Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Event
China’s Power: Up for Debate 2023
Keynote Remarks by Assistant Secretary Ely Ratner

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FEATURING
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Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, United States Department of Defense

CSIS EXPERTS
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I’m going to just give folks another 30 seconds.

(Pause.)

OK. Sorry we’re running two minutes late, but hopefully, we can make up some of the time during the break.

So good morning. My name is Bonny Lin. I’m the director of the China Power Project and senior fellow for Asian security at CSIS. I’m very delighted to welcome you to this eighth China Power Conference. It’s actually our first full – fully one-day in-person China Power Conference that we’ve had since COVID.

So we’re very delighted that we have an excellent lineup of speakers as well as prominent experts to discuss five different debate topics all relevant to China’s defense as well as China’s foreign policy.

What makes this China Power Conference different from other conferences are two aspects.

First is, instead of panels in which experts are broadly talking about a subject area, we actually have debates. So we’ve asked 10 leading experts to take different positions on critical topics that are central to the China debate.

The second aspect that makes our conference different is that we actually poll the audience and get your views and your participation on these critical topics. So I hope for those of you both in here – here in person as well as online that you can participate in the polls as we’re going through each of the debates.

But perhaps the most important part of the conference is early on the day when we actually have a keynote practitioner, a senior official from the Biden administration, join us. He probably needs no introduction, but I still should. We are very delighted that we can have Dr. Ely Ratner, assistant secretary of defense, with us today.

He is assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific affairs. In that position he served as a principal advisor for the undersecretary of defense for policy and the secretary of defense on international security strategy and policy on issues of DOD interest that relate to the Indo-Pacific region. Prior to confirmation he served as the director of the DOD China Task Force and a senior advisor for China to the secretary of defense. Before arriving at DOD, Dr. Ratner was the executive vice president and director of studies at the Center for New American Security where he was a member of the executive team and responsible for managing the center’s agenda and staff. Prior to that he served from 2015 to 2017 as the deputy national security adviser to then-Vice President Joe Biden. From 2011 to 2012, he was in the Office of the Chinese and Mongolia Affairs at the Department of State.
And so after Dr. Ratner makes his remarks, we will have a short discussion and then open to Q&A from both the audience in person as well as online.

So, Ely, thank you again for joining us, and please come up here to the podium. So I think you are wired, but I think this is probably going to be slightly better.

Ely Ratner: OK. Well, good morning, everyone. And thank you, Bonny, for that very kind introduction. It's great to see so many familiar faces around the room, especially for such an important event and one that I have participated in the past.

Places like CSIS, gatherings like this, play a really important role in fostering rich conversations about the relationship between the United States and the PRC. And I have no doubt that today will be any different. And I would say, as a recovering scholar and think-tank expert myself, I can really attest to the immense value that these debates and discussions have had over the years. And it's your work that continues to really provide important insights for officials across the Defense Department and the U.S. government, myself included. So thank you all again for being here today.

Now, I know Bonny has planned a great agenda for you all, with some really excellent debates, really critical topics. I wish I could actually spend the full day here, because there's going to be some terrific discussions. But I did want to take just a few minutes this morning to share with you the Department of Defense's perspective on the PRC's military power as it stands in 2023 and, just as importantly, what we're doing at the Pentagon and in the U.S. government to set the pace as we rise to the China challenge.

As many of you know, every year for over 20 years the department has released what we call the China Military Power Report. DASD Chase is here today. His team leads that effort at the Pentagon, which is sometimes known shorthand as CMPR. Congress first required this annual report from the department in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2000. And it's really a critical example of longstanding bipartisan interest and concern about the PLA's capabilities.

Needless to say, it's an important document because it is the department's authoritative public assessment of the PLA and the role it plays in helping realize Beijing's broader ambitions.

This year's report will be out soon, very soon. You can bug Mike about exactly when that will be later in the day. But the report will underscore the department's fundamental assessment, which is that China's leaders are increasingly turning to the PLA as an instrument of coercion in support of their revisionist aims.
You've heard from this administration often that the PRC is the only country in the world with the will and increasingly the capability to refashion the international order in ways that would deeply undermine vital U.S. interests and global peace and stability. And the forthcoming CMPR will show why this assessment continues to be the case.

