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The Contemporary Security Dilemma: Deterring a Taiwan Conflict

The security dilemma, one of the most important concepts in the field of international relations, is currently out of fashion. In the aftermath of September 11, concern that mutual misunderstandings and spiraling mistrust might cause international conflicts seems quaintly naïve. It also seems clearer than ever that international instability is most likely a result of the aggressive actions of a few evil actors attempting to change the status quo by force, not a result of the inadvertent escalation of tension among actors primarily interested in security and defense of the status quo. Common sense tells us that weakness invites conflict and toughness gets results; wars are not Greek tragedies, they are crime scenes. Deterrence, not reassurance, is the name of the international security game.

In reality, the choice between deterrence and reassurance is a false one, created in part by common misunderstandings of the core tenets of deterrence theory and its proper relationship to the security dilemma concept. Successful deterrence requires both threats and assurances about the conditionality of those threats. Otherwise, the target has no reason to comply with the deterrer's demands.[1] In other words, the security dilemma, properly considered, almost always exists in deterrence relationships. Discovering how to reduce it without undercutting the credibility of the deterrent threat is the art of coercive diplomacy.

In East Asia, the security dilemma concept still applies, and in a particularly knotty fashion that increases the difficulty of balancing simultaneous threats and assurances. The United States must maintain a high degree of superiority over regional actors to maintain regional stability and, in particular, to deter conflict in the Taiwan Strait. Beijing is both revisionist and

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The Washington Quarterly • 25:4 pp. 7–21.

anxious about the Taiwan issue. Therefore, the United States needs to be able to balance two positions: (1) clear, credible commitments to transfer defensive capabilities to Taiwan and, if necessary, to intervene on Taiwan's behalf; and (2) political reassurances that the United States does not plan to use its superiority now or in the future to harm Beijing's core security interests by promoting the independence of Taiwan.

The Taiwan issue challenges some core tenets of political science literature, which treats the potential for territorial conquest as the most important international security problem and prescribes arms control, particularly of offensive weapons, as the solution to that problem. Precisely because the Taiwan issue is not primarily about territorial conquest, but about coercion and political identity, the thresholds of credible deterrent capabilities are very high, as are the obstacles to credible reassurance—even defensive capabilities in the hands of Taiwan and its supporters can appear provocative to Beijing. In fact, robust defense would be the best asset for Taiwan's independence. To balance threats and reassurances, the United States must be creative, mixing a high degree of military superiority with credible political assurances to Beijing that Washington has no intention to create mischief with that superiority.

The Security Dilemma in Theory and History

Political science literature has two distinct models of international security politics: insufficient deterrence of revisionist actors (the deterrence model) and insufficient reassurance of status quo actors (the security dilemma, or spiral model). Status quo actors are defensive but might be provoked into an avoidable conflict; therefore, they must be reassured. Revisionist actors, on the other hand, must be robustly deterred; otherwise, they will exploit enemy weakness and initiate conflicts.[2]

In his classic, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis argues that it is absolutely critical to know the type of leadership with which one is conducting affairs. A nation's leadership must ask whether its counterpart is an aggressive, revisionist state or a defensive, status quo state. Reassurance is ineffective against evil aggressors. In fact, appeasement can lead to "self-denying prophecies" of peace by whetting the appetite of leaders with revisionist or irredentist aims. The classic case is Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Adolf Hitler, followed by the latter's determination that he need not fear his enemies because he was dealing with "worms." On the other hand, robust military postures aimed at falsely accused status quo actors can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies about the target state's belligerence by triggering a spiral of tensions and animosity

between the target state and one's own nation.[3] Here the classic case is World War I, when Europe allegedly stumbled into a major conflagration because of mutual insecurities related to geography, offensive military doctrines, and the multipolar distribution of power in Europe.[4]

Jervis is correct in his assertion that it is fundamentally important to make distinctions between regime types in national security policy. The distinction between status quo and revisionist actors may be too stark, however, particularly after the events of September 11. The following alternative tripartite typology might be more useful:

The choice between deterrence and reassurance is a false one.

