, committing to the defence and preservation of the ROC on the hand and recognising the PRC as the "only China" on the other has been and remains a difficult position for the U.S. to hold. However, whereas the PRC insists on its "communist" government being the sole legitimate representative of this "one China" (and by definition therefore excluding anything other than eventual unification under PRC leadership), the U.S. interpretation has allowed both sides (i.e. the collective "Chinese people") to arrive at different interpretation as to which government is the legitimate one for the "only China". Thus, the U.S. has attempted to assuage some of the PRC's fears by sending the message that the U.S. is not committed to full and de jure independence of Taiwan, whilst simultaneously supporting the ROC in its bid to preserve its de facto independence from Beijing (Huang, 2017).

In addition to all this, democratisation of Taiwan also brought about the rise of "Taiwanese identity" amongst some (and increasing numbers of) Taiwanese, that is to say promoting Taiwan as a unique state separate from both the idea of "the one China" and "one of two Chinas" (Coffin, 2017).

## 7. Previous research

### 7.1 Overview of previous research

The issue of Sino-Taiwanese relations have, ever since the invasion by a similar great power of a smaller country (that by Russia of Ukraine), been on the minds of an increasingly large amount of people, both scholars and academics but also most significantly of ordinary citizens in China and Taiwan. As such, recent studies have been made in 2022 and 2023 drawing certain parallels between the two sets of countries “Russia and Ukraine” on the one hand and “China and Taiwan” on the other, for example by institutions such as the “Global Taiwan Institute” (Khrestin, 2023) and the European Council of Foreign Relations (Köckritz, 2023). However these studies are not empirical comparisons of the two in any sense, and there is room here for further research in the future, particularly regarding the causes and motivations of Russia’s decision to invade and how it may or may not apply to the PRC-ROC situation.

The work of John Mearsheimer is essential to anyone seeking to understand international relations and why nations wage war on each other. In his book “Conventional Deterrence” (1985), Mearsheimer outlines his views on the basic rationale for war, why nations wage war against each other and what “preconditions” must be met to reach a state of war. He does this based on military and strategic rationales, from the fundamental standpoint that the international order is anarchic common to arguably all realist scholars.

In general, most of the research one can find on deterrence theory, as was stated in the introduction, is from the Cold War era, especially the 1980s. Although there has been continuous and vibrant publishing on deterrence theory throughout the 2000s, as shown by Zagare (2006), most of this research and debate has been on the conceptual thinking around the theory itself and on the failings and shortcomings of the theory as it was originally developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Some scholars have advanced claims that we have entered a fourth wave of deterrence theory applicable to the modern world and that has begun to untangle some of the knots of the previous three “waves” (Lupovici, 2010).

Recent, post-Ukraine invasion studies on the implications of that war on the relationship between China and Taiwan have been made. An example of this is the in-depth report by Benoit Dupras (2022) in which one of the key points to take away is the argument that Russia’s poor performance in Ukraine has significantly reduced the risk of an invasion of Taiwan by the PRC at least in the short term.

## **7.2 Criticism of previous research, and why it needs to be updated**

Brief commentaries and articles such as those by Khrestin or Köckritz do not provide an in-depth look at the full historical background of the relationship between the PRC, the ROC and the U.S. in the way I aim to do with this thesis, and they are especially reticent on information about the PRC's viewpoints, motivations and potential actions.

Mearsheimer and his views, as one of the earliest and most important scholars to focus explicitly on conventional deterrence, will be more thoroughly discussed in the “theory” section, but suffice it to say here that I identify flaws (or perhaps more accurately limitations) with his realist outlook of the world that has allowed him to, seemingly, become an unwitting apologist for the war in Ukraine (Rachman, 2023) and that fails to take into account other vital aspects necessary for analysis, such as how potential sanctions on the PRC's trade-dependent economy, in the event of an attempt to invade Taiwan, might impact China and by extension also the West.

Recent reports such as Dupras' do not approach the issue of Sino-Taiwanese relations from the theory of deterrence or the implications of said theory, in the way that my thesis does. Although informative and important, it does not add to the field that I seek to contribute to. In other words, not so much in the cases chosen but rather in theoretical approach, I argue that my thesis provides new aspects, viewpoints and knowledge that I would argue confirms its scientific relevance.

Fundamentally, I disagree with statements that seek to imply that the current state of deterrence theory is entirely healthy, although I certainly do agree with Lupovici that the field has never “gone away” from academia in any sense. Rather, the greatest problem is to be found at the policy level. The failure of the EU and the U.S. to provide any form of real security assurances to Ukraine serve as a reminder of what can happen when deterrence is not taken seriously, but fortunately therefore also serves as a valuable blueprint for how not to act “next time” in a tense situation (“next time” obviously meaning in dealing with the PRC).

