

Understanding China's approach to deterrence

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The era of great power 'strategic competition' has seen deterrence as both a concept and operational objective [return](#) to a place of pre-eminence in national defence and strategic policy not seen since the end of the Cold War.

While much attention has been given to the technological advances of China's military – which the United States military openly [terms](#) its 'pacing challenge' – relatively less attention has been paid to the concepts and strategies that may animate the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s capabilities. The Pentagon's latest annual assessment, 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China,' for example, [noted](#) that General Secretary Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2022 set a goal for the PLA to 'build a strong strategic deterrent system' based on development of both 'traditional nuclear deterrent force building' and 'the construction of conventional strategic deterrent forces' – but without further examination of how China currently conceives of deterrence.

Given China's [escalation](#) of military exercises in the Taiwan Strait over the past year and the [recent](#) step-up in incidents in the South China Sea, it is more important than ever to examine and understand how China conceives of and practices forms of coercion like deterrence. An examination of authoritative and semi-authoritative Chinese sources on PLA strategy and doctrine reveals a number of things: that China conceives of and practices deterrence in a distinct manner that combines dissuasive and compellent forms of coercion; that deterrence is explicitly framed as an instrument for the achievement of politico-military objectives; and that PLA doctrine envisages a sequential application of deterrent and compellent postures across a peacetime-crisis-war spectrum.

Chinese thinking on deterrence

Recent Chinese actions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea [underline](#) the fact that international politics 'takes place in a grey region involving no-peace and no-war wherein the *threat* of violence – more than its mere application – is the critical variable for an understanding of interstate relations and crises.'

This 'power to hurt,' as Thomas Schelling [phrased](#) it, stands at the core of strategies of coercion. This primarily takes [two](#) forms: deterrence and compellence. The former uses the threat of violence to prevent an actor from undertaking a course of action they otherwise might take absent the threat, and the latter uses the threat of violence to make an actor undertake an action they would prefer not to. The [object](#) of deterrence is thus dissuasion – i.e., a threat 'intended to keep an adversary from doing something,' while that of compellence concerns the use of threats 'to make an adversary do something.'

Most Western theorists have posited two further distinctions between deterrence and compellence. The first **concerns** the relationship between threat and the use of force. The threat is usually seen as sufficient for deterrence but insufficient for compellence, which requires both the threat and the exemplary use of force to succeed. The second is the question of who has the initiative in the practice of each concept. Deterrence, as **Schelling** memorably put it, ‘involves setting the stage – by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation – and waiting,’ while compellence ‘involves initiating an action that can cease, or become harmless, *only* if the opponent responds... To compel one gets up enough momentum to make the other *act* to avoid collision.’

In **summary**, deterrence is a ‘coercive strategy designed to prevent a target from changing its behaviour,’ where a deterrer issues deterrent threats ‘because it believes a target is about to, or will eventually, change its behaviour in ways that hurt the coercer’s interests.’ Compellence, conversely, is a coercive strategy **based** on the imposition of costs through ‘either threat or action’ until the target changes its behaviour in ways specified by the coercer.

How do these Western understandings of deterrence and compellence relate to the Chinese case?

Most immediately, as the Heritage Foundation’s Dean Cheng has **argued**, the Chinese term most often translated into English as deterrence, 威慑, ‘embodies both dissuasion and coercion.’ Authoritative documents, such as the Science of Military Strategy (SMS) compendiums published biennially by the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, illustrate this linkage in Chinese thinking with the most recent edition, from 2020, **asserting** that deterrence has two functions: ‘to stop the other party from doing what they want to do through deterrence’ (i.e. dissuasion) and ‘to use deterrence to coerce the other party to do what they must do’ (i.e. compellence).

Chinese understandings of the concept also frame it explicitly as an instrument rather than as an objective of policy. The **focus** is not ‘detering action in one or another domain, but in securing the larger Chinese strategic objective,’ such as preventing Taiwan from declaring independence or obtaining acquiescence for Chinese claims to the South China Sea.

Therefore, deterrence is conceived of not as a static activity, but one that has phases of application across peacetime, crisis, and war. The 2013 SMS, for example, **detailed** that during peacetime the objective is to employ ‘a normalised deterrence posture to force an opponent to not dare to act lightly or rashly’ based on ‘low-intensity military activities,’ such as holding military exercises, ‘displaying advanced weapons,’ and diplomatically asserting China’s ‘strategic bottom line.’ This is **suggestive** of the notion of ‘general deterrence,’ where ‘arms and warnings are a contribution to the broad context of international politics’ in which the core objective ‘is to manage the context so that for an opponent it will appear basically unattractive to resort to force.’

However, the 2013 SMS **stated** that in crisis situations the PLA will adopt ‘a high intensity deterrence posture, to show a strong resolve of willingness to fight and powerful actual strength, to force an opponent to promptly reverse course.’ The cognate of this in Western understandings is **arguably** ‘immediate deterrence,’ which is concerned with ‘the relationship between opposing states where at least one side is seriously considering an attack while the other is mounting a threat of retaliation in order to prevent it.’