It will also show why the 2022 National Defense Strategy identified the PRC as the department’s pacing challenge. And here I have to note that by prioritizing the PRC as DOD’s top pacing challenge, the strategy we released to the public nearly one year ago marked the very first of its kind. And the bottom line is this. We are clear-eyed about the challenges posed by the PLA’s growing capabilities and by how it is choosing to use these capabilities in threatening and destabilizing ways.

For example, we have seen PLA aircraft and maritime vessels continue to engage in coercive and risky behavior against U.S. ally and partner forces operating in accordance with international law. This is happening in the Taiwan Strait and in the East and the South China Seas and beyond. This includes PLA activities in the air and at sea that increase the likelihood of an accident that could spiral into crisis or conflict.

We have also seen the PRC continue its rapid expansion, modernization, and diversification of its nuclear forces, all encased in a lack of transparency that extends further to domains such as space and cyber. And we have seen the PRC demonstrate a concerning lack of interest in maintaining open lines of military-to-military communication where our defense and military officials could discuss these concerns about these activities and others like them. And, as you all know, the PRC has declined multiple invitations from the department for opportunities to communicate directly with Secretary Austin, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other department officials. And we will continue to call – we will continue to call for substantive conversations between our seniormost defense officials.

But at the same time, we know this: Conflict in the Indo-Pacific region is neither imminent nor inevitable, because deterrence is real and strong today. And we’re doing more than ever, together with our allies and partners, to keep it that way by advancing a common vision for regional peace and stability. And I’d like to spend the remainder of my time with you this morning sharing more about what we have been able to deliver together in just the past 12 months.

First, we’re investing in critical capabilities at the Department of Defense to maintain deterrence in this decade and beyond. As you heard from senior leaders across the department, the president’s budget request for fiscal year 2024 was the most strategy-aligned budget in our history. These investments will strengthen our warfighting advantages, exploit adversary vulnerabilities, and address critical operational challenges in the Indo-Pacific. They provide
capabilities that will strengthen our combat credible deterrent by ensuring we can prevail in conflict. Our budget request also sought unprecedented levels of funding for research and development. In other words, this is the largest R&D budget ever requested by the Department of Defense, and these major investments will help us develop and deploy breakthrough technologies to deter conflict in the decades ahead.

Second, we’re deepening our alliances and partnerships across the region. And in almost every single instance, these alliances and partnerships now run deeper than they ever have. This is one of America’s greatest strategic advantages, and it’s growing even stronger. The department is supporting our Indo-Pacific friends as they invest in their own strength, in their relationships with each other, and in their relationships with us. For example, we’re supporting Japan’s efforts to acquire new counter-strike capabilities, which you may have heard more about yesterday following Secretary Austin’s bilateral meeting with his new Japanese counterpart, Minister Kihara.

We’ve launched a major new technology initiative with India with strong support from the White House. And we’re working with countries across Southeast Asia to acquire asymmetric capabilities to counter Beijing’s coercive activities. Consistent with longstanding U.S. policy, we are also supporting Taiwan self-defense in the face of the PRC’s aggressive threats and ongoing pressure campaign.

Finally, we’re bringing together our historic capability investments and our momentum with allies and partners to deliver a U.S. force posture in the region that is more mobile, distributed, resilient, and lethal. With Australia, we’re increasing rotations of U.S. bombers and fighters through Australian bases, while deepening our logistics cooperation. With Japan, we have agreed to station the Marine Corps’ most advanced formation forward for the first time ever in 2025. With the Philippines, U.S. forces will now have access to four new strategic locations across the country as part of our important Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. And with Papua New Guinea, where Secretary Austin made history as the first U.S. secretary of defense to ever visit the country, we recently concluded a defense cooperation agreement that will deepen our bilateral security cooperation.