There has also been relatively little attention paid to applying deterrence theory to modern interstate conflicts such as the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, given that other types of conflict in the 21st century have primarily taken other forms, especially of course asymmetric warfare against terrorist groups. Realism and theories, like deterrence theory, rooted in it have too often been forgotten in favour of an exaggerated focus on and belief in the peacekeeping

abilities of precisely the same liberal multilateral organisations that I accuse Mearsheimer of focusing too little on.

## **8. Research question**

My RQ is “Does the support of Taiwan by the U.S. provide sufficient deterrence to prevent a Chinese invasion?”. The goal is to examine whether or not Taiwan is likely to remain independent in the future or be attacked by, and subsequently incorporated into, the PRC using deterrence theory as framework.

I aim to answer the RQ through empirical analyses of the military and economic capabilities of China on the one hand and Taiwan and the U.S. on the other.



## 9. The "Theory of Deterrence" and its framework

### 9.1 What is the "Theory of Deterrence", and how is it used and applied?

The theory of deterrence in international relations and IR theory fundamentally means "persuading an opponent not to initiate a specific action because the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks", in the words of Mearsheimer in his book "Conventional Deterrence" (1985, p. 11). Mearsheimer also addresses the additional non-military implications of deterrence, such as the reactions of third-party countries, aspects of international law and economic areas. Accordingly, he provides the broad summary that deterrence is a function of the relationship between potential political benefits derived from military action on the one hand and non-military as well as military costs and risks on the other.

There are two different forms of deterrence that have been relevant since the end of the Cold War: "conventional deterrence" and "nuclear deterrence". As the names suggest, the former is comprised of non-nuclear forces armed with "conventional" weaponry, and the latter of tactical- and strategic nuclear weapons. Because deterrence theory in an academic sense was developed against the backdrop of the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was for a long time the primary focus of the theory and the scholars associated with it (Gerson and Whiteneck, 2009, p. 8). For the same reason, the majority of scholarly work on deterrence, whether conventional or nuclear, was also focused around the "bipolar world order" of the two superpowers the United States and the Soviet Union. Because of this association with a world order and a reality that no longer exists in today's multipolar world, deterrence theory has previously, as mentioned earlier, often been thought of as outdated and as irrelevant for the modern post-Cold War era (Zagare, 2006, p. 115).

Another key distinction regarding the theory of deterrence is found in the two concepts "punishment" and "denial", as laid out in both the work of Mearsheimer and by Gerson and Whiteneck (2009), amongst others. The former focuses on the threat to destroy a large proportion of a country's civilian population and economic base (largely synonymous with nuclear deterrence) and the latter on convincing a potential adversary that the goals it seeks cannot be obtained on the battlefield (thus largely synonymous with conventional deterrence). Gerson and Whiteneck, citing Lawrence Freedman, argue their point that conventional deterrence is more effective than nuclear deterrence based on conventional deterrence being more "easily transformed into a capability to engage in conflict, control escalation, and win

the war”. If the “punishment” option is taken (i.e., the threat of nuclear war, or perhaps a massive bombing campaign reminiscent of World War II) it is left to the adversary to decide how much more to “take” before surrendering, or abandoning the pursuit of its goals through military means. “With denial”, says Freedman, “the choice is removed” (Gerson and Whiteneck, p. 3).

With conventional deterrence focused on the idea of “denial”, military forces already in the geographic area or forces that can rapidly be deployed there are most important and this is equally important for my analysis of the military capabilities of China and the United States. Regardless of whether or not China obfuscates its true military spending (which a 2021 U.S. Department of Defense estimate argues they very much do<sup>1</sup>), I consider it beyond doubt that the U.S. military is considerably more powerful than the PLA (especially in the naval arena, where the United States has nearly as many aircraft carriers as all other countries combined<sup>2</sup>, all of which are nuclear-powered). This edge for the United States is especially true, I would argue, in terms of quality of the equipment and probably, or at least plausibly, also training and tactics.

As a number of twenty-first century events (such as the American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, or the war in Ukraine) have shown, the importance of providing and articulating deterrence is still very clear, perhaps more today than in a long time. This is also reflected in the academic literature, which in the post-Cold War era reevaluated many of the earlier positions that nuclear deterrence was the “be all, end all” and a general consensus emerged that conventional weapons could substitute for many of the missions once relegated to nuclear weapons (Gerson and Whiteneck, 2009, p. 9). Despite nuclear sabre-rattling by Russia since its invasion of Ukraine, they have not used even tactical nuclear weapons despite the arrival of tens of billions of dollars in Western military aid to Ukraine, and it is therefore reasonable to rule out the use of nuclear weapons from any conceptualisation of a potential conflict between China on side and Taiwan and the U.S. on the other (at least from reasonably rational actors).