- *The United States' unprovokable friends.* Many friendly status quo states allied with the United States, for example, Great Britain and Japan, require neither credible deterrent threats nor strategic reassurance in the face of an increase in U.S. power. These actors are often annoyed with the United States, but they rarely, if ever, feel directly threatened by U.S. power, unless they deem Washington unreliable in alliance situations. Nor is Washington concerned about these friendly states' militaries, unless they are deemed too weak to contribute to the alliance.
- *The undeterrable ideologues*. Some international actors are so bent on conflict and have such sweeping and unacceptable political goals that they are both fully undeterrable and, by association, largely unprovokable. Hitler's Germany and Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network come to mind. At least after 1934, the only tragedy in interwar Europe was the failure to crush Germany sooner and at less expense in lives and treasure. Similarly, the United States cannot deter bin Laden because he and his adherents seem to value their revolutionary cause more than even their lives. Moreover, bin Laden has reason to believe that U.S. reassurances to him would be meaningless because the United States would surely try to kill him as soon as the opportunity presented itself.
- *The conditional or potential revisionists—targets for deterrence and candidates for provocation*. Fortunately, Hitler and bin Laden are exceptions, even for revisionist actors. Most revisionist actors, such as the former Soviet Union and North Korea, have been deterrable (even if deterrence has at times been very difficult) for the simple reason that these actors placed a higher value on things other than conquest. The United States could hold those prized possessions hostage while making efforts at expansion seem futile. Thus, for example, the United States could deter the Soviets

from aggression against areas that Washington valued, such as Western Europe, the Middle East, and Japan. Effective hostage-taking, however, requires some guarantee that the hostage can survive if the demands are met. The United States was therefore wise not to challenge Soviet core security interests in Eastern Europe and elsewhere overtly.

Deterrence theory applies only in cases of these conditionally revisionist or potentially revisionist actors. The security dilemma concept, however, frequently applies in these cases as well. States that have unproven and questionable motives and goals, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) today, also fit into this category. Public policy debates about these cases tend to break down along the lines of deterrence versus reassurance. Those who worry about deterrence generally fear that the United States has been insufficiently tough and should stop reassuring potential adversaries and start threatening them more credibly. Those who emphasize the security dilemma and the related dangers of spiraling tensions often stress that additional military capabilities or tougher deterrent threats will only increase tensions and, thereby, the chance for war. These individuals often argue that reassurance, not deterrence, is in order.[5]

Beijing may be willing to fight over Taiwan, but it is hardly eager to do so.

The problem is not that either side in this debate is right or wrong, but that the entire debate is a false one. As pioneers in deterrence theory have pointed out from the beginning, successful deterrence is a form of coercive bargaining that requires a mix of credible threats and credible reassurances.[6] Those who equate deterrence with pure toughness miss the bargaining aspect of the relationship. Reassurances must be built into deterrent threats so that the target will not fear being deprived of its core values if it complies with the deterring state's demands. Of course, the target must also believe in the credibility of the threat to deprive it of some or all of its core interests if it violates the demands. Finding the proper mix of toughness and reassurance is the art of coercive diplomacy.

Deterrence models and spiral models should generally go hand in hand. Neither model applies when the foreign actor in question is implacably hostile (as is Al Qaeda for the United States) or is friendly to the point of being virtually unprovokable (as is Great Britain for the United States). In all other cases, one does not have the intellectual luxury of taking sides on the toughness versus reassurance debate or selectively choosing between the deterrence model and the spiral model. Precisely those who advocate deterrence should be most concerned with the security dilemma.

This view sheds more light on the classic cases of tragedy in international politics—World War I and the escalation of the Korean War in the autumn of 1950—which are not simple cases of either revisionist aggression or defensive panic. If Germany had not been aggressive and somewhat revisionist in its goals in Central Europe, World War I would have been highly unlikely. A world war was probably preventable, however, even given Germany's belligerence. Avoiding war required clearer deterrent threats by Great Britain against Germany, combined with reassurances all around the continent that failing to deliver the first blow would not lead to one's own demise.[7]

The same can be said for the Sino-U.S. conflict in late 1950 during the Korean War. Prior to the war's inception, the United States was insufficiently threatening to deter the Communist invasion of South Korea, an invasion Moscow and Beijing backed partially because Kim Il-sung argued that his quick victory would preclude an effective U.S. response. Once the United States entered the war and decided to cross the 38th parallel, however, the United States was insufficiently reassuring that it would not carry the fight to China once it had finished off the North Korean regime. The absence of credible U.S. assurances led to massive escalation of the war by China, which was hardly eager for such a conflict with a superpower.[8]