Now, each of these achievements could have been considered the highlight of an entire year or even an entire term for our forward presence in the Indo-Pacific. But through relentless work by the president, the secretary of defense, and our colleagues across the administration, we have advanced all of them together, and in just the past 12 months.

So let me conclude by saying, consistent with the theme of the conference today, of course, the PLA’s power matters. But so does our power, and so does the collective power of our allies and partners. Continuing to deliver in the Indo-
Pacific will require considerable attention, resources, and prioritization by the U.S. government. And we are focused on doing what it takes. So thank you again for the opportunity to be here today. Thank you, Bonnie. And I look forward to the discussion. (Applause.)

Dr. Lin: Thank you very much, Ely. I think there was a lot that you covered.

Unfortunately, we won’t have time to really unpack everything, but I did want to follow up with one issue that you mentioned at the very top, which is that you’re seeing that the PLA’s – sorry, that China is increasingly turning to the PLA as an instrument of coercion. Are you seeing that China is using military more compared to other tools of coercion, whether it was diplomatic or economic tools?

Dr. Ratner: Yeah, it’s a good question. And I think the point in the remarks is that, look, if you went back five, 10 years ago – Bonny, you’ve been following this for decades – it was the case that there was a perception that yes, the PLA was modernizing but that Beijing was using its military tool very much in the background, that it was not – that it was diplomatically driven, economically driven, in terms of how it was trying to achieve its foreign policy aims. And what the China Military Power Report is putting forward, what it noted last year but increasingly notes this year, is that isn’t the case anymore, that the PLA is just in the background, that it is now in the forefront of the way that Beijing is going about trying to achieve its revisionist aims in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, border with India and beyond, and I think that’s a significant change in PLA strategy.

Dr. Lin: So it’s not just the – it’s not just us worrying about the large-scale contingencies, but on the day-to-day gray-zone pressure has been increasing.

Dr. Ratner: Absolutely. And I think several of our allies and partners who are on the front lines of that would attest to that.

Dr. Lin: The other question I had with both you and Mike here is I did want to ask about, from your perspective, where is the state of the U.S.-China military-to-military relations, particularly with the removal of China’s defense minister, Li Shangfu? Are you more optimistic that we will be able to communicate or have more channels with the Chinese on the military side soon?

Dr. Ratner: Well, to your first question of where are we today, we are not where we need to be and not where we should be. Mil-mil communications between the Defense Department and counterparts in Beijing have been largely turned off over the last year. There have been episodic interactions. Secretary Austin did meet with his – the PRC defense minister in Cambodia last November on the margins of the ADMM-Plus, the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting. That was the last time he had a direct interaction with the PLA. And in the interim, as I noted, the
chairman, others, Admiral Aquilino have tried to reach out to counterparts, unsuccessfully. We have seen some new openings. I’ve had the opportunity to meet with the ambassador here in Washington. Admiral Aquilino had an opportunity to meet with a senior PLA official on the margins. But as it relates to our – the dialogues that we have built, both at the political-military level as well as at the operational level, those are not back up and running yet. And so we don’t think the fits and starts that have happened yet are a substitute for sustained dialogue and sustained communication between our leaders.

I would say from the perspective of the United States, our position has been 100 percent consistent since the absolute – for sure since Secretary Austin walked into this role, which is he has said repeatedly that we are seeking open lines of communication with the PLA. We think that’s important, even as the relationship grows more competitive, and that is true today and the United States has had and will keep an outstretched hand to the PLA. And your question about what comes next ought to be directed toward them. And I think we may have some representatives from the PRC embassy here today, so maybe they can shed some light on that. But we absolutely look forward to opportunities for our senior leaders to engage, if those present themselves.

Dr. Lin: We’ll ask the representatives from the PLA, from the – sorry, the Chinese embassy at a later time. They are not onstage.

Dr. Ratner: Yeah.

Dr. Lin: But, Ely, I did want to follow up on that question to look and relate to some of the debates that we had. So one of the first debate that we’ll have next is about managing crises and tensions in U.S.-China relations. Looking at it from the military side, are you – what do you see that we’re most lacking right now in terms of what we need to do, whether that’s more communication channels with the PLA, in terms of how we can have a better handle, if we were to get into a crisis or incident, whether that’s in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait – what do we need to be able to manage that, vis-a-vis the PLA or vis-a-vis the Chinese government as a whole?