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense estimated in 2021 that China’s real military spending might be up to twice that of the officially stated figure for that year of \$209 billion (ChinaPower Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies)

<sup>2</sup> World Population Review, “Aircraft Carriers by Country 2023”

## **9.2 Mearsheimer's contributions and the weaknesses of his reasoning**

One of the most important contributions provided by Mearsheimer to the field of deterrence theory, apart from his early work on conventional deterrence, is his idea of “offensive realism”. This idea adheres to all the basic tenets of realism in IR, building on Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism. The “offensive” element added by Mearsheimer consists of his argument that the goal of states in the anarchical realm of international relations is not just to deter attackers but to maximize their power relative to other states and become a hegemon (Toft, 2005).

Mearsheimer also classified state capabilities into two different groups, latent power and actual power, where the former means things such as economy and population and the latter military power and capabilities, and he has focused almost entirely on actual power in his work (ibid).

Herein lies one of the fundamental problems with Mearsheimer, his undisputed influence in the field notwithstanding: that he has not and does not concern himself sufficiently with the possibility of other aspects of exercising power or projecting deterrence – a view echoed by other scholars (Toft, 2005). While military power can of course never be removed from the equation entirely either in IR or in deterrence (indeed, I would agree that it is central to both), modern conceptualisations and applications of deterrence theory need to take into account the potentially far-reaching consequences and effectiveness of “latent power” aspects such as economic sanctions. This is especially true of economies as globalised and dependent on global trade as the PRC’s and despite his narrow focus on power Mearsheimer himself has admitted that China is likely to attempt to dominate Asia in other, more subtle ways (ibid), yet seemingly has not adjusted his thinking to account for this.

Another fault with Mearsheimer’s thinking that is particularly relevant for the China-Taiwan context is that not only has it been focused squarely on war to the detriment of other aspects, but it has been focused on land wars in particular. Indeed, he argues that because land armies are necessary to control territory, they are the most crucial aspect of actual power (Toft, 2005). However, a potential conflict between the PRC and the ROC would involve primarily naval and air forces, especially early in the most crucial phase of a Chinese attack, and any thinking from Taiwan and the U.S. on how to deter the PRC must account for this reality of Taiwan being an island and the inevitability of naval conflict. Thus, even concerning actual power and actual open conflict Mearsheimer’s theories are of limited use to the scenario in question.

Thirdly, I fundamentally disagree with a number of basic assumptions made by Mearsheimer on the fundamental state of the world, particularly his claim that “survival is the primary motivation of all states in the international system” (Toft, 2005). This is at most only true in times of conflict with an obviously superior foe, and not something informing day-to-day policy or actions in peacetime in any country, I would argue. While there is some merit to Taiwan being an existential threat to the PRC because of the alternative, democratic model for a Chinese-speaking population it provides, there is not much evidence that the democratisation of Taiwan and its continued existence as a democratic state near the PRC has led to increased calls for democracy in the PRC.

It can certainly also be debated whether or not, as Mearsheimer and indeed realist scholars in general assert, global society today truly is “anarchic”. I argue that the myriad of liberal multilateral organisations in existence today, whether the UN or the IMF or the ICC or any other, absolutely contribute to providing at least some degree of stability to the supposed “anarchy”, and they can also provide a degree of deterrence even if conflict does break out. Russia’s pariah status, with condemnation in or exclusion from most major multilateral organisations including the UN, is certainly something China is aware of and will need to factor in for any cost-benefit analysis of an invasion of the ROC.

Obviously, criticism of Mearsheimer and his ideas is nothing new, and I am not exactly the first to articulate it in writing. On core issues, such as how to interpret whether or not global society is “anarchic”, one could certainly say that I am joining in with existing critique rather than creating my own, and this because I would I argue it is self-evident that non-state actors have a role to play if one looks at the world. However, this study does attempt to add something new to criticism of Mearsheimer by applying it to a concrete scenario of two opposing sides with defined strengths, where the shortcomings of Mearsheimer’s focus on land wars, his lack of emphasis on economic aspects and his argument that survival is the primary motivation of states are all highlighted and “laid bare”. In short, it is not so much that the arguments against Mearsheimer are all entirely new but rather in how they are applied to a modern potential “flashpoint” of conflict that separates my criticism from that of many others.