As with most of the potential enemies of the United States today, Mao Zedong's China in 1950 was both revisionist and scared. Ideal types do not help policymakers wrestle with these cases; therefore, the typology does not provide the mix of conceptual tools necessary to handle real-world cases of potential aggressors who are both deterrable and provokable. The real security dilemma for foreign policymakers is how to be tough enough without being overly provocative in the process. Conditionally aggressive states may exploit physical weakness or apparent lack of resolve, but they might also lash out if made to feel insecure.[9] Therefore, the target of a deterrent threat must believe that its core interests will be spared if it does not commit an act of aggression. In this light, security dilemmas are more likely with states with which the United States has real differences of interest and potential conflicts, but with which war is still an avoidable and deterrable outcome. By association then, a state is most likely to provoke conflicts with those states it is trying to deter.

Taiwan: The Especially Knotty Security Dilemma

Given the Taiwan issue and relations among China, the United States, and Japan over it, the security dilemma does indeed apply to East Asia, and in a particularly knotty way.[10] China's stated goal of reunification with Taiwan, when accompanied by the threat of violence to achieve this objective, ap-

pears revisionist and irredentist to many regional and global observers. Nevertheless, largely for reasons of history and domestic politics, Beijing also has defensive motivations: PRC leaders fear Taiwan's permanent independence from the Chinese nation. Leaders in Beijing consider deterring that outcome a defensive strategy because, at least until the early 1990s, leadership circles both in Taipei and in Beijing had recognized Taiwan, in some abstract sense, as part of a Chinese nation, whether that nation was designated the PRC or the Republic of China (ROC). Only since the early 1990s have top officials in Taipei, starting with former president Lee Teng-hui, begun calling such a formula into question.

China seems to be seriously preparing for coercive military operations later this decade.

Preventing Taiwan's permanent separation from the mainland and fostering eventual unification are core goals of all Chinese nationalists. But the overall objective is particularly important for today's Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which faces severe domestic legitimacy problems because the PRC's Communist regime rules over a country in which very few people believe in communism. Moreover, CCP elites fear that dramatic failure on Taiwan policy would allow currently disparate domestic opposition groups to link with each other and with disgruntled nationalists within the party in a manner that could threaten the party's monopoly on power. Because relations with Taiwan affect domestic stability, success or failure on the Taiwan issue will likely be a key standard by which CCP leaders' peers will judge individual party leaders' acumen on the international stage, during the leadership transition currently under way in China.

That being said, economic growth and job creation are also critical to the stability of the regime in China. The goals of economic growth and nationalism sometimes pull Beijing in opposite directions. Good economic policy requires further foreign penetration of the Chinese economy and positive relations with the United States, Taiwan, and Japan—China's three biggest economic partners—whereas nationalist posturing in military and economic policy could easily injure relations with those major trading and investment partners. An attack against Taiwan would risk not only military disaster but also prolonged alienation of China's economic partners. Beijing may be willing to fight over Taiwan even against militarily superior foes, but it is hardly eager to do so. Thus, deterrence is possible, but not simple.

Traditional theorizing about the security dilemma in the Taiwan Strait has three related deficiencies. First, security dilemma theorists have assumed that international security politics concerns merely defending sover-

eign territory from invasion and foreign acquisition. Second, from that assumption these theorists have argued that defensive weapons systems and doctrines therefore pose little threat to stability because they require no response from other defenders of the status quo. Finally, these theorists therefore believe that arms control efforts, particularly those focusing on limitations on offensive weaponry capable of seizing territory, are the best corrective measures to prevent security dilemmas and spiraling tensions.[11]

These common forms of wisdom regarding the security dilemma do not apply to the Taiwan situation for three reasons:

- To a large degree, the Taiwan question is one more of the island's political identity than of the PRC's territorial expansion. The danger to the PRC is that Taiwan might eventually move from de facto independence to legal independence, thus posing an affront to Chinese nationalism and a danger to regime stability in Beijing. Little evidence suggests that the PRC would like to occupy Taiwan and run the island's day-to-day affairs, even if it could.
- PRC weapons systems designed to deter Taiwan's independence can also appear capable of compelling Taiwan to agree to unification against Taipei's will.
- Similarly, U.S. and Taiwanese efforts to deter such forced unification can easily appear to Beijing as efforts to create protective conditions for Taiwan's independence. Defensive capabilities, generally viewed as stabilizing in security dilemma theory, are precisely the kind of protection that Taiwan would need to change the political, rather than the territorial, status quo more safely. This holds true for everything from missile defense systems designed to protect Taiwan, Japan, or the United States to counterblockade capabilities, such as mine-clearing equipment or antisubmarine warfare planes.