Dr. Ratner: Well, look, I think we’ve had some good diplomatic engagement over the last couple of months and that can support the management of some of these tensions, but again, I don’t think those are a substitute for direct communications between military leadership and potentially between military operators. And I think we should remain concerned that in the event of a crisis that we don’t have the habits of communication, we don’t have the relationships, and we don’t have the kinds of open channels we need to be able to manage those in the tight timeframes that that we would want to.

So I think that’s really why we think this is so important and this is about potential crises but also talking about issues like space and cyber, new domains,
China’s nuclear modernization, as I mentioned, that also create potential opportunities for escalation that we ought to be talking about. So I think that we are not, again, where we need to be. That remains a priority for us.

Dr. Lin: And I’ll just ask one more question. I know there are probably many questions from the audience there. Once we open up for Q&A there will be a rotating microphone so you don’t need to line up anywhere.

But the final question, Ely, I have for you relates to Taiwan. That’s been quite a bit of a focus both for your team as well as Mike’s team. But as you look at Taiwan, today we have two debates related on Taiwan, both in terms of when Xi Jinping has signaled, if he has, a timeline for unification with Taiwan as well as another debate on whether it’s more or less likely that China would think about using a blockade or invading Taiwan.

I just want to see if you had any – if you wanted to weigh in on any of those debates or share your thoughts on where you think Xi Jinping has – what you think Xi Jinping has in mind for Taiwan.

Dr. Ratner: OK. Yes. Happy to, and we can draw that out, some of this, in the discussion as well.

I think happy to take the question of timelines because folks pay a lot of attention to this. I think Director of CIA Burns has noted that Xi Jinping has timelines for PLA modernization. That’s very different than timelines for aggression, and our position today is that we believe conflict is neither imminent nor inevitable.

We believe deterrence is real and strong and we’re doing everything we can to keep it that way. We are modernizing our operational concepts through the joint warfighting concept. We are, obviously, investing in capabilities relevant to operational challenges.

In the Indo-Pacific we are strengthening our alliances and partnerships and we’re making our forward presence in the Indo-Pacific more distributed, more resilient, and more lethal and we think those things together reinforce deterrence and will over time.

I was asked, alongside Wendy Sherman, in a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee by Senator Rubio – just a few seconds left so we didn’t get to build on the question but the question was do you think there’s any chance we make it to the end of the decade without the PRC invading Taiwan, and my answer was yes. And then the time ran out so I didn’t get to give the full answer, though I gave most of the full answer just now.
But the answer is yes. It’s going to take a lot of hard work. It’s going to take focus. It’s going to take attention and resources. But I do think if we are vigilant that we can continue to reinforce and sustain deterrence into the future and, again, we believe that is the state of the situation today. So that’s what I would say about that.

And then on the blockade question, look, I think the – I was asked about this again. Different hearing before the House Armed Services Committee recently. There was a lot of talk about various gray zone contingencies, potential contingencies below the threshold of armed conflict, a lot of talk about blockade in particular.

We are very mindful of this. We are looking at this very closely inside the department. Just a couple points here.

One, what happens the very minute that the PRC starts mounting a blockade against Taiwan? The global economy falls through the floor. OK. So that’s the first thing that’s going to happen, not just for China and not just for Taiwan – for the United States, for Japan, for Southeast Asia, for India, for Africa, for Latin America, for Europe. There will be no one immune from the economic pain that the PRC would place on the world through doing that and I would charge those in the audience who work on international economic issues that I think this remains a gap that the think tank community would be very well positioned to fill to help the broader community understand the economic implications, even just with crisis, not of conflict in the Taiwan Strait, because some of the analyses that I’ve seen are quite extreme in terms of what a blockade like scenario would do for the global economy on a scale vastly greater than what the world experienced under COVID. So that’s the first thing that’s going to happen.