## 10. Design and methodology

In attempting to understand present and future Sino-Taiwanese relations and the effectiveness of deterrence against the PRC laid out in my RQ, aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian war will, as was stated in the “Thesis aims” section, inform and influence parts of this thesis. This on the basis of that war being the very reason concerns about a China-Taiwan conflict have once again become paramount in international relations. The main focus of this study is therefore quantitative and empirical in nature, drawing on extant “raw data” in terms of military hardware- and capabilities. However, interpreting and analysing this empirical data and applying it in order to make assumptions and predictions will involve more qualitative efforts too, not least when attempting to determine if and how sanctions and embargoes will play a role in deterring China (where simple “yes” and “no”-type answers likely cannot be provided). In short, this study seeks to make use of both quantitative and qualitative measures to answer the RQ.

In order to obtain basic data on the military strength of the PRC on one side and Taiwan plus its allies on the other I will be making use of the website [globalfirepower.com](http://globalfirepower.com), which ranks countries according to their military strength and allows for side-by-side comparisons of two countries at the same time of the various metrics. The website’s metrics and information are based on more than sixty individual factors such as economic strength, raw materials production and of course numbers of various types of military equipment, and can therefore be considered a comprehensive and well-researched resource. A potential problem with this resource, and indeed with all available resources purporting to accurately portray the “military arsenals” of countries, is the extent to which the data can be trusted. Whilst this should be less of a problem with U.S. resources used for deterrence, it might be more of an issue with China as China might not have reported the full extent of equipment and capabilities they possess, feel no obligation to do so and are under less scrutiny to do so due to not being a democracy. This is the empirical, quantitative part of the design.

Another weakness of using [globalfirepower.com](http://globalfirepower.com), and indeed any resource listing and comparing military forces in such a manner, is that the numbers do not tell the whole truth, that they only provide one part of the picture. Political scientist Eliot Cohen goes as far as to state that quality of equipment and technology has become so superior to quantity in the era of modern conflict that tracking and analysing numbers in terms of soldiers and equipment has become irrelevant (Cohen, 2013, pp. 140-141).

However, against this I would like to raise two objections. Firstly, as long as the imagined U.S. supremacy over China in terms of quality and tactics remains hypothetical, because there has been no open conflict between the two sides, there will continue to exist a need for more “black-and-white”, concrete metrics such as numbers of personnel and equipment to provide, at the very least, hints and clues about the general military strength of nations. My point is that because it cannot be proven that the technology and tactics of the U.S., that we all imagine is superior to China’s, actually is until the two sides have faced off, we also cannot dismiss analyses of quantity and numbers if we want to say anything at all about deterrence. Secondly, I would argue that the potential conflict between the PRC and ROC/U.S. would be precisely the type of conflict where Cohen himself admits his observations about quality trumping quantity “may not apply” (ibid, p. 141). The conflict would be fought much closer to the PRC than the U.S., in waters where China’s many smaller and cheaper (and doubtlessly inferior) vessels were specifically designed to operate, and close to Chinese coastal defences that could offset a great deal of any potential U.S. qualitative advantage. Against the backdrop of these arguments, I believe that my choice of making easily accessible, empirical data of military arsenals the foundation of my thesis is motivated and in any case the only real type of objective data available. The need for letting aspects such as quality inform how the empirical data is interpreted, and what value it is assigned, must however still be kept in mind, of course.

There are clear similarities between the situation that Taiwan now finds itself in and that of Ukraine. As has previously been stated, China and Russia have applied similar rhetoric towards their respective neighbouring smaller state, have put forth similar reasons for why they think the smaller country “belongs to them”, and they are both great powers with a large military production and relatively sanction-protected economies whereas Ukraine and Taiwan are both Western-aligned countries that can expect to receive (in the ROC’s case) or have received (in the case of Ukraine, albeit only after war had broken out) U.S. and Western support. Fundamentally, what Russia has done to Ukraine, that many people including many experts to the last minute believed would not happen, has once again made it abundantly clear in the case of China and Taiwan that no option, however foolish it may seem, can be treated as if it won’t happen.

However, the reason this thesis has not been designed to be a comparative case study (as was originally intended) is because of a number of key differences between the two sets of countries. In the case of Ukraine, it is not obvious that there was a deterrence from the

collective West to compare with that provided over many decades to Taiwan by the United States that could form the basis of such a comparison between the effectiveness of deterrence in different contexts. Indeed, I would say that the absence of deterrence in the form of security guarantees- and assurances to Ukraine, and especially Russia's experience of a relatively minor response to its previous violations of Ukrainian territorial integrity, is one major contributing factor to why Russia felt it was in a position to invade Ukraine with relative impunity. Although one could certainly fault Putin and his advisors for their failure to recognise the severity of international response their invasion would be met with, it is equally possible to take a more sympathetic view by recognising that the collective West indeed hadn't done all that much to stand up for Ukraine's territorial integrity previously and that their expectations of a swift triumph were not wholly unreasonable, if still a bit unrealistic.

