



# Going Nuclear in the Taiwan Strait?

By Robert Ayson

**Escalating tensions between Beijing and Washington, as well as Beijing and Taipei, have led to rhetoric on all sides that envisages, for the first time in years, the possibility of armed conflict over the Taiwan Strait. China's determination to halt any efforts to thwart its long-term goal of reunifying Taiwan with the mainland is running headlong into growing calls in Washington for the US to do more to protect Taiwan.**

**Beyond that rhetoric, however, are grim reminders of how quickly things could escalate if cooler heads don't prevail, writes Robert Ayson.**

MANY OF THE ingredients are already in place for a Taiwan Strait crisis to precipitate a nuclear escalation between China and the United States. Political tensions between Beijing and Taipei are intersecting with the growing US-China competition. Asymmetries in military power will make escalation tempting as a crisis unfolds. And should war start, difficulties await China and the US in maintaining clear firebreaks separating conventional and nuclear military options.

The pressures on decision-makers during a crisis bear little comparison to what seems rational in the cold light of a calmer day. But nuclear escalation in the Taiwan Strait still requires moving from A, tension in the absence of a precipitating crisis, to B, a serious and escalating Taiwan Strait crisis, to C conventional war in the Taiwan Strait, and to D, the use of nuclear weapons. These steps afford multiple possibilities for Taiwan, China and the US to reduce the chances of dangerous escalation ahead of the next crisis.

## POLITICAL CONDITIONS: THE CONTEXT FOR A CRISIS

The dynamics that can fuel or damp down a dangerous crisis in the Taiwan Strait are not nearly as good as we might want but not as bad as they have been. In the mid-1950s, the Eisenhower administration contemplated using nuclear weapons in response to China's bombardment of offshore islands. Forty years on, President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the US precipitated a dramatic few months in Taiwan-China and China-US relations.

A few years after the 1995-96 crisis, President

George W. Bush signaled that Washington's support for Taiwan might evaporate if Taipei pressed for independence. Beijing has opposed any level of American assistance to Taiwan, but Washington's strategic ambiguity has suited China. And while popular support in Taiwan for independence continues to grow, Taipei's leaders have been treading a relatively careful line.

Yet the *modus vivendi* of the recent past is unsteady. First, China's willingness to tolerate Taiwan's autonomous political decision-making, never a strong suit, has been diminishing. Calls for Taiwan to be unified with the motherland have been part of Xi Jinping's consolidation of power. Taipei's leaders will have watched with apprehension recent developments in Hong Kong.

Second, Joe Biden has taken office amid strengthening US congressional support for democratic Taiwan and antipathy toward non-democratic China. Strategic ambiguity is less popular. The Senate's Armed Forces Committee was told in March by the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Commander that China could translate its threats into action in as little as six years.

Third, a serious Taiwan Strait crisis could be egged on by broader political tensions between Beijing and Washington. The Biden administration is seeking some measure of US-China cooperation, including on climate change. But the basis for that collaboration remains narrow.

While it remains outside of Beijing's control, Taiwan complicates China's quest to dominate the first island chain, project maritime military power further into the region, and intensify the costs to the US of supporting regional allies. But as the power balance shifts in its favor, China may believe it can get away with upping the ante against Taiwan despite Washington's obligations under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act. In such a crisis, the US will want to demonstrate the opposite: that its military superiority in Asia

has not been matched by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). This could mean offering decisive support to Taiwan.

Brittle high-level political and military communications between Washington and Beijing increase the chances of serious misjudgment. And Taipei will also need to read the signals accurately. Will pressured leaders there conclude that the time for expanding Taiwan's place in international diplomacy is fast running out? Will that make them even more desperate for extra US support at the onset of a crisis?

## FROM CRISIS TO WAR

China's leaders will have noticed the limits to America's regional risk taking. In the South China Sea, the US conducts freedom of navigation operations to confirm its forces can move unimpeded on, under and above international waters. But the US has shown little sign of trying to roll back China's island-building efforts, let alone its militarization of these features.

China's coercive options are growing. It does not need to be able to invade Taiwan to change life on the other side of the strait. A blockade on trade-dependent Taiwan is one alternative. The US might rally its closest allies around a retaliatory ban on Chinese-flagged commercial vessels. But the onus could also be on Taiwan to take the next, hazardous, step.