The distinction between these, as Lawrence Freedman noted, ultimately **concerns** ‘the degree of strategic engagement between deterrer and deterred’ wherein immediate deterrence ‘involves an *active* effort to deter in the course of a crisis when the efficiency of any threats will soon be revealed in adversary behaviour’ and general deterrence ‘is altogether more relaxed, requiring merely the conveyance of a sense of risk to a potential adversary to ensure that active hostilities are never seriously considered.’

Where the Chinese approach departs from this concerns the operation of deterrence in the space between crisis and war. If war does break out, the objective, the **2013 SMS** and **2020 SMS** noted, becomes ‘war control’ (战争控制). ‘War control’ has been **equated** with notions of escalation management or control. Yet another possibility is suggested by analysis of the treatment of this term in the 2013 SMS and 2020 SMS documents. Here, ‘war control’ is in fact to be **used** ‘within the opportunity between total war and total

peace. The outbreak of war is a condition which makes war control possible. Preventing war is not among its imperatives.’ As such, it is a warfighting concept.

The 2013 SMS provided a snapshot of the essence of ‘war control’ when it [noted](#) that it means ‘grasping the war’s initiative, to be able to adjust and control the war goals, means, scales, tempos, time opportunities, and scope, and to strive to obtain a favourable war conclusion, at a relatively small price.’ By picking ‘the timing for the start of the war’ and surprising the enemy by attacking ‘where they are least prepared,’ China can ‘seize the battlefield initiative, paralyse the enemy’s war command, and give shock to the enemy’s will’ and thus ‘achieve victory even before the fighting starts.’

The 2020 SMS chapter on ‘war control’ provides further detail by [identifying](#) three necessary stages for its successful employment: the ‘control of war techniques’ (i.e. deliberate control of escalation through grey zone-conventional-nuclear capabilities); control of the pace, rhythm and intensity of conflict (i.e. centrality of shifting from defensive to offensive operations at the outbreak of conflict); and the ability to ‘proactively end the war’ (i.e. an ‘escalate to de-escalate’ approach).

This suggests three major implications.

First, the focus on ‘war control’ is [informed](#) by China’s historical conflict behaviour, where Beijing has had a ‘heavy preference for escalation over de-escalation to bring a conflict to an end.’ This escalate-to-deescalate approach ‘in the early stages of conflict,’ as Oriana Skylar Mastro [noted](#), is seen as having strengthened China’s capacity to prevent ‘the outbreak of total war’ during the Korean War, the Sino-Indian border war, and the Sino-Vietnamese War.

Second, the delineation of ‘war control’ into distinct phases [suggests](#) it ‘is intended to ensure flexibility in military options so the Chinese Communist Party can realise its political ambitions and affect its desired policy without compromise’ and that Chinese strategists believe that warfighting intensity can be precisely controlled.

Third, conventional capabilities are now perceived as major instruments for attaining such controllability. The [2020 SMS](#) explicitly noted here, that ‘the development of high-tech conventional weapons’ has not only ‘narrowed the gap’ between their ‘combat effectiveness’ and that of nuclear weapons but that hi-tech conventional capabilities have ‘higher accuracy and greater controllability.’ As such conventional deterrence ‘is highly controllable and less risky, and generally does not lead to devastating disasters like nuclear war. It is convenient to achieve political goals and becomes a credible deterrence method.’

China’s practice of the ‘power to hurt’

Consideration of these implications provides possible insight into future Chinese behaviour in crisis and conflict scenarios. China’s evolving strategy toward Taiwan, in particular, is consistent with the double meaning of deterrence as encompassing both dissuasion and compellence in authoritative Chinese military writings. This can be seen in the dual nature of Chinese strategy, as it seeks to dissuade Washington from intervening should China choose to use force across the Taiwan Strait and simultaneously compel Taipei to accept Beijing’s concept and model of ‘reunification.’

To achieve the first objective (i.e. to dissuade Washington), China has sought to decisively shift the military balance between it and Taiwan, while developing capabilities to delay or deny the US military access to the island and its surrounding area in the event of conflict. China’s ability to deter US intervention has been based on significant investment in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, including the [deployment](#) of a diverse suite of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) – such as the DF-15 and DF-16 SRBMs, the anti-ship DF-21D MRBM, and DF-26 IRBM deployed by the PLA Rocket Force brigades tasked with Taiwan contingencies.

Significantly, during the August 2022 military [exercises](#) in the Taiwan Strait, the PLA’s missile launches likely involved the DF-15 variant, which is [designed](#) for ‘precision strike, bunker-busting, and anti-runway operations.’ Other elements of the PLA’s exercises [consistent](#) with an A2/D2 approach vis-a-vis US forces were the inclusion of air and sea-based anti-submarine capabilities, such as the Y-8 surveillance/anti-

submarine warfare aircraft and regular sorties of the PLA Airforce's (PLAAF) J-11 and J-16 fighters (aircraft thought to be capable of carrying the PL-15 air-to-air missile, which is optimised to target aerial refuelling and airborne early warning control aircraft across the 'median line' of the Taiwan Strait). Such capabilities, as RAND analyst Mark Cozad [argued](#), provide the PLA with 'numerous options to hold at risk major US bases, logistics hubs, and command and control facilities throughout the region.'

China's desire to compel Taiwan was also on display during the exercises and was consistent with its long-term strategy toward Taiwan, which has sought to [integrate](#) a variety of diplomatic, economic, and military instruments to prevent Taipei from any deviation from [Beijing's](#) interpretation of the 'One China' principle. The exercises, and subsequent ones in [April 2023](#), suggest that China is seeking to leverage what it sees as its growing military advantage vis-à-vis Taiwan to demonstrate the punishments and costs that it can impose should Taipei not move back toward what Beijing believes is the 'bottom line' for cross-strait relations (in other words, acceptance of its 'One China principle').

In August 2022, this was expressed through Beijing's imposition of a variety of economic and diplomatic [sanctions](#) backed by [military exercises](#) that directly impinged upon Taiwan's territorial waters, exclusive economic zone, and air defence identification zone. For example, the exercises [conducted](#) off China's Pingtan Island, at the narrowest point of the Taiwan Strait, and in the Bashi Channel, which separates waters within the First Island Chain from the Philippine Sea and the broader Pacific Ocean, demonstrated China's [capability](#) to control these vital chokepoints in a potential quarantine or blockade of Taiwan.

That these activities are designed to signal China's capability to impose such punishment was underlined by an analyst from the Naval Research Academy of the PLA, who [asserted](#) that the August 2022 exercises constituted a 'closed encirclement posture towards Taiwan Island' where the PLA could force 'a situation of closing the door and hitting dogs' in the event of conflict – a colourful turn of phrase that implies the PLA could effectively delay and/or deny US forces access to Taiwan.

Conclusion

Several uncertainties remain, however, about how the deterrent and compellent elements of China's approach may play out in a crisis.

First, the [2020 SMS](#) envisaged the sequential application of deterrent and compellent strategies across a peacetime, crisis, and war spectrum. We may thus ask where the August 2022 and more recent April 2023 exercises lie on this spectrum. The picture here is arguably mixed. Some aspects of these exercises were consistent with the 'normalised deterrence' posture – based on 'low-intensity military activities' such as 'displaying advanced weapons' and diplomatically asserting China's 'strategic bottom line' – that the 2020 SMS identified as appropriate for peacetime. Yet the scale and intensity of the exercises were suggestive of the 'high intensity deterrence posture' that the 2020 SMS [described](#) as designed to demonstrate 'a strong resolve of willingness to fight...to force an opponent to promptly reverse course.'

Second, China will likely find compellence to be a challenging form of coercion to effectively implement. This appears particularly so with respect to its attempted compellence of Taiwan as China's objective – 'reunification' on Beijing's terms – abrogates the engine of coercive diplomacy. The goal of coercive diplomacy, as Tami Davis Biddle [argued](#), 'is to force the target state (or actor) to choose between conceding the disputed stake or suffering future pain that making such a concession would avert.' The coerced state 'must be convinced that if it resists it will suffer, but if it concedes it will not.' However, 'if it suffers either way, or if it has already suffered all it can, then it will not concede and coercion will fail.' China's current behaviour amply demonstrates to Taiwan that it will suffer regardless of whether it resists or concedes to Beijing's coercion, thus arguably increasing Taiwan's [resolve](#) to resist. This raises the question as to when, and under what circumstances, Beijing may reassess the utility of its use of coercion.

Finally, the concept of 'war control' indicates not only that China believes coercion can be precisely calibrated, but that its crisis behaviour is informed by a preference for an escalate-to-deescalate approach. This carries two possible risks: First, that China will seek to make its violations of Taiwan's air space and territorial waters routine and thereby establish a new status quo that will enhance its ability to dictate the modes, intensity,

and duration of future coercion, and, second, that a belief in the controllability of conventional escalation significantly heightens the risk of future miscalculation.

China's conception and practice of deterrence thus presents a difficult picture for external observers to both decipher and predict future Chinese behaviour. Key elements of China's deterrence thinking such as 'war control' suggest the PLA may have a higher willingness to probe and test adversary 'red lines' in pursuit of seizing the initiative early in a crisis so as achieve strategic or operational advantage that can be leveraged to induce concession from adversaries. Yet, at the same time, China's compellence efforts may deliver increasingly diminishing returns as adversaries recognise that the imposition of costs are forthcoming regardless of whether they accede to or resist coercion. External observers can only hope that recognition of this fact may induce greater caution in Beijing.

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