Even if one cannot, then, compare the effectiveness of different "degrees" of deterrence or the differences of its effectiveness in different countries (as, again, there was no deterrence to speak of in the Russia-Ukraine context) there are still conclusions that can be drawn from this absence of deterrence in Ukraine. Because this is a study about Taiwan and its future, and not about Ukraine, I am once again not looking to provide answers to why Ukraine finds itself in the position it is in, but it is still worth reiterating that the Russo-Ukrainian war is important for understanding the China-Taiwan situation. The failure of the West, over many years, to stand up for Ukraine before it was "too late" has shown the importance of deterrence and therefore also reiterated the vital place that deterrence theory still has, or should still have, in contemporary IR.

## **11. Empirical analysis**

### **11.1 What forms of deterrence are provided by the United States and its allies?**

Although it has been stated earlier that the world today is multipolar, and not unipolar or bipolar, there can be little doubt that the United States is by far the world's most dominant military power. This is especially true when taking all branches of service (as the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force in particular possess overwhelming capabilities) into account, along with aspects such as quality of materiel, technical- and research capabilities and likely also tactics. Although the tactics of the United States and other Western countries are untested against a great power adversary in the modern era, I argue that the last point on tactical superiority is

evidenced by the performance of Ukrainian troops (using modern, NATO-derived tactics and training) against Cold War-era Russian tactics, which clearly lack a lot of the mobility and relatively autonomous lower-level decision making we have seen in the Ukrainian forces.

However, this well-known fact is only of limited use when applied to the context of the protection of Taiwan by means of deterring China. Even if China cannot inflict anything close to a complete defeat on the United States as a whole at least with conventional weaponry, of course it does not necessarily need to do that in order to invade Taiwan. Much as how, in Mearsheimer's definition, attackers can be deterred if "the perceived benefits do not justify the estimated costs and risks", so it can be argued the United States could be deterred from strongly defending Taiwan with more than token forces if they have reason to believe the costs will be unacceptable and that Taiwan will quickly lose, official guarantees of Taiwanese independence notwithstanding.

In other words, the responsibility for deterring Chinese forces rests, at least in the earliest phase of potential aggression, on forwardly deployed units in Okinawa and other parts of Japan, alongside Taiwan's own units. These American forces, the "USFJ", comprise about 54 000 military personnel (Commander, USFJ). The largest share of these is made up of U.S. Navy personnel and U.S. Marines, with about 20 000 military personnel each, and include hardware such as F-16 fighters, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and Orion reconnaissance aircraft (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019).

While these are considerably large and well-equipped units, it again becomes important to reiterate the previous point that the purpose of deterrence is not necessarily to actually possess superior forces, but to project to the potential adversary that the losses from aggression will be unacceptable regardless. On paper the full strength of the PLA would almost certainly have the forces needed to defeat Taiwanese and the available American forces (at least assuming the latter don't receive significant reinforcements) but as the Theory of Deterrence suggests, that is not all that relevant as the PRC would likely not initiate direct aggression in the first place with sufficient deterrence. This can be compared with Sweden during the Cold War, which (although arguably significantly stronger militarily than today<sup>3</sup>) despite rhetoric was never under much illusion that Soviet forces were not stronger and more numerous. Rather, the purpose of the defence was to deter any aggression outright in the first place through the

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<sup>3</sup> Åselius, 2005, p. 27



threat of significant casualties greater than the value of achieving the objective (Boman, 2016).

Beyond U.S. forces that provide deterrence, Taiwan is of course itself also in possession of forces providing deterrence. According to official and estimated data, Taiwan possesses a highly significant fighting force including, but not limited to: 1 681 500 total military personnel, 285 fighter planes (228 in a combat-ready state), 91 attack helicopters, over 1 000 tanks, around 2 000 conventional artillery pieces and a naval force of 4 destroyers, 22 frigates, 2 corvettes and 4 submarines. The country also has the world's 20th-highest defence budget, at \$18.31 billion. On the civilian side, the ROC also has a significant merchant marine fleet of 429 vessels (globalfirepower.com, "2023 Taiwan Military Strength"). Naturally, listing total strength is much more relevant here than in the U.S. case, as Taiwan has no engagements elsewhere and therefore can be expected to use its full strength to defend its own possessions.