Beijing also has a big cross-strait advantage by virtue of its increasingly sophisticated missiles. In the early stages of a military engagement, Taipei could face "use it or lose it" choices with its own limited arsenal of missiles that can reach China's coastline. These pressures would grow if Taiwan doubted the chances of an early American military response. Taiwan would want China to know early in a crisis that PLA forces were *already* at a real risk of a devastating American attack. This might give Taiwan incentives to

Deadly threat: The DF-17 hypersonic medium-range ballistic missile was unveiled during 70th anniversary celebrations for the People's Republic of China in 2019. It is thought capable of breaching all existing anti-missile shields deployed by the US and its allies.

Photo: Roman Pilipey/EPA

act provocatively if that meant bringing the US into the conflict.

Yet Washington's freedom to repeat its playbook from the last crisis — including by deploying aircraft carriers to the waters near Taiwan — is receding thanks to China's growing submarine warfare and anti-ship missile capabilities. With enhanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (including satellites), the PLA has new options for precision strikes. But China knows that some of these systems would be early targets for an American attack. Hence there would be incentives for China to strike Taiwanese targets early in the hope that these could occur *before* the US can make it especially difficult for Beijing to do so.

Moreover, the threshold between peace and war may not be as clear as one might wish. As the crisis builds, should the US treat intensified PLA cyber activities directed at US (and Taiwanese) command-and-control systems as something close to an act of war? Would the ramming of an American vessel by a Chinese ship, apparently on purpose but quickly blamed by Beijing on American risk-taking, be misread as a commitment to hostilities?

China and the US last fought each other in the Korean War. In the intervening decades they have weathered crises without going to war with each other again. But there is no recent precedent for how these two great powers might control escalation once the threshold of conventional military action between them has been crossed. China also has no recent experience of managing the domestic political pressures for escalation that are likely to arise once violence in the Taiwan Strait is in play. Social media pages in China are likely to be full of demands that Taiwan be crushed. And congressional and public pressure for decisive action to come to Taiwan's aide may grow in the US once any fighting has begun.



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That fighting might not be restricted to the Taiwan Strait. China will face important choices about how far out from its first island chain it needs to put US forces at real risk in order to reduce America's ability to intervene decisively. Beijing will also be watching the US's regional allies. Japan's capabilities are important to East Asia's military balance, and Washington's plans in the Taiwan Strait are likely to involve US forces normally based in Japan. This makes attacking targets on and near Japan's territory an obvious consideration for Beijing even if it appears as though Tokyo wishes to stay out of the fight.

Moreover, can we be sure that North Korea will sit back and quietly watch the US use force in Northeast Asia against Pyongyang's main guarantor? If Washington was focused on an increasingly violent Taiwan Strait crisis, would Pyongyang decide to add to America's challenges by disruptive action on or across the 38th parallel?

The US will also face perverse incentives of its own that could encourage escalation. For example, Washington will need to consider how far into China it will need to target PLA forces to restrain Beijing's options. Of the many bases for PLA rocket forces that the US would target



in a conventional conflict, not all would necessarily be in coastal locations adjacent to Taiwan. Deeper strikes may well be envisaged. Which brings us to the biggest threshold of all.

### THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION

If China and the US end up fighting over the Taiwan Strait, two nuclear-armed great powers would find themselves on opposing sides of a dangerous armed conflict. But why might either of them be willing to violate the nuclear taboo that has been in place around the world since 1945? We can take some solace that there is no obvious answer to this question. Yet nuclear pressures could grow depending on how a conventional war evolved. Think of China's options if it faced a deteriorating correlation of forces as its missile bases on the mainland were being degraded by American conventional attacks.

In anticipation of these US measures, the Communist Party leadership may decide on deploying "all options are on the table" language, hinting at nuclear possibilities. Hinting is about as far as things *might* go. But if China's options to manage the conventional conflict are getting scarcer, what remaining choices would it have aside from crossing the nuclear threshold and putting an end to its "no first use" declaratory policy? And surely the possible targets for a nuclear attack by China would not be confined to the Taiwan Strait. Would Beijing consider launching nuclear attacks on US territories in the wider region, including Guam, if it wanted to make the costs of continuing too great for Washington to handle? Would it want to hold hostage cities and other targets in the Pacific coast of the US mainland?