Missile defenses provide a good illustration of this problem. Even though systems such as future upper-tier theater missile defenses or U.S. national missile defense (NMD) systems are hardly offensive in nature, Chinese elites consider them a threat for several reasons. First, mobile, ship-based, upper-tier systems, for example, might somewhat protect Taiwan against China's most potent coercive tool—short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Second, if developed with Japan, as is currently planned, the ship-based systems might encourage eventual Japanese naval involvement in a Taiwan conflict. Third, if the United States transferred such systems to Taiwan, Beijing analysts believe that this act might restore a quasi-alliance between Washington and Taipei because the Taiwanese systems would not function without sustained peacetime

links to the U.S. military intelligence network in the Pacific. Beijing analysts worry that this quasi-alliance would suggest an unconditional commitment to Taiwan's security by the United States and perhaps by Japan. They argue that such integration of Taiwan with the U.S.-Japanese alliance would reduce the likelihood of Taipei's accommodation of the mainland and increase the likelihood of long-term diplomatic adventurism by Taiwan.

PRC strategists also consider U.S. NMD development to be somewhat threatening given the potential for conflict over Taiwan. The PRC has a limited number of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of hitting the United States. Applying Cold War logic, Western analysts believe that a U.S. NMD system could create a security dilemma with China by threatening China's second-strike capability in a nuclear war. From Beijing's perspective, however, the problem is actually much more complicated. China's nuclear deterrent not only helps limit the likelihood of a U.S. first strike on China—an unlikely occurrence under any balance of nuclear forces—but also potentially limits the damage China would suffer in a conventional conflict with U.S. forces over Taiwan. Chinese strategists believe that a U.S. president would be reluctant to unleash against Beijing the kinds of robust conventional attacks that were leveled against the capitals of Iraq and Yugoslavia, for example. After all, Baghdad and Belgrade lacked nuclear weapons, and Beijing has them. China's elites hope that the possibility of escalation would limit the U.S. conventional response and thereby reduce the costs of a PRC coercion campaign against Taiwan.

Historically, China has used force coercively despite military weakness.

Complicating matters further is the issue of the alliance between the United States and Japan. Because the U.S. Navy and Air Force have bases in Japan, the United States requires support from Japan during sustained regional and global crises and conflicts, including those in Taiwan. Many in both the United States and Japan believe that additional degrees of Japanese commitment to active participation within the alliance are necessary for the alliamce's long-term survival. Since September 11, Tokyo has been more forthcoming in providing support for the U.S. military.

Such activities are a concern to Chinese security analysts, however, particularly when they consider scenarios involving Taiwan. Severe distrust of the Japanese—widespread in China as a legacy of twentieth-century Japanese imperialism in China—only exacerbates these concerns. In fact, Japan's imperial period essentially began in 1895 with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded Taiwan and other Chinese territories to Japan. In order to dissuade Japan from

active cooperation with the United States and to coerce Washington, China is increasing its coercive capacity against U.S. bases in Japan with ballistic missiles and land-attack cruise missiles. Such developments feed "China threat" theories in Japan and are the stuff of security dilemmas.

In the presence of these kinds of circumstances, one can easily imagine an arms competition of sorts between Chinese offensive, coercive weapons on the one hand and Taipei's, Washington's, and Tokyo's defensive, anticoercion weapons on the other. In fact, precisely this situation seems to be happening today. China's recent military improvements in conventional theater ballistic missiles, antiship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, submarines, surface combatants, air defense systems, and fighter aircraft all seem designed to pressure Taiwan and dissuade prompt and effective intervention by Taiwan's friends. Moreover, given U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and serious pursuit of NMD development, Beijing might accelerate its extant program to modernize the country's ICBMs. None of these new systems is likely to provide China with the opportunity to invade Taiwan or to allow the PRC to defeat the U.S.-Japanese alliance in a military conflict, but these systems do provide some degree of coercive capacity against the United States and its regional allies and friends. Only a degree of military superiority among China's potential adversaries that allows not only for military victory but also for military victory at acceptable costs—a much taller order—can counter such systems and doctrines. China will be working to erode that advantage somewhat, a much more achievable outcome than overcoming it entirely.