However, Taiwan also has a number of potentially critical weak points on the civilian side. The country produces essentially no oil yet is the world's 22nd-largest oil consumer, and similar major deficits exist for other critical resources like natural gas and coal (ibid). Simply put, naval supremacy along Taiwan's shipping routes is absolutely critical for the survival of the ROC in times of war.

## **11.2 China's rationale and goals**

The PRC, as has been stated earlier, has never recognised the ROC as independent and therefore the "reincorporation" (in their view) of this "breakaway province" has in a sense always been a goal of the CPC. Despite this, relations between the two were relatively stable, if cool, for most of the time period after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The main reason for this was the fact that the ROC under the Kuomintang was also a nondemocratic state, unlike today, and although the PRC considered its independence illegitimate the ROC did not pose a serious threat to the "communist model". But when democratisation picked up speed in the 1990s, culminating in free and direct presidential elections in 1996 and a state visit by Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to the U.S., the PRC drew the conclusion that Taiwan was pushing for formal independence and that the U.S. was pursuing the goal to weaken the PRC. Shortly afterwards, they started military exercises in the Taiwan strait that have been a regular occurrence since (Coffin, 2017).

The PRC's increasing concern over a democratic ROC in its immediate vicinity was further reflected in a 2004 statement by the PRC's "Taiwan Affairs Office". In it, the PRC for the first

time made it clear that preventing the ROC's de jure independence was the top priority for its Taiwan policy (Huang, 2017).

### **11.3 “Hybrid warfare” from the PRC against Taiwan**

The tensions between the PRC and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region are viewed somewhat differently by the two sides. Key Chinese strategists and theorists categorise competition with the United States in their surrounding countries and areas as “hybrid warfare”, rather than “hybrid threats” or escalation of tensions. This “hybrid warfare” extends to every field imaginable, including to religion and civil society. In this view, then, it would seem that China considers itself at least to some extent already at war with the United States, albeit not in a conventional sense. In China's view, hybrid warfare applied against Taiwan and its key Asian allies such as Japan is a defensive struggle. This struggle is compared with the Russian aggression against Ukraine which in Chinese propaganda, largely echoing the propaganda of Russia, is a result of the United States carrying out “hybrid warfare” of its own to push Ukraine away from Russia. Similarly, the ROC is viewed by China's strategists as a “pawn” of the U.S., where the latter's ability to communicate with and move the “pawn” to take certain action needs to be removed. The CPC of China aims to do this by degrading U.S. political-, economic- and military influence with Taiwan (Peterson, 2023).

The key component of this strategy of “hybrid warfare” from China is the effort to paint the American-led security architecture as no longer providing stability and security. For example, military- and diplomatic pressures on the Philippines, a key U.S. ally, has allowed China to violate the maritime territorial integrity of the Philippines thereby posing a very real threat to the notion that the United States will always be able, or willing, to swiftly come to the aid of any of its allies (Peterson, 2023). In short, China is a threat to the current world order, which it wants to replace with one dominated by the PRC (at least in Asia).

### **11.4 China's military strength**

Let us turn once more to the raw data, this time for information on the other side of potential conflict. The PRC is estimated to have around 2 million active personnel in the PLA, along with 510 000 reservists in addition to 625 000 paramilitary troops (globalfirepower.com, “2023 China military strength”). With a defence budget stated to be \$230 billion (but likely, as has been stated earlier, being considerably higher than that) it is of course no surprise that China possesses considerable capabilities also in the equipment and capabilities of their forces. Even an old 2009 report by the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence concluded that the

PLA Navy is one of the strongest in the world, and that was commissioned when the PRC had only one aircraft carrier, compared to the three aircraft carriers it currently operates, with a fourth one on the way. The same report also notes the PLA's commitment to coastal anti-ship defences and underway replenishment capabilities that already in 2009 allowed for "greater sustainment of operations far from shore" (Office of Naval Intelligence, 2009). It goes without saying that China's capabilities in these areas have not exactly diminished in the 14 years since.

In terms of aircraft, the PRC is stated to operate 1 199 fighter planes, 371 attack planes and 281 attack helicopters among more than 3 000 total aircraft. This is substantially less than global U.S. air forces, but substantially more than the combined U.S. and ROC forces in the region. The PLA's naval forces include the aforementioned 3 carriers, 50 destroyers, 43 frigates, 72 corvettes and 78 submarines (a number of which are nuclear-powered).

Additionally, the PLA possesses powerful land-based systems such as close to 5 000 tanks and 4 000 artillery pieces, however these are not covered more in detail as the bulk of these would likely not be involved in an amphibious operation against the ROC because they were not designed for this purpose (globalfirepower, "2023 China military strength").