If China judged that the use of nuclear weapons was warranted, it would be obliged to contemplate what sort of American retaliation would ensue. That thinking would focus on the nuclear asymmetry between China and America, includ-

ing the absence of options on Beijing's part to attempt to fight only a limited nuclear war (as absurd as that notion may sound). But would escalation dominance in such a situation be judged by capability and doctrine (favoring the US) or by desperation (favoring China)?

There is also an obligation to consider whether the US might be the first of the two nuclear-armed states in this crisis to use nuclear weapons. Many of America's military objectives could be achieved by using advanced non-nuclear systems, including conventionally armed cruise missiles launched from offshore. Moreover, while some US attacking options would be vulnerable to China's pressure (including forces based in regional bases), the US would retain long-range options (including bombers), which would be hard for the PLA to reach.

But might the US use nuclear weapons first if a conventional war was moving strongly in China's favor? Taiwan's future could head in almost any direction, including forceful absorption into China, without any obvious direct threat to America's own survival. Yet Taiwan's absorption would imply that Washington had been defeated by China in East Asia. America's reputation among regional allies (and especially Japan and South Korea) will have been seriously eroded. American officials might argue that despite the enormous costs of using nuclear weapons (and the moral opprobrium that would follow), at stake would be the future of the East Asian equilibrium on which many US vital interests depend.

The nuclear threshold might also be crossed less deliberately. There is no guarantee that the US can put at risk China's conventional forces without also endangering some of China's nuclear arsenal. PLA reforms appear to have reduced the collocation of conventional and nuclear rocket batteries which created significant escalatory hazards. But China's new intermedi-

ate-range DF26 missile has both conventional and nuclear payloads. How would China's leaders read an American attack on these systems, and what message would Washington believe it is sending by doing so?

A variation on this problem may occur before any violence occurs in the Taiwan Strait, if the US and China are probing and putting on notice their respective command, control, communications and *computer* systems. China will already be scurrying to perceive America's intentions in the murky twilight zone between an escalating crisis short of fighting and the firing of the first shots. What if China assesses that US cyber pressure on its military command-and-control systems puts at risk some of its nuclear options? Could China conclude that it stands to lose access to some of its deterrence capability before any physically obvious fighting begins?

### SOME POLICY PRIORITIES

It's reasonable to think that China and the US will do what they can to live up to the view that nuclear weapons are only weapons of the very last resort. But neither China nor the US can afford to think that they can fight a conventional war "safely" in the Taiwan Strait, because the fear of nuclear escalation puts a natural limit on how awful things can get. And if things move beyond the nuclear threshold, an unsettling disconnect would await between China's lack of confidence that war can be controlled once any nuclear weapons are used and American thinking that still finds a place for limited nuclear options.

The best way for Taiwan, the US and China to avoid a Taiwan Strait crisis escalating to the use of nuclear weapons is to avoid a crisis in the strait. However, that is more a hope than a policy recommendation. Right now, there are practical steps that can be taken to reduce escalatory pressures should that next crisis arrive. China and

the US need an honest conversation about what it will take to see Beijing become a more willing participant in nuclear arms-control discussions. Both need to recognize the risks of the murky zone between escalating pressure and actual fighting in a regional contingency. They should develop formal or informal rules of the game on what differentiates unthreatening information-seeking from activities that put their forces at risk, including through cyber operations. They need to have shared no-go areas in a Taiwan Strait crisis, including assets that, if attacked, would be likely to generate disproportionate retaliation.

Tacit understandings between the US and China on these matters become even more important while formal dialogue remains stifled. Meanwhile, Taiwan and the US should identify what factors intensify the chances that an early and dangerous resort to force (by Taiwan or China) will occur in a Taiwan Strait crisis, and what this means for their understanding of America's role. And all three actors have a common interest in signaling their reluctance to put command-and-control systems at risk in an escalating crisis.

China and the US don't need to end their competition to reduce the dangers. Even as adversaries they can recognize their common interests in controlling escalation in the next Taiwan Strait crisis. But we're in dangerous territory if it takes that crisis for Beijing and Washington to recognize the urgency of enhanced communication, co-operation and restraint.

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