Given this analysis, imagining arms control agreements that could reassure each side that its accommodation would not lead to the loss of its core political interests is difficult. Even many defensively minded moderates in Beijing are loath to halt the PRC military buildup across from Taiwan, lest Beijing lose leverage over the government of President Chen Shui-bian, the leader of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has traditionally advocated independence for Taiwan. Neither Taiwan nor the United States is willing to attempt to reassure the mainland by leaving Taiwan's young democracy exposed and defenseless in the face of the PRC's increasing military power and intensifying military exercises.

Why Deterring Beijing Requires Reassurance

Sometimes, Chinese analysts are relatively confident that Beijing will be able to encourage Taiwan to accommodate the mainland without the use of military coercion. At these times, the Chinese tend to be more willing to accept a U.S. military presence in the region, as well as the notion that China

and the United States share interests in economic, political, and even military affairs. When Chinese analysts are more concerned about Taiwan's domestic political trends or Taipei's relationship with Washington, they tend to view the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, improvements in U.S. relations with India, new U.S. bases in Central Asia, and the development of U.S. missile defense technology with more alarm.

During 1999–2000, Beijing began a sharp military buildup with a clear focus on coercing Taiwan. Acquisition of weapons and technology from Russia and increasingly realistic training exercises also suggest that China is seriously preparing for coercive military operations at some point later in this decade. The buildup began during a period of severe pessimism in Beijing about long-term trends in cross-strait relations. That pessimism resulted from U.S. military intervention in Yugoslavia, the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Taiwan president Lee's "two-state" theory, and the March 2000 election of the traditionally pro-independence DPP's Chen. That pessimism arguably also prompted Beijing's 2000 Taiwan White Paper, which seemed to belie irredentist impatience on Beijing's part. The White Paper listed Taipei's indefinite refusal to negotiate unification on Beijing's terms as a *casus belli*.

Although the military buildup continued apace, by early 2001 Chinese security analysts appeared much more sanguine about China's ability to influence Taiwan without heavy reliance on military coercion. Contributing factors included Taiwan's sharp economic downturn and increasing economic dependence on the mainland, Chen's rather conciliatory inaugural speech, his early low approval ratings, and Taiwanese opposition-party members' misleading statements to CCP leaders about the growing popularity in Taiwan of accommodation with the mainland. At the time, the CCP believed that Chen would likely serve for only one term and would be weak in office, while pro-accommodation forces would grow. The only negative factor from Beijing's perspective was a new U.S. administration that was more clearly and less conditionally committed to Taiwan's defense from mainland coercion. If Taiwan wanted to accommodate the mainland, however, Washington could do little to prevent it.

In this context, China reacted relatively moderately and somewhat cooperatively to the U.S. campaign against terrorism following the September attacks. It had reasons other than optimism about Taiwan for this cooperation. Beijing probably feared that an unsuccessful U.S. campaign would lead to a major downturn in the U.S. economy, with dire consequences for China's economy. The CCP also has its own reasons to wish for the destruction of Al Qaeda, which has been linked to Islamic militants in western China. But China's optimism about Taiwan at the time was also likely a major factor in

China's muted initial reaction to certain aspects of the war on terror, including increased Japanese military activities; closer U.S. ties with India and Pakistan; U.S. basing in Central Asia; and improved U.S. relations with Russia, China's major supplier of advanced weapons.

Several subsequent events have reduced the level of optimism about Taiwan that was prevalent in Beijing in the fall of 2001. Most importantly, the DPP did surprisingly well in Taiwan's legislative elections in December 2001, and the Kuomintang did very poorly. Beijing now must accept that Chen will probably have a second term and that the DPP is Taiwan's strongest party. Taipei also took some symbolic steps—including adding the term "Taiwan" on the ROC passport—that the mainland views as signs of creeping independence.

Arms control solutions to the security dilemma seem impossible.

Moreover, defense ties between Washington and Taipei appear to be deepening. In particular, Chinese analysts fear increasing interoperability between the two militaries. Rumors are also circulating in Beijing about a potential visit to Washington by Chen, with one PRC military officer warning that this would likely lead to a military crisis. For these reasons, even relative optimists in the CCP now believe that additional PRC military strength is an important part of PRC policy on Taiwan. Some analysts, particularly those in the military, are more pessimistic, viewing eventual military conflict as increasingly likely and growth in China's military power as the single most effective means by which to influence Taiwanese and U.S. calculations.