On the civilian side, the country also has the world's 3rd-largest merchant marine fleet with more than 6 600 civilian vessels. However, much like the ROC China suffers from critical weaknesses in oil and gas production, being the world's second-largest oil consumer and third-largest natural gas consumer. Despite being the fifth-largest oil producer, fourth-largest natural gas producer and largest coal producer worldwide the PRC has a deficit in all three critical resources, albeit only negligibly so in terms of coal (ibid).

### **11.5 Economic dimensions and their implications for deterrence**

While economic dimensions are not the most important aspect of deterrence, it is simultaneously important, as stated earlier with regards to Mearsheimer, not to forget them entirely. This is of course all the more true with two of the parties envisioned as being involved in the future conflict being the two largest economies in the world.

Sanctions are often thought of as primarily an instrument of democratic Western states to voice disapproval mostly with nondemocratic countries, often in the developing world. There is merit to this assumption, as Europe and the U.S. have dominated this sphere of power projection (Nephew, 2019, p. 5). Increasingly though, the PRC has displayed a willingness to also make use of this instrument to which it has previously often been opposed, and

frequently been a target of (ibid). As a result, it is likely that U.S. support for the ROC in the event of an invasion will result in Chinese sanctions against the U.S. even if it doesn't lead to a total stop in trade between the two, and it is relevant to keep this in mind just as much as the possibility of U.S. sanctions against China. It is, at least in theory, certainly possible to imagine a scenario in which the mere threat of this deters the U.S. from supporting Taiwan, rather than the other way around.

The PRC itself is all too aware of the potential of its powerful "latent power", to use Mearsheimer's terminology. A professor at Renmin University wrote in 2019 that China has three "trump cards" to use against the U.S.: the banning of the export of rare earths to the U.S., refusing to buy U.S. debt, and denying the U.S. access to the enormous Chinese market. As the trade war (much less drastic than these measures) between the two countries in 2019 showed, this would have a very significant impact on the U.S. economy (Nephew, 2019). By extension, it might therefore also have a very significant political impact and result in the losing of an election for the sitting president as consumer goods prices rise.

China might also attempt to target allies of the U.S. with more vulnerable economies, in order to attempt to compel them to abandon their support of the U.S. or Taiwan or both (Nephew, 2019). This could potentially be a powerful tool for the PRC to counter the increasingly urgent attempts by the U.S. to "encircle" China with pro-U.S. countries, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand and Japan.

Of course, the most frequent user of sanctions, the U.S., itself has a potentially powerful tool for deterrence at its disposal here. Apart from requiring large-scale imports of oil, gas and coal to fuel its economy as stated earlier, the PRC has another important weakness: semiconductors. In October 2022 the Biden administration imposed restrictions on the export of this important technology to China, and was followed later by Japan and the Netherlands (Allen, 2022). At the same time, 20 % of global semiconductor manufacturing is located in Taiwan, with Taiwanese company TSMC alone accounting for 55 % of global semiconductor manufacturing (Lemert and Runde, 2021). Semiconductors are required for most modern equipment, including military equipment, and a complete ban on the sale of this technology not only from the U.S. but also from the ROC could have significant consequences on China's ability to produce as well as maintain its military equipment.

All these aspects considered, one could argue that the U.S. (with Taiwan) and the PRC are in a state of equilibrium with regards to economic aspects. Both sides have potentially significant

leverage over the other, and neither side is without weaknesses. While this could be thought of as making the situation more uncertain, I would argue it actually strengthens the potential U.S.-ROC deterrence. This uncertainty benefits the defenders more than the aggressor, as it is the aggressor that has everything to lose and what they stand to gain (i.e. Taiwan) is likely to have had most of the industry and infrastructure that the PRC covets destroyed in the fighting anyway.

## 12. Conclusion

I have attempted, in this work, to answer the question whether or not the ROC will be an independent state in the future. I have done so by attempting to outline the basic military realities between on the one hand the PRC and on the other the U.S. and Taiwan, and also factoring in economic aspects such as potential sanctions. All of it underpinned by deterrence theory, in which the idea is that costs from military action that are deemed higher (by the potential aggressor) than the potential gains can *deter* this potential aggressor from actually becoming one. My belief is that illustrating objective, empirical realities in this manner is a clear, easy-to-grasp way of presenting the situation while still providing a basis for deeper analysis.

Obviously, the question I have posed is not one that can be answered definitively. That is, in one sense, a weakness of this study. On the other hand, there is a need particularly in international relations for studies that attempt to “predict the future” and the uncertainty element is inescapable. Deterrence theory is, after all, all about “prediction”, in the sense that very little is guaranteed. Yet it remains a vital theory for international relations in the 21st century, even if it hasn’t always been treated as such.