The second thing that’s going to happen is that the global community is going to rally around and against the PRC’s actions because of what it is doing to the global economy, and Beijing will be inviting exactly the kind of counterbalancing diplomatic coalition that it is trying to avoid on this issue.

And third, importantly, operationally – and maybe folks will get into this later today, and there are different variations, and I understand that maybe some of the nuances will be drawn out – blockades are not easy to actually enact, particularly at the scale around Taiwan. And therefore, we think that Taiwan would still have options on its own and with the international community to deliver the kind of industrial supplies and raw materials, food and energy, it would need to sustain its society; and that, ultimately, it would be up to Beijing to decide whether it wanted to start attacking commercial vessels to sustain a blockade.

So the risk of escalation is extremely high. So I would say, as it relates to blockade, when I look at that issue the cost for Beijing looks very high and the
risk looks very, very high. But let me know after the panel today. I’ll be interested to see what the – how the expert discussion plays out. But that’s my view, and that’s the view of the Pentagon.

Dr. Lin: Thank you very much, Ely. We do have one of the debaters here, Lonnie Henley. So I think I will definitely bring up some of those questions in your panel.

But with that, let me open this up for Q&A from the audience. We should have two floating mics. One is right there in the back and one on this one. So please raise your hand. We’ll take two questions from the room first, and then we’ll go to questions online. So I see one right here, please. They’re coming, it’s just people are leaving at the same time. If you could introduce yourself very briefly, and then your question.

Q: Yeah, thank you. My name is Liam Cosgrove.

So my question is on deterrence, which – so I understand the argument of building Taiwan to be a porcupine, making it too expensive to invade, and then that idea acts as deterrence because China doesn’t want to, you know, suffer that cost. My question though is, you know, last month we saw the biggest military drill by China in the Pacific Ocean ever. The same argument was true of Ukraine. It was, let’s give them weapons, let’s do joint military drills with NATO, let’s train their soldiers since 2014. But eventually, it reached a point where, you know, Russia felt that it needed to invade to stop having U.S. influence on its border.

Taiwan obviously, you know, what is it, 70 miles off the coast of China. So it seems like these actions that are in service of deterrence, ostensibly, are actually escalating. And it’s forcing these countries into a position where they feel like they have to respond. And whether they’re justified in doing that or not, we saw it last month with China’s, you know, largest drill ever. So what do you say to that criticism?

Dr. Ratner: Well, look, it’s a good question. And what I would say is a couple things. Number one, the U.S. policy toward Taiwan has not changed. We oppose unilateral changes by either side. We’ve been crystal clear about that. And we do not support Taiwan independence. And we say that publicly. We say that privately. Sometimes the PRC accuses us – accuses the United States of supporting Taiwan independence, and nothing could be further from the truth. So our efforts are focused on maintaining deterrence and not engaging in the kinds of activities that you’re describing, that would be a lurch toward an important change in the status quo, that could be potentially destabilizing. So we’re focused on trying to get that balance right.

Q: Yeah, but you have –
Dr. Lin: My apologies. We probably want to get in some other questions, if that’s OK.

Q: OK, but just real quickly –

Dr. Ratner: Maybe just get a comment, and then we can move on, if you’d like to, yeah.

Dr. Lin: Sure. Good.

Dr. Ratner: We do have, you know, what is it, I think, like, 200 –

Dr. Lin: Let’s get the microphone to you. One second. Let’s give you the microphone.

Q: But so that, yeah, fair response. But I just mean, we have 200 or so troops stationed in Taiwan. We have bases kind of making an arc around China, and various other countries like Philippines and Japan. So regardless of whether you support Taiwan independence in name, our military presence is, you know, very close to China, whereas they have, you know, I think one or two artificial island bases. You know, they’re not – they’re not establishing bases. They are doing the whole, you know, Belt and Road stuff, but they don’t have military bases in South America or Africa, you know. So I don’t know, what do you say to that?