Just as security dilemmas need not be rooted in fears of direct territorial conquest, the spirals of tension they cause need not manifest themselves in direct conflict over territory. In fact, the most likely source of near-term Sino-U.S. tension is the PRC's proliferation of weapons or militarily relevant technologies, such as fiber-optic cables or chemical or nuclear technologies, to actors on the list of actual or potential U.S. enemies in the war on terror, such as Iraq and Iran. Traditionally, the PRC has used such proliferation as a form of tacit leverage to punish the United States for its relationship with Taiwan. CCP elites' understanding of how dangerous this practice would be to Sino-U.S. relations after the events of September 11 is unclear.

In the longer term, the danger exists of direct Sino-U.S. military conflict regarding Taiwan. The goal of China's continuing military buildup is likely not the domination and occupation of Taiwan or a significant closing of the overall military gap with the United States. Rather, Beijing seems dedicated to developing more credible ways of causing sustained pain to Taiwan, of raising the prospects of escalation and casualties if the U.S. military inter-

venes, and of perhaps coercing Japan into refusing active support for U.S. operations near Taiwan. Despite being a formidable challenge itself, this set of goals is much more achievable for the PRC than the conquering of Taiwan or the defeat of the U.S. military. Moreover, the PRC's strategic history shows a tradition of using force coercively despite military weaknesses. The goal of such past operations was not to solve security problems once and for all, but to slow, halt, or reverse trends that Chinese leaders perceived as working against the PRC's long-term security interests.

Precisely because China has both military and economic reasons for avoiding war but would be willing to fight a war of coercion against superior foes if necessary, deterring an attack on Taiwan is a complex undertaking. Balancing these dual requirements of effective deterrence—credible threats and assurances—in the Taiwan context in the future will be difficult for the United States. Given PRC buildups, U.S. and Taiwanese efforts to increase military security are certainly necessary. The thresholds of credible deterrence are relatively high because Taiwan needs to be able to do more than defeat an invasion; it needs to appear relatively capable of countering coercion campaigns. Because some in Chinese strategic circles exaggerate U.S. aversion toward casualties, U.S. reliance on allies, and the pacifying influence of business on U.S. security policy, the United States also must do more than show that it can defeat the Chinese military; it must prove that it can do so soundly and quickly, with limited U.S. casualties.

A key problem is that tighter military and political coordination between the United States and Taiwan does more than signal U.S. resolve and create a stronger Taiwan. Closer cooperation also signals to Beijing that the United States might be moving toward an unconditional commitment to Taiwan's security. This might portend U.S. military support for Taiwan's independence at a future date when such a declaration is more marketable in Taiwan's politics and when the United States has more effective means of countering Chinese coercion, such as theater and national missile defenses. Fear of this outcome feeds the dangerous perception in Beijing that, later in this decade, a window of opportunity or vulnerability may arise when China must use force to alter trends in cross-strait relations before it finds itself less capable of preventing Taiwan's independence in the future. Under certain political and military circumstances, that fear of an unconditional U.S. commitment and increasing U.S. power over time would make the mainland's use of military force against Taiwan more likely, not less so. To avoid conflict, the United States and Taiwan should balance the very real requirements of increasing U.S. and Taiwanese military strength with the equally real requirements of political assurance to the CCP that it will not be punished later if its leaders comply with U.S. demands not to use force.

Short of a unilateral PRC reduction in its military threat toward Taiwan, arms control solutions to the security dilemma seem impossible. The United States will therefore need to find political means to reassure Beijing about the prospects of Taiwanese independence. One sure way would be to convince PRC leaders that the independence of Taiwan is incompatible with the selfish security interests of the United States. Rather than arguing on purely practical grounds that such a declaration would spark an avoidable war, which is probably the case, Washington might adopt a more positive argument that should both find broader reception in U.S. domestic politics and be more believable in Beijing: that the United States has long-term security and moral interests in the political liberalization of the mainland and that Taiwan's status as a Chinese democracy—holding out the prospect of unification with the mainland under the right set of conditions—can be a powerful force for liberalization on the mainland. Consequently, the United States has strong interests in Taiwan maintaining that status and will not fight for Taiwan if it chooses to defy U.S. interests by declaring independence.

