



***DEALING WITH INCREASED CHINESE
AGGRESSIVENESS - PART ONE***

BY RALPH COSSA

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For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

The following are some of the key findings and recommendations from the August 2022 US-Taiwan Deterrence and Defense Dialogue. PacNet 7 provides a summary of the dialogue. The full report, with expanded key findings and recommendations can be found [here](#).

Taiwan is under attack by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) politically, economically, psychologically, and militarily—the latter through more aggressive Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) gray zone military operations short of actual direct conflict. This multidimensional threat requires a multidimensional response in ways that complement and enhance military deterrence. PRC behavior represents a global—and not just a Taiwan or US—problem which demands a global response.

PRC pressure on Taiwan has increased considerably over the past year, even before Beijing used the visit by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi as an excuse to ramp up pressure. The August 2022 PLA military exercise around Taiwan appears aimed at creating a “new normal” that could reduce warning times should Beijing invade. However, such PRC actions are not “normal.” They are unilateral, destabilizing, and, in some instances, illegal changes to the status quo.

Such Chinese pressure tactics, combined with the “wake up call” provided by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have sensitized the citizens and governments of Taiwan, the United States, and beyond to the growing possibility—if not probability—of a PRC

invasion and have increased public perceptions about the need and willingness to defend Taiwan democracy.

Both the United States and Taiwan have taken measures in the last year to deter or, at the very least, better prepare to respond to Chinese kinetic action against Taiwan. But both should do more—individually, together, and in cooperation with other like-minded states—to increase the risks or costs associated with any contemplated PLA military action against Taiwan.

The above were among the main conclusions when a group of American and Taiwanese scholars, experts, and former and current government officials (the latter in their private capacities as observers) convened in Honolulu for the second Track 2 US-Taiwan Deterrence and Defense Dialogue. The Pacific Forum hosted the dialogue, with sponsorship by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) and in partnership with Taiwan’s Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR). This PacNet provides a summary of dialogue discussion. A full report, including expanded dialogue results can be found [here](#). Part two of this PacNet will provide an abbreviated version of the key findings and recommendations.

The dialogue addressed a range of key strategic issues pertinent to the bilateral security relationship. The objective was to produce actionable and operationally relevant recommendations aimed at improving and enhancing the security relationship. The August 2022 dialogue built upon the recommendations from the 2021 [inaugural dialogue](#) with a greater sense of urgency as a result of both Beijing’s increasingly aggressive actions toward Taiwan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which demonstrated that naked aggression is no longer unthinkable.

The dialogue addressed the following topics: current/looming cross-Strait challenges and increasing risks of conflict; Taiwanese defense goals and priorities and the extent of planning for worst case contingencies; US defense policy goals, priorities, and motivations related to cross-Strait conflict; domestic attitudes in Taiwan and the United States and how they relate to cross-Strait defense preparations; current deterrence-related policy and capabilities and how best to enhance them to decrease the likelihood of Beijing taking military action against Taiwan; and options to counter coercion that would complement and enhance military deterrence. The focus was on

defense and deterrence measures both partners could take, together and separately, to raise the costs and risks and thus lower the odds of Chinese military action.

There was a great convergence of views among American and Taiwanese participants as to the urgency of the challenge and the need for effective countermeasures now to deter further PRC aggression and assist Taiwan in resisting current coercion tactics, even as both prepare for a possible direct conflict with the PRC.

Major points of agreement

The potential for conflict across the Taiwan Strait is growing more serious by the day. Even if Beijing does not intend to attack in the near term, its pressure tactics aimed at demoralizing Taiwan could spiral out of control and escalate in the event of an accident, given Beijing's increased recklessness. Differences exist about current Chinese capabilities to successfully invade. But, even if the PLA is unprepared to invade today, other events could prompt an earlier than anticipated invasion.

While the United States (but not Taiwan alone) enjoys qualitative and some quantitative advantages over the PRC, Beijing is determined to close these gaps and is steadily improving and modernizing its forces and capabilities. The window of deterrence is closing for Washington and Taipei as the window of opportunity is opening for Beijing.

Taipei recognizes and accepts that responsibility for defending itself rests with Taiwan, and the government has taken significant steps in the past year to better prepare itself. Taiwan is placing increased emphasis on asymmetrical warfare and the development of homeland and territorial defense capabilities to improve Taiwan's ability to resist an invasion. Nonetheless, Taiwan is not capable of defending itself against an all-out PLA assault without outside assistance; a lack of clarity regarding the nature and extent of outside support complicates Taiwan defense planning and acquisitions.

While voices calling for US strategic clarity have grown louder, any PRC decision to invade will likely have already factored in a US response. Taiwan's willingness and capability to resist and America's capability and readiness to defend will be the primary deterrents.

The PRC's ongoing nuclear build-up is a great cause of concern, driven less by the threat of nuclear war (given US nuclear superiority) than by the possibility of nuclear blackmail aimed at discouraging Washington from getting involved in a Taiwan confrontation. Taiwanese are concerned about crisis escalation (especially to the nuclear level) but worry more about the PRC deterring the United States.

The United States, working closely with allies and other like-minded states, should thus be more proactive and less reactive in responding to increased PRC aggressive behavior. US officials should better assess Chinese strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis Taiwan with an eye toward countering strengths and exploiting weaknesses, while also examining ways to broaden the challenge along multiple fronts in cooperation with various allies and partners.

While continued strong support for Ukraine is important to demonstrate Western resolve and prevent more Russian territorial gains, the PRC remains the "pacing challenge" and thus should remain the focus of US national security policy and defense procurement strategy.

At the end of the day, Taiwan should assure the United States that it has the will and ability to defend itself and the United States should assure Taiwan of its "rock solid" support. Both countries should develop effective measures to increase the risks to future PRC actions against Taiwan to fortify our integrated deterrence.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.