Dr. Ratner: Well, no, no, let me – let me – I’m happy to – I’m happy to jump on this because I think the – does the United States have a robust military presence in the Indo-Pacific? Yes. Why? Because we want to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. We want to maintain the status quo that we believe has been fundamental to the peace and prosperity that has been delivered to that region to the benefit of billions of people. And we want to maintain that.

So the intentions matter, right. The intention of the United States is to strengthen and support its military position in the region and with its allies and partners to maintain the status quo and to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, in contrast to the PRC, where we see a leadership setting milestones to develop capabilities to commit aggression.

OK, now, we talked about the intention. And we’re doing everything we can to ensure the day never comes when it is, within a cost calculus, worth it to exact that aggression. But the intention here really matters. And the PRC is seeking military bases around the world. This has also been documented carefully in the China Military Power Report and among a number of experts in the Washington research community and around the world.

So PLA is growing its operational reach. That’s something we are mindful of. But the question of what are the intentions around the capability and what is our goal and what is our vision for the Indo-Pacific really matters.
And I'll just say one more word on this, because I think it's important. If you look back on the last couple of speeches, but in particular the speech that Secretary Austin gave at the Shangri-La dialogue in June in Singapore – I would urge you all to take a look at that. It is the marquee Defense Department speech on the region each year.

What he is talking about there is a shared vision for the region. It's not America’s vision. It is a shared vision for the region that aligns with the way the Koreans and the Japanese and the Philippines and ASEAN and the Australians and the Indians and even the Europeans are talking about what they want the future to look like in the Indo-Pacific. That’s what our military is there to support. And I think that’s in contrast to what we see and hear very explicitly from leaders in Beijing about what they want the future in the Indo-Pacific to be.

Dr. Lin: Thank you. Thank you.

Q: And I just want to say real quick, I'm totally onboard with the vision and the intention.

Dr. Lin: Truly –

Q: But it’s a very delicate situation. You know, you have two –

Dr. Lin: I’m sorry, we need to – we need to stop this –

Dr. Ratner: Thank you for your question. It’s a – thank you.

Dr. Lin: We need to continue on and allow more folks to be able to speak.

Q: OK. Hi. I’m Mathias Hammer from Time Magazine.

I have a question regarding DOD’s assessment of China’s nuclear modernization. I’m wondering what the Pentagon makes of the discrepancy between China’s more restrained declaratory policies and its advancing nuclear capabilities, how DOD sees China’s specific motivations or is it seeing any shifts in how PRC sees the role of nuclear weapons in seeking to achieve its foreign-policy ambitions underlining, you know, the expanding nuclear program.

Dr. Ratner: Another really good question. And again, coming back to the China Military Power Report, which we’re hoping will be out in the coming weeks, we’ll be providing the most up-to-date assessment of the PRC’s nuclear modernization program.

I think my answer to your question is that we are watching very carefully what is a rapid, unprecedented military buildup of nuclear weapons in China. And we are concerned about the lack of transparency about its intentions and how it
wants to use those. So again, it’s another great question for the PLA and PRC interlocutors. And it’s the type of issue that we think it would be important to talk about with PLA officials. So it’s sort of yet another reason why it would be important for us to have more open lines of communication.

Dr. Lin: Thank you.

Let’s take a question from online. And then, since we’ve been talking about Taiwan a bit, I did want to also allow some of our Taiwan colleagues to ask a question.

Please.

Moderator: So the first question on here actually is about Taiwan, from our online audience.

So one of the viewers asked, you know, how is the department preparing for the Taiwan presidential election in terms of what – you know, how China may escalate or, you know, what the U.S. can do to mitigate risk there?

Dr. Ratner: Look, we are – the Department of Defense plans. That’s what we do. We are prepared for all contingencies. But we don’t see – I would say we look forward to working with whomever takes the reins in Taipei following the election. So, of course, we’re keeping an eye on events there. We have seen Beijing use political events in and around Taiwan opportunistically to engage in acts of coercion and aggression, frankly, that they were wanting to do anyway, pulling them off the shelf when they feel like they have an excuse to do it. We hope they don’t use events around the election to do that, but we’ll be prepared for whatever comes.