Beijing's fear of eventual Taiwanese independence seems the most likely cause of war.

To add credibility to the assurance, an explanation of the political logic behind it is necessary. Taiwan's Chinese democracy refutes cynical arguments that Chinese culture and democracy do not mix. Moreover, the prospect of unification allows mainland political reformers—both inside and outside the party—to wrap themselves in the flag of Chinese nationalism and increase their voice by arguing that liberal reform in China is consistent with patriotism because it will speed up national unification. On the other side of the equation, Taiwan's independence would retard the hope for political reform on the mainland because democracy would be associated with the breakup of the nation, and political reformers would seem like dupes or even agents of the United States and the Taiwan traitors who declared independence.

The goal of such a pro-democracy assurance strategy is not to oppose the independence of Taiwan actively but to make a credible public commitment that the United States has no interest in fighting for this outcome, were it to occur. This stance in turn will help convince Beijing that the United States has no stake in Taiwan's independence, that it is unlikely to support it now or in the future, and that such a declaration is therefore much less likely to occur now or in the future. Moreover, if convincing, U.S. reassurances will hold regardless of the degree of U.S. military superiority or the quality or quantity of defensive weapons sold to Taiwan.

A clear but conditional commitment to Taiwan's security might best serve U.S. interests, especially when arms control appears an unworkable solution to the reassurance problem across the strait. Beijing will not like this evangelical, pro-democratic reasoning for a U.S. conditional military commitment to Taiwan, but precisely because the CCP elites will not like it, they are more likely to believe that the position is sincere and credible. The goal of the assurance policy, of course, is not to please or appease Beijing, but to avoid war by creating something akin to the stable political status quo in cross-strait relations that existed during the second half of the Cold War and that the factors discussed above have since destroyed.

Beijing's fear of eventual Taiwanese independence with U.S. backing, rather than Taipei's actual near-term declaration of independence, seems the most likely cause of war across the Taiwan Strait in the next 10 years. Reducing that fear in Beijing in a clear, credible, and principled way that is consistent with U.S. political values and security interests is probably the best hope to solve the difficult deterrence challenge across the strait. A commitment to Taiwan's freedom and democracy, but not its sovereignty, will allow the United States to strengthen Taiwan's military security, improve military contacts with Taiwan, and enhance protection of U.S. forward-deployed forces where necessary and possible, without triggering conflict in the process. Given the recent, provocative increase in the PRC's military might across the strait, such measures are likely to be warranted as a hedge against a more aggressive PRC posture toward Taiwan and its supporters in the future.

Notes

1. Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 74.
2. For the classic text on this score, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 58–116. Also see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978).
3. Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics.*
4. For the most complete account of the spiral logic in World War I, see Stephen Van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," *International Security* 9, no. 1 (summer 1984): 58–107.
5. For the theoretical distinction between deterrence and reassurance, which I believe to be a false one, see Richard Ned Lebow, "Deterrence and Reassurance: Lessons From the Cold War," *Global Dialogue* (autumn 2000): 119–132. For the application of similar ideas to China, see Peter Hays Gries and Thomas J. Christensen, "Correspondence: Power and Resolve in U.S. China Policy," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (fall 2001): 155–165.

6. See generally Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. Also see James Davis, *Threats and Promises: The Pursuit of International Influence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
7. Jack Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choice in July 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (winter 1990–1991): 151–186.
8. See Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 138–193. For the classic formulation of China's defensive concerns at the Yalu, see Allen Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960).
9. See Schelling, *Arms and Influence*; Charles L. Glaser, "The Security Dilemma Revisited," *World Politics* 50, no. 1 (October 1997): 171–201; Charles L. Glaser, "Political Consequences of Military Strategy: Expanding and Refining the Spiral and Deterrence Models," *World Politics* 44 (July 1992): 497–538.
10. The following sections will be based on my interview research in China in 2000–2002 and the following published articles: Thomas J. Christensen, "China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (spring 1999): 49–80; Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching Up: China's Rise and the Challenges to U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25, no. 4 (spring 2001): 5–40; Thomas J. Christensen, "China," in *Strategic Asia: Power and Purpose, 2001–2002*, ed. Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), pp. 27–70.
11. See generally Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma."