

The Looking Glass

The ‘vicious diplomacy’ of coercion: China’s military exercises in the Taiwan Strait

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Centre for Defence Research, July–August 2022

US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan on 2 August prompted the People’s Liberation Army Eastern Theatre Command (PLA ETC) to mount the most significant Chinese military exercises in and around the Taiwan Strait since the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995–96. On 3 August, the PLA ETC [announced](#) that it would be undertaking ‘joint combat training exercises in the northern, southwestern and southeastern waters and airspace off Taiwan Island’ involving PLA Navy (PLAN), PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) elements focused on ‘joint blockade, sea target assault, strike on ground targets, and airspace control operation’.

These [exercises](#) took place across the ‘median line’ of the Taiwan Strait and violated Taiwan’s territorial waters in the northern and southern exercise zones. They included rolling violations of Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ) by Chinese military aircraft and the launch of ‘long-range rockets and conventional ballistic missiles from four main regions within China into multiple exercise zones to the north, east, and south of Taiwan’. This came after Beijing [imposed](#) a range of economic measures, including [import bans](#) on over 2,000 Taiwanese food products, as well as launching concerted denial-of-service [attacks](#) on Taiwanese government websites.

In this edition of the *Looking Glass*, we explore the evolution of China’s strategy toward Taiwan, how the current PLA exercises fit within it, and identify some of the major implications for cross-Strait relations and Sino-US relations. We argue that China’s approach to the Taiwan issue can be usefully framed as coercive diplomacy. In particular, the PLA ETC’s exercises in and around the Taiwan Strait from 3 to 10 August are consistent with a form of coercive diplomacy, where China’s conception of deterrence is based on *both* dissuasion and compellence.



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The latest exercises bear some similarity to those of [1995–96](#) in that their ultimate objective is seeking to both deter Taiwan and the US from moves that would violate Beijing's interpretation of the 'One China policy' and to compel Taiwan toward acceptance of Beijing's goal of 'reunification'. Yet, the geostrategic and political realities in which the recent exercises have unfolded— in particular the shifting balance of military power in the Taiwan Strait, the [hardening](#) of Taiwanese opinion against the very idea of 'reunification', and the Chinese domestic political context – open up more pathways for potential miscalculation and escalation than in 1995–96.

Coercive diplomacy, deterrence and compellence

China's military exercises serve to [remind](#) us that 'international politics often takes place in a gray 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'. Such latent violence – the 'power to hurt', as Thomas Schelling [argued](#) – constitutes 'bargaining power' and the exploitation of that power 'is diplomacy, vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy'. This 'vicious diplomacy' is primarily concerned with [strategies](#) of forceful persuasion that [erode](#) 'an opponent's motivation by exploiting the capacity to inflict damage, and thus creating the expectation of unacceptable costs in the event of noncompliance with demands'.

Famously, Schelling focused primarily on the distinctions between two types of 'vicious diplomacy', deterrence and compellence, while Alexander George's broader conception of [coercive diplomacy](#) encompassed not only such threats as the use of force but also employment of persuasion, positive inducements and accommodation to affect an opponent's will. For most of the period since 1945, analysis of the practices and theories of deterrence have considerably outweighed those focused on compellence in international security studies. Given the realities of the Cold War and the exigencies of mutually assured destruction, a predominant focus by scholars on the logics and practices of threats intended to dissuade an adversary from doing something is understandable.

One [outgrowth](#) of this tendency has been to view deterrence and compellence as related but distinct concepts. The fundamental distinction here is one of [timing](#) and initiative. As Schelling pithily put it, 'Deterrence involves setting the stage – by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation – and *waiting*'. Compellence, in contrast, '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'.

Deterrence in this [understanding](#) is thus both a more passive and status quo-oriented form of coercive diplomacy than compellence. Compellence is [generally](#) conceived of as a much more [difficult](#) form of coercion to successfully implement 'because in contrast to deterrence, which requires an invisible concession, it requires target actors to behave in ways that are highly visible and more likely to involve major costs at home and abroad'. Nonetheless there is a [consensus](#) that 'the coercive policies of deterrence as well as of compellence rely on the threat of future military force to influence adversarial decision makers' but that the 'limited use of actual force *may* be required for compellence to work'.

While deterrence and compellence have often been treated as two separate but related concepts, there is a [case](#) to be made that the distinction between the two is not so clear-cut in practice because

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'they can be formulated and applied at sequential stages in the management of a crisis'. Indeed, numerous cases throughout the twentieth century from the lead-up to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 through the crises over Berlin, the Taiwan Strait and Cuba during the Cold War to the First Gulf War have [suggested](#) the sequential application of deterrent and compellent strategies.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is often popularly thought of as a successful instance of deterrence. But in fact it saw the Kennedy administration [attempt](#) to simultaneously communicate two warnings to the Soviet Union: one compellent – to stop installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba in the first place in autumn 1962 – and the other deterrent – via the naval blockade of the island – aimed at preventing the arrival of additional missiles once the compellent strategy had failed.

The how and why of such a dynamic on closer inspection is [straightforward](#): if 'actor A is warning actor B not to do X (= A is deterring B), A has (or should have) an idea about how to react if B decides to do X (a compellence strategy). If A's deterrent threat fails (= B decides to do X), A puts in motion its compellent policy'.

Deterrence with Chinese Characteristics

This conception of the deterrence–compellence relationship as a sequential one is important for understanding China's evolving strategy vis-à-vis Taiwan, and also for its broader conceptualisation of deterrence in its defence and military posture.

As Dean Cheng [notes](#), the Chinese term translated into English as deterrence, 威懾 (*wēi shè*), '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, also provide further illustration of this linkage in Chinese thinking. The most recent [2020 SMS](#), for example, asserts clearly that deterrence has two functions: 'One is to stop the other party from doing what they want to do through deterrence' (i.e. dissuasion) and 'the other is to use deterrence to *coerce* the other party to do what they must do' (i.e. compellence).

Chinese understandings of the *wēi shè* concept also frame it explicitly as an *instrument* rather than as a goal of policy. The [focus](#) is not 'detering action in one or another domain, but in *securing the larger Chinese strategic objective* (e.g. getting Taiwan to abandon efforts at securing independence; obtaining support for Chinese claims to the South China Sea)'. The 2020 SMS [underlines](#) this by noting that deterrence is a 'method of military conflict to achieve a *political* goal based on military strength, a comprehensive use of various means, through clever display of strength and determination to use strength, *makes the other party face unworthy or even unbearable consequences, and is forced to give in, compromise, or surrender*'.

Therefore for China deterrence is not conceived of as a static activity but rather as one that has phases of application across peacetime, crisis and war. The [2013 SMS](#), for instance, details 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'. 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'.

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If war does break out, the objective becomes ‘war control’ (*zhànzhēng kòngzhì* 战争控制), a concept that [some](#) have equated with notions of escalation control.

Yet analysis of the treatment of this term in the 2013 and 2020 SMS documents [indicates](#) ‘war control’ is 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 arguably a war-fighting concept. The [2020 SMS](#) chapter on ‘war control’, for example, delineates three necessary stages for successful ‘war control’:

- ‘control of war techniques’ (i.e. deliberate control of escalation through gray-zone conventional-nuclear capabilities);
- control of the pace, rhythm and intensity of conflict (the centrality of shifting from defensive to offensive operations at the outbreak of conflict);
- controlling and ‘proactively end the war’ (an ‘escalate to de-escalate’ approach).

This [suggests](#) that Chinese strategists believe that war-fighting intensity can be precisely controlled and ‘is intended to ensure flexibility in military options so the CCP can realize its political ambitions and affect its desired policy without compromise’.

Using deterrence and compellence sequentially is also implied in two passages of the 2020 SMS’s [discussion](#) of the role of strategic deterrence in peacetime, crisis and war. It suggests that in peacetime deterrence ‘is mainly the use of national military power, combined with political, economic, diplomatic, technological, cultural and other strategic forces to influence the development of the situation and delay or stop the outbreak of war’. However, during a crisis the use of deterrence ‘may delay the outbreak of war and create conditions for the country to make other political choices and prepare for war’. But if war is imminent deterrence ‘can either seize the last chance to avoid war, or gain the initiative in war, especially the first battle, and create a favorable military situation for entering a state of war’. Finally, during war strategic deterrence may slide directly into compellence. The [2020 SMS](#) asserts here, for example, that a:

surgical’ attack on the enemy in a local war is actually an application of strategic deterrence in war. The two sides of the war are a contradictory unity. In the case of a strategic balance of power between the two sides of the war, if one party can adopt the correct strategic policy and skilfully play the role of strategic deterrence, so that the other party can truly feel that continuing the confrontation does not pay off, it can shake its determination and will and abandon the attempt to continue the war.

This approach is consistent with China’s overarching defence strategy of ‘[active defense](#)’, which, as China’s [2019 Defence White Paper](#) states, rests on the principle of ‘we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked’. It places emphasis on both containing and winning wars, and underscores the ‘unity of strategic defense and offense’ at operational and tactical levels.

China’s evolving Taiwan strategy: parsing deterrent and compellent approaches

China’s response to Taiwan so far is [consistent](#) with its long-term strategy, which seeks to integrate a variety of diplomatic, [economic](#) and military instruments to coerce and deter both Taipei and Washington from any deviation from Beijing’s [interpretation](#) of the ‘One China policy’. This [holds](#) that ‘there is only one China in the world, Taiwan is a part of China and the government of the PRC is the *sole legal government representing the whole of China*’.

The problem for Beijing is that the recent *political* trendlines on the Taiwan issue are largely [contrary](#) to its desired objective. The Tsai Ing-wen government is [moving](#) away ‘from anything resembling a One China perspective’ as Taiwanese society sees the [solidification](#) of Taiwanese national identity and declining support for any notion of ‘reunification’ with the Chinese mainland.

According to Beijing’s [new](#) White Paper on ‘The Taiwan Question’ of 10 August 2022, the DPP government of Tsai Ing-wen is to blame for this as they ‘assert Taiwan and the mainland should not be subordinate to each other’, ‘incite radical separatists in and outside the DPP’, ‘deceive the people of Taiwan, incite hostility against the mainland, and obstruct and undermine cross-Straits exchanges’. Further, the paper says the DPP has ‘steadily built up their military forces with the intention of pursuing “independence” and preventing reunification by force’ and ‘join[ed] with external forces in trying to sow the seeds of “two Chinas” or “one China, one Taiwan” ’.

The moves of the [Trump](#) and now Biden administrations toward greater support for Taiwan – including [increased](#) arms sales and [indications](#) of diluted commitment to strategic ambiguity – suggest a far less permissive diplomatic environment for China to assert its claims to Taiwan than in the recent past. For [Beijing](#) such developments indicate that while ‘US authorities have stated that they remain committed to the one-China policy and that they do not support “Taiwan independence”...their actions contradict their words’, as Washington is ‘clouding the one-China principle in uncertainty and compromising its integrity’ by ‘contriving “official” exchanges with Taiwan, increasing arms sales, and colluding in military provocation’.

Put simply, as Bonnie Glaser has [noted](#), ‘the Chinese feel that if they don’t act, that the United States is going to continue to slice the salami to take incremental actions toward supporting Taiwan independence. China does feel under pressure to do more to signal that this is an issue in which China cannot compromise’.

From Beijing’s perspective, then, the current political trends *heighten* the need for it to engage in coercive diplomacy. Significantly, the response to Pelosi’s visit has sought to leverage the [favourable](#) military trendlines vis-à-vis Taiwan from China’s perspective to redress this situation. As illustrated in Figure 1 overleaf, the PLA significantly overmatches Taiwan’s military in a cross-Strait scenario.

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Figure 1 Taiwan Strait military balance (ground forces right, naval forces left)

	China		Taiwan
	Total	Taiwan Strait Area	Total
Total Ground Force Personnel	1,040,000	418,000	38,000
Group Armies/Army Corps	13	3	3
Combined Arms Brigades	78	10 (6 Amphibious)	NA
Mechanized Infantry Brigades	N/A		3
Motorized Infantry Brigades			4
Armor Brigades			4
Army Aviation/Air Assault Brigades	15	3	4
Artillery Brigades	15	3	3
Airborne Brigades	7	7	0
Marine Brigades	8	3	2
Tanks	8,300	—	300
Artillery Pieces	7,000	—	1,100

	China		Taiwan
	Total	Eastern and Southern Theatre Navies	Total
Aircraft Carriers	2	1	0
Cruisers	1	0	0
Destroyers	32	21	4
Frigates	48	41	22
Corvettes	51	34	0
Tank / Medium Landing Ships	57	49	14
Amphibious Transport Dock	56	33	2
Diesel Attack Submarines	9	2	0
Nuclear Attack Submarines	6	4	0
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	86	68	44
Coast Guard Ships	223	N / A	23

Source Office of Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, Department of Defense, Washington DC, 2021, pp 161–162.

However, this imbalance only contributes to one part of its deterrence objective of preventing a Taiwanese declaration of independence. China's ability to achieve this, as Philip Saunders has recently [argued](#), does not simply rest on military capabilities but also:

its capacity to use its economic and diplomatic power to impose costs and to deny Taiwan international recognition and its military ability to threaten the island with unacceptable punishment. This leverage is translated into deterrence by the PRC's conditional threat to employ coercive means if Taiwan takes actions to proclaim its status as an independent entity separate from China.

The response to the Pelosi visit was thus clearly about the imposition of such economic and military-strategic costs on Taipei. This was done through Beijing's imposition of a variety of economic and diplomatic [sanctions](#) backed by [extended](#) military exercises that directly impinged upon Taiwan's territorial waters, exclusive economic zone and air defense identification zone (ADIZ).

China's deterrence task vis-à-vis Taiwan is complicated by the expectation of US assistance to, or military intervention in support of, Taipei in the event of Chinese military action against Taiwan. Hence a major element of the recently concluded military exercises was arguably designed to provide clear deterrent signals to the US that China's military modernisation efforts have [overcome](#) historical weaknesses in conventional capabilities relative to the US (and Taiwan). As a case in point, the modernisation efforts have included significant investment in [anti-access/area denial](#) (A2/AD) capabilities and acquisition and [deployment](#) of new precision strike capabilities.

The consensus of a number of [detailed analyses](#) into China's strategy for circumventing US assistance to Taiwan in the event of a conflict is Beijing will focus on exploiting its 'home field advantage' of geographic proximity. This provides China with the capacity to use force concentration to deter and/or deny the US from force projection into the direct vicinity of Taiwan, delaying them sufficiently for Beijing to overcome Taiwan, thus presenting a *fait accompli*. Indeed, Zhang Junshe, a senior fellow at the Naval Research Academy of the PLA, [noted](#) to state media during the exercises

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that, 'It can be seen from the regional distribution that one of the purposes of the exercise is to deter the intervention of external forces, and the northern exercise area is adjacent to the Okinawa region and the southern part is adjacent to the Bashi Strait, forming a strategic layout to resist external forces.'

Implications of China's military exercises

As indicated in Figure 2 below, the exercises were significant as they were much closer to Taiwan than the 1995–96 live-fire exercises, penetrated Taiwan's ADIZ and territorial waters, and encircled Taiwan from multiple directions. Taken together the exercises suggest several implications.

Figure 2 Chinese military exercises around Taiwan from 4 August to 10 August 2022



Source Bonny Lin, Brian Hart, Matthew P Funairole, Samantha Lu, Hannah Price, Nicholas Kaufman, 'Tracking the Fourth Taiwan Strait Crisis', CSIS *ChinaPower* Project, 10 August 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/tracking-the-fourth-taiwan-strait-crisis/>

First, they signalled Chinese capability (and intent) to reflect multiple scenarios: from a blockade of Taiwan through to preparations for direct military invasion of the island. As such they are consistent with the transition between 'peacetime' and 'crisis' deterrence activities detailed in the SMS documents. The exercises in Zones 1 and 5, for instance, demonstrated Chinese capability to potentially close off access to the northern entrance to the Strait (Zone 1) and the Bashi Channel (Zone 5), which separates the waters within the First Island Chain from the Philippines Sea and the broader Pacific Ocean – both important choke points for a [blockade](#) of the island.

These exercises, the Naval Research Academy of the PLA analyst Zhang Junshe [asserted](#), amounted to a 'closed encirclement posture towards Taiwan Island' that he likened to 'a situation of closing the door and hitting dogs'. Taiwanese commentator, [Chen Kuohsiang](#), assessed that what he termed the 'PLA's encirclement exercise' to be 'an attack simulation, essentially claiming sovereignty over Taiwan by locking down the island, depriving it of its strategic manoeuvring space and restricting the US's support from the east'.

Second, the 'jointness' of the exercises involving PLAN, PLARF and PLASSF elements that have not generally trained or operated together was notable. The exercises, as Bonny Lin and Joel Wuthnow [note](#), will likely become 'a 'battle lab' of sorts for joint commanders and staff officers who must keep military activities in sync – which will be essential in any blockade or amphibious landing' – and that future exercises 'that build on these achievements will result in a Chinese military that is able to act more cohesively and ultimately move from military theater to real combat'.

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Third, the exercises may permit China to establish a [new status quo](#) regarding its violations of Taiwan's airspace and territorial waters that would enhance its capability to deter and/or deny access in the event of conflict. A Chinese analyst quoted by state media [noted](#) here that, 'The most crucial thing is that five exercise areas or missile landing points in this exercise are demarcated in the area east of the so-called "middle line of the strait", and the other one crosses the so-called "middle line of the strait", *which is the PLA's denial of the existence of the so-called "middle line of the strait" with actual actions.*'

Fourth, making such exercises routine not only contributes to Beijing's objective of shifting the 'facts on the ground' but [would](#) 'mimic the actual requirements of a massive firepower strike against key Taiwan targets or a blockade', making it difficult for external observers 'to distinguish exercises from actual preparations to conduct those campaigns'. A spokesman for the PLA ETC indicated that this is a Chinese objective when he [noted](#) that while the military exercises had been successfully concluded China would nonetheless 'continue to carry out military training for war preparedness, and organize *normalized combat-readiness* security patrol in the Taiwan Strait to defend China's sovereignty and territorial integrity'.

Fifth, the exercises show how the PLA may be operationalising China's concept of deterrence. In particular, it offers a window through which external observers can examine the questions of when and how the PLA may transition between the peacetime-crisis-war phases of deterrence. At first blush the recent exercises provide a mixed picture. Recall that during peacetime a 'normalized deterrence' posture based on 'low-intensity military activities' such as holding military exercises, 'displaying advanced weapons' and diplomatically asserting China's 'strategic bottom line' is advocated. In crisis scenarios, meanwhile, the PLA is to 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'.

Finally, China may find coercion to be anything but straightforward to implement. That's because its objective regarding Taiwan – that is 'reunification' on Beijing's terms – abrogates the basic engine of coercive diplomacy. The [goal](#) of coercive diplomacy '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'. Crucially, the coerced state 'must be convinced that if it resists it will suffer, but if it concedes it will not'. However, 'it *suffers either way*, or if it has already suffered all it can, then *it will not concede and coercion will fail*'.

Put simply, China's current behaviour provides Taiwan with ample proof that it will suffer whether it resists or concedes to Beijing's coercion. As a result, Taiwan's resolve has arguably been [strengthened](#). As Taipei's representative to the US, Hsiao Bi-khim, [stated](#), China's 'attempt at coercion' would spur greater efforts at both 'fortifying our own defenses' through 'our domestic defense industry' and 'foreign military sales projects with the United States' and increase Taiwan's diplomatic engagement to 'galvanize international support' to deter China. The question that remains is twofold: will China's leaders recognise that its coercive strategy is failing; and if so, will they seek to up the ante in response, or try a different approach?

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Further reading

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