Dr. Lin: Thank you. Please, up here. Thanks.

Q: Hi. Alexander Wang from Taiwan.

You know, in defense business, there are always competing priorities, and in different capital, different country usually they make their best assessment, and they try to come up with their own modernization program. I want, based on your assessment and upcoming, you know, China military power report, what do you – what’s your comment on the competing priorities in Taiwan? Because there are – platform-based, you know, conventional systems are still very important, because, as people said, in Taiwan a porcupine could be starved to death. And you have answered some of them in your hearings. What’s your comment on the continuing, based on the current, you know, threat assessment? What’s your comments on their priorities? You know, for instance, Taiwan has thrown a lot of assets and investment into a submarine program. What’s your take? Thank you.
Dr. Lin: Maybe, Ely, before you answer this question, we’ll collect a one more question in the back. Right there. And then we’ll – I think we have about five minutes left. So I don’t – I just want to give you a little bit of time to decide which one you want – you have time to answer.

Q: Stanley Kovar.

What lessons do you take from the Vietnam War that apply today?

Dr. Lin: OK, can you clarify, apply today to what? Are you talking about Taiwan contingency? Apply today in terms of –

Q: I hear a lot about deterrence. Deterrence failed in Vietnam. Why would it work any better now?

Dr. Lin: OK.

Dr. Ratner: OK. No, it’s a good question. Let me take the first one, really important issue about how one thinks about the future of Taiwan’s force structure, and what it ought to look like based on the competing challenges and threats, frankly, that the PRC is presenting to Taiwan on a daily basis. Because the administration, as you have heard, as I have testified publicly about and you’ve heard from others, has been focused on ensuring that Taiwan is developing the kinds of asymmetric capabilities it needs to reinforce deterrence. And again, as we’re thinking about the need to maintain deterrence against a cross-strait invasion, the types of capabilities that can create operational problems for what would be an incredibly difficult military act by the PLA even given its relative advantages in size and geography and whatnot to commit an amphibious invasion. Taiwan possessing asymmetric capabilities, that makes that all the harder.

So that has been a considerable focus for the United States in terms of our commitments under the Taiwan Relations Act. But absolutely we have to continue to ensure that Taiwan has the capabilities to counter the coercion it’s facing on a daily basis, which has a function all of its own in trying to intimidate and coerce the people on Taiwan.

So I think the answer is not that it has to be one or the other, but that we have to get the balance right. And I think it is a balance. I think there has to be a bias toward asymmetric capabilities given the need to strengthen deterrence into the future, but that cannot be done in a way that neglects the real – the very real day-to-day needs of the Taiwan military. So we take those questions on a case-by-case basis, but it really is about getting the balance right with a bias toward asymmetric capabilities.

On the question of Vietnam, I guess I would just broaden it out to say, look, I did a Ph.D. in political science. I’m sure a number of others, Dr. Lin here as well. We
are very thoughtful about how we are thinking about deterrence as it relates to the PRC. We are doing it in as analytical a way as possible. There are a lot of political scientists inside the Defense Department right now and who are using social scientific methods and others to really try to understand how to get analytical leverage around questions of deterrence. So history is part of that. There are case studies in Asia. There are case studies in Europe. And we continue to do that in a way that is based on as much analysis and information and history as we can, and not just a gut feeling about what deters or what doesn’t deter.

And there has been a major effort inside the department to try to come to an increasingly refined and sharper understanding about how we think about deterrence. If you look back on the National Defense Strategy, integrated deterrence is the central concept in that strategy and preventing this war is our primary focus. So we’re very focused on the deterrence question, invite analogies from history, but that’s broader than any single conflict. And we think it’s really important, so I appreciate the question.

Dr. Lin: Thank you very much, Ely. All simple questions that you had to answer today.

I want to invite everyone to join me in a round of applause for Ely for joining us today. I know you’re incredibly busy. So thank you very much. (Applause.)

We’re going to take a 20-minute break while Ely, I think, has to – has a very tight schedule and probably has to leave immediately. So thank you, everyone.

(END.)