To still attempt to answer my RQ, or rather what is the most likely scenario, I think that, at the time of writing this, the U.S. and Taiwan do provide sufficient deterrence to prevent a PRC invasion. So what makes me arrive at this conclusion? Contrary to the great military strength of the U.S., it is actually the ROC defences that render me most confident in this assessment. “All” they realistically have to do, if we assume the U.S. indeed does come to their aid, is hold out until U.S. forces arrive. With hundreds of thousands of troops and 1.5 million reservists on an island, the prospects of successfully doing this in the short term (as in a week or two) are in my view excellent. The deterrence provided by the geographical realities of Taiwan’s location is perhaps the greatest deterrent of all. Couple that with U.S. power projection capabilities, naval strength and air strength and likely qualitative advantages and I cannot envision a rationally acting PRC undertaking an invasion attempt for the foreseeable future, *as long as they believe this superior U.S. support to Taiwan will come.*

However, the same geographical realities of Taiwan’s location also serve as one of the greatest obstacles to providing deterrence that would protect Taiwan. The great distance between the bulk of U.S. forces in California and Hawaii and Taiwan, and the time needed to travel from those areas to Taiwan, are a significant argument for why China won’t necessarily take U.S.

forces beyond Japan and Guam seriously. Despite this I find, when looking at the empirical data on the USFJ, that the USFJ alone is sufficient for deterrence based on quantitative measures. Its carrier force, in conjunction with the land-based aircraft from the mainland that the U.S. has and that can be deployed to Taiwan very rapidly compared to the slow movement of ships, would likely be able to offset a great deal of the PRC's numerical advantage in terms of ships. With the hundreds of modern combat aircraft the U.S. and Taiwan together have, as seen in the above data (theoretically thousands, limited only by the U.S. willingness and capability to rapidly send planes from other sectors of the world, and its ability to supply them), China would not be able to achieve the aerial supremacy necessary for large-scale amphibious landings even if they did have full control of the sea. Air and sea are intimately intertwined, as evidenced by Germany's failure to invade Britain during World War II due to its failure to achieve aerial supremacy.

Another primary argument against Taiwan remaining independent, albeit one lying somewhat outside what can be directly seen in the above empirical data on military hardware, is the potential unreliability of U.S. support. Words are easy, action much harder, and as Europe prepares for a possible second Trump term in the White House and a worst-case scenario of a total stop in aid to Ukraine, so too must the possibility of a U.S. that wavers on the "Taiwan issue" when it matters most be taken into account. Even without an explicitly isolationist president in the White House, and even with an explicitly interventionist president, domestic opinion in the U.S. is something that will always remain central to support of Taiwan, and it is a profound risk that American popular support for a full-scale great power war with China simply won't be there and any president undertaking such a venture will be voted out. All my conclusions on Taiwan "surviving" as an independent state rest on the assumption that the U.S. will help the ROC against the PRC. It is on the basis of this that my comparison of the military- and economic strengths of the two sides in this thesis has been carried out. If they don't, then even the geographical realities of Taiwan and its strong military will not be able to cause casualties higher than Taiwan's strategic "worth". In other words, if there is reasonable doubt in the minds of PRC leaders that the U.S. will not help Taiwan, then the "correct" answer to my RQ would be the opposite, the deterrence would then not be enough and China would invade.

All this said, it is clear that deterring the PRC is not a static endeavour and it is necessary to develop policy- and strategy suggestions for the future. The deterrence needs to continually evolve and expand to meet new threats from China and this needs to be reflected at the policy

level. The U.S. must continue to respond to China's "proxy war" attempting to undermine the U.S.-led liberal world order, and continuing down the path of securing more alliances with Asia-Pacific states opposed to China is a sound step in these efforts. Additionally, the U.S. and the broader West in general need to continue to work to reduce their dependencies on Chinese manufacturing, and much more thoroughly scrutinise Chinese companies operating in the West that might constitute security risks in different ways. More specifically for Taiwan, the U.S. should increase its presence at forward bases in Japan and on Guam to more quickly be able to respond to PRC aggression. In the long term the EU also has a role to play in strengthening its own defences, thereby reducing its dependency on the U.S. and freeing up more American troops and materiel for use in the Asia-Pacific. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly given the great risks of U.S. passivity stated above, the U.S. needs to continue working for Taiwan's "cause" in Congress, making it clear not just outwardly to China but also domestically to Americans that "they should care" about the ROC, that the ROC is worth defending even with military means and what it would mean long term for American security if Taiwan was incorporated into the PRC